Social Movement Unionism and the UE

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Social movement unionism has become the new buzzword for both the academic left and union reformers. As Ian Robinson noted, “… analysts and activists have begun applying the concept to organized labor in the United States, as a characterization of some unions within the larger movement, as an ideal towards which organized labor ought to be moving if it wishes to recapture lost economic and political power, or both”.¹ However, whether social movement unionism is something new is open to serious doubt. This article gives a chronological overview of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) and whether it can be classified as a social movement union. Kim Moody stated that a current of social movement unionism was “… already at hand in unions such as … the United Electrical Workers in the US”, although he did not elaborate on this statement.² Thus, this article seeks to determine whether Moody’s claim is correct. This article is divided into two main sections; in the first section, I argue that the UE’s polices and practices match the key components of Moody’s account of social movement unionism. However, in the second section by analysing the ideological conflict within the UE, union raids and government harassment of it, and in recent times, its campaign to keep Stewart-Warner’s Chicago plant open, I conclude that that social movement unionism alone will revive US unionism.

Social Movement Unionism

There are many different theories of social movement unionism, but unquestionably, Moody’s account is the most popular. Social movement unionism became prominent as an approach in the US with publication of Moody’s book *Workers in a Lean World*. Indeed, *Workers in a Lean World* was the catalyst for other US labor academics and writers embracing social movement unionism. Since the book’s release, there has been a plethora of publications arguing that social movement unionism can lead to the revitalisation of North American unions, with most either referencing Moody or using a very similar account of social movement unionism to his.³ Indeed, other theorists of social movement unionism recognise the influence of Moody’s account of...
social movement unionism. Peter Waterman acknowledges that Moody’s interpretation of social
movement unionism is ‘more-influential’ than his own. Rob Lambert and Eddie Webster state
that the “… notion of a global social movement unionism was introduced by Kim Moody in …
Workers in a Lean World”; while Kim Scipes notes that Moody “… was the first to popularize
SMU [social movement unionism] in North America”.

There are five crucial aspects of Moody’s account of social movement unionism: (1) union
democracy/extensive rank-and-file involvement; (2) undertaking to organise the unorganised; (3)
fighting for everything that affects working people in their communities and having alliances
with the local community; (4) labor internationalism; (5) undertaking independent political
action. In addition, while not a crucial aspect of his account, Moody noted that women and/or
people of color have greatly contributed in transforming and revitalising unions. Based on these
criteria, I shall demonstrate that the UE matches the key components of Moody’s account.

The UE: The Early Years

The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America, more commonly known as the
United Electrical Workers, is a small union with approximately 35,000 members. The UE is an
independent union, as it has not been affiliated with the American Federation of Labor-Congress
of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) since it left/was expelled from the CIO in 1949. The
United Electrical and Radio Workers of America came into existence during the 1930s. US labor
historian Ronald Schatz noted that

Local union leaders … formed a series of coalitions in an attempt to unify the
burgeoning union movement in electrical manufacturing and ancillary industries.
These efforts resulted in the formation of the United Electrical and Radio Workers of
America [in March 1936]. As the full name of the organization indicated, the UE was
a product of an alliance between two distinct groups of peoples or union locals.
Some came from electrical factories … others from radio and home appliance
shops… The UE membership at this time amounted to but 15,000 of the 300,000
workers in the industry.
By November 1936, the UE had joined the newly formed CIO. The UE expanded dramatically the following year, partially because of James Matles. While not the President, Matles ‘… exercised effective control’ of the Machine, Tool and Foundry Workers union as he was the only full-time official. The union merged with the AFL affiliated International Association of Machinists (IAM) in 1935 as Matles hoped that the merger would result in an ‘AFL industrial charter in electrical manufacturing’. However, almost immediately Matles became disillusioned with the union. Amongst Matles’ concerns were the AFL’s refusal to grant the union ‘… an industrial charter’, the union’s refusal to allow African Americans to become members, and its hostility to, amongst others, Communists, radicals and Jews. After “… he received encouragement from the Communist Party to leave the IAM and join the newly formed UE … Matles resigned and took fourteen lodges with him [approximately 15,000 workers]. His old group of Machine, Tool and Foundry Workers came with him, as did most of the new shops he had organized”. The UE responded to this gesture by changing its name to the United, Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America. Matles was also elected as the director of organisation; a nation-level position

Since its formation, the UE has been a democratic union with the rank-and-file playing a crucial role; this clearly corresponds to Moody’s account of social movement unionism. Filippelli and McColloch stated that

[from the beginning, the UE’s structure provided for broad participation by the membership. Each year the international union and each district met in their representative conventions. The UE’s constitution ensured strong district and local autonomy. District officers received their salaries from the district, not the international, and the general executive board could not remove district presidents from office… International representatives were appointed by the general executive board with “due deference given to the wishes of the membership of the district,” but they were paid by the District. [Moreover,] Local, district, and national officers stood for election annually.

UE Locals adopted their own constitutions which outline ‘… the rights and duties of the membership, how the Local will be governed, and how the local activities will be governed’. The only constraint is that the Local constitution cannot contradict the ‘National constitution,
especially in the areas of union democracy, finances, and the right of all workers to belong to a union’. This is to ensure that all workers, regardless of, amongst other things, race, sex, and political beliefs, could belong to the union and to deprive give bosses of ‘… yet another tool with which they can divide workers’.9 The UE’s constitution allows the rank-and-file to vote on all key issues, including contract proposals. The members also elect delegates to the National Convention and District Councils.10 There are seven UE District Councils, which cover the entire US geographically. The District Councils are funded by UE locals through a monthly per capita payment, and meet either two or three times a year to discuss issues affecting the UE and set policy. The District Councils ‘… elect District Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Secretary Treasurers, Executive Boards, and District Trustees to one-year terms’. Any UE member of good standing is eligible for election.11

The annual National Convention is the ‘… highest decision-making body in the UE’. It is comprised of delegates ‘… elected by members of their local unions, plus two delegates from each District Council’.12 The delegates set UE policy for the forthcoming year, with all Locals and District Councils able to submit policy resolutions. The National Convention elects the UE’s National Officers (General President, Secretary-Treasurer, Director of Organisation) and three Trustees (they audit the ‘UE’s books and records four times a year and safeguard the property of the National Union’). As with positions on the District Councils, any UE member of good standing is eligible to stand for these positions.13 Unlike the majority of unions worldwide, the UE Constitution states that the three National Officers ‘… shall be paid a salary not to exceed the highest weekly wage in the industry’. In other words, the National Officers do not receive a wage much higher than the rank-and-file.14 The National Officers, UE District Presidents and District Secretaries comprise the General Executive Board which meets three times a year. They deal with all issues and carry ‘… out the policies and programs of the union between the National Conventions’. The National Officers also oversee the UE’s organisational work, collective bargaining, political action, education and publicity, and international solidarity, which are the five crucial areas of UE activity.15

The UE had many major successes in the middle-to-late 1930s. After a long-struggle, the UE organised the GE Schenectady plant, and within four months of this triumph, GE agreed to the UE’s request for a national contract, which led to 29 new UE Locals at GE plants. Likewise,
after a years-long struggle and following a NLRB ruling that Westinghouse ‘… was violating the legal responsibility to bargain’, Westinghouse agreed to a national contract with the UE in 1941 covering 19 plants.16 UE membership grew from less than 50,000 in 1939 to 432,000 during the middle of World War II (WWII) and to 750,000 members by war’s end.17 The improvement in the US economy helped the union’s efforts to organise workers.18 Moreover, it was the UE’s belief in the benefits of organising the unorganised and its rank-and-file unionism that contributed to the remarkable gains in membership. The Report of the General Officers to the 8th UE Convention in 1942 argued that the UE should organise the unorganised.19 Likewise, at the 1946 CIO convention, UE Director of Organising James Matles stated that

[a]ll men are created equal – and we propose to fight for that principle… And if we continue to organize this movement of ours on that principle, then the overwhelming majority of the unorganized workers will rally to us. They will join us. And our ranks will be tremendously increased.20

The only unions which achieved growth compared with the UE’s during the war years were the United Auto Workers (UAW) (165,000 to 1 million), and the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) (its membership increased three-fold to 700,000).21 In 1946, the UE was successful in 84.1 per cent of NLRB certification elections, which was the highest rate for any US union. That year the CIO organised 350,000 workers, with 20 per cent organised by the UE.22 The UE organised the unorganised, thus it had another crucial characteristic of Moody’s account of social movement unionism.

As it organised thousands of new members the UE then built links with the local community; another important aspect of Moody’s account of social movement unionism. For example, in St. Louis during the 1930s and 1940s the UE Local President, William Senter (who admitted that he was a member of the Communist Party), claimed that while the UE was interested in the livelihood of its members, it was also ‘… interested in the effects of their economic status on our community’.23 In other words, where workers received higher wages, it was likely that the local community would be vibrant. The UE Locals’ belief in the benefit of labor-community alliances helped in a campaign to prevent the Emerson Electrical Company moving its production plant from St Louis in late 1939-early 1940. The UE’s campaign was eventually successful, but at the cost of agreeing to cooperate with management. Nevertheless, the UE’s campaign led it to
become a respected organisation in the community. This helped the Local during a five-month strike at Century Electric in 1940, which led to a good settlement. Likewise, during WWII, the Local hosted a convention involving UE members, business representatives and ‘… prominent figures in St. Louis public life’ that debated the course industrial relations should take following the end of the war.

The UE opposed prevailing opinion during the late 1940s. In the 1948 Presidential campaign, the CIO Executive Board endorsed the Democrat candidate Harry S. Truman and instructed its member unions to do likewise. However, the UE claimed that ‘… as an autonomous organization it would make its own political determinations’. Eventually, the UE endorsed no candidate, but the National Officers endorsed Henry Wallace who belonged to a new US political Party: the Progressive Party. Moreover, Wallace spoke at the 1947 UE Convention and UE President Albert Fitzgerald was named as permanent chairman of the Progressive Party convention. The UE’s support and endorsement of a third US political party occurred before the Communist Party of the USA endorsed the Progressive Party.

The UE has a relatively good record in its treatment of so-called minorities and adopting issues affecting them. From its inception until WWII, women only had a minor role in the UE. This was mainly because women only comprised 14 per cent of the UE’s membership in the lead-up to the war. Historian Lisa Kannenberg asserted that “… while some exceptional women did take active, leadership roles in the early organizing, the UE leadership was predominantly male and women’s issues had no discernable place on the UE agenda”. With US involvement in WW II, women comprised almost 50 per cent of electrical workers, compared to one-third before the war (not all women employed in the electrical industry were represented by the UE). With their increased presence in the electrical industry, the UE placed greater emphasis on its women members. It conducted women’s leadership classes and it led the fight for demands affecting women, and had success in a number of instances. For example,

[b]y 1944 UE contracts covering 460,000 workers contained equal pay clauses, and in 1945 UE got a War Labor Board order requiring General Electric, where 40 percent of the workers were women, and Westinghouse, to cease pay discrimination based on sex. In addition, among the 1,843 labor dispute cases involving UE before
the regional war labor boards, the union won numerous contract improvements outside of the wage area. These included shift differential premiums, improved vacation plans, job classifications and automatic progression.29

By the end of the war, there were over 260,000 UE women members. This corresponded to 40 per cent of the UE’s membership.30 However, the leadership was still male-dominated (see below). While the UE’s record on women was good, its record on African-American issues for the period 1930-1960, despite its claims, was weaker. One delegate at the 1942 UE convention noted that the UE’s record on racial discrimination has been second to none. Unfortunately, much of this record … has remained on paper. Very little has been done to effectuate the fine resolutions that have been passed by every convention of the UE on this question.31

It is often claimed that the main reason that African-Americans did not make large strides within the union during WWII was that African-American comprised only five per cent of the UE’s membership at the end of the war. Thus, African-American issues were not deemed very important.32 However, in a study of CIO unions, Judith Stepan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin convincingly argue that the relative size of the African-American membership barely made a difference to the union’s policies towards them.33 Instead, they suggested that the UE did not have as a good record on African-American issues as it did on gender issues because it was fighting tooth-and-nail for women’s issues, and was not able to “… engage in a conflict on a second front, that is, fighting against employers who … were even more resistant to hiring blacks than employers in other mass-production industries”.34

It is difficult to ascertain the truth. Nevertheless, conditions for UE African-American members often varied from Local to Local. For example, UE Local 601, which represented workers at ‘… the flagship of the Westinghouse chain’; hired an African-American woman to work in its office. However, white UE members pressured the union to fire her. The UE Local’s full-time officer claimed “… it was terrible. It was just terrible. We had to dismiss her. It wasn’t a question of [her ability to perform] a job. She was black and therefore she had no right to work in a union office”.35 Likewise, at the UE Local at the ‘Philco plant in Philadelphia, an enduring pattern of
racial segregation and discrimination existed for many years’. This Local was led by the UE’s right-wing and was one of the first Locals to secede from the UE and join the IUE, where its racism continued unabated.\textsuperscript{36} However, not all UE Locals were racist. For example, UE Local 1225 in New York pressed companies to hire minorities including African-Americans. Likewise, UE Districts in the New York-New Jersey and St. Louis areas were very active in African-American issues, partly because of the high number of African-Americans working in the electrical industry in their districts. At the same time, ‘Communist[s] were leaders in these districts and being politically conscious of social issues, pressed the black question’.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, the UE led the fight for no-discrimination clauses in collective bargaining agreements. In 1950, GE agreed to a no-discrimination clause. However, during the 1950s, Westinghouse refused to adopt such a clause. As the UE noted, ‘[i]n spite of wide public support our campaign received in 1958, Westinghouse continued its opposition. Congressmen and Senators, as well as outstanding Negro and white Civil Rights leaders, supported our campaign, but no other union in the industry took up the cause’.\textsuperscript{38} Finally, in 1963 Westinghouse agreed to the clause. The UE claimed:

\begin{quote}
\ldots we are gratified that we have finally won it, not only for the plants we represent, but for all Westinghouse plants. Because UE has scored this breakthrough, the no-discrimination clause can now be included in all union contracts with Westinghouse. The clause prohibits discrimination because of race, creed, color, religion, or national origin.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

While the UE has a relatively good history regarding minority groups, as it does with union democracy, collective bargaining is an area that the UE’s record is superb. For example, during WWII, the US government regulated wages. Between 1940 and 1945, wages “… were not permitted to increase by more than 15 percent … [but,] … over the same period the cost of living went up by 45 percent”.\textsuperscript{40} Hence, following the war, workers wanted a dramatic increase in their wages. The Big Three CIO unions (UE, UAW, USWA) demanded substantial increases, with the UE seeking a $2 per day increase (25 cents per hour); a 24 per cent increase. The UE had overwhelming support from its workers at GE, General Motors (GM), and Westinghouse to strike if the companies did not meet its demands.\textsuperscript{41} In a precursor to the upcoming strike, in September Westinghouse briefly locked out 36,000 workers who were demanding wage increases from its East Pittsburgh, Lima, Cleveland, and Sharon plants.\textsuperscript{42} GE and GM offered the
UE a ten cents an hour increase which was promptly rejected. GM offered 13½ cents an hour in December 1945, which the UE also rejected. UE members at GE, GM and Westinghouse overwhelmingly voted for strike action if the parties could not reach an agreement. As there was no settlement before the strike deadline, in January 1946, some 200,000 UE workers went on strike at GE, GM and Westinghouse, with the UAW on strike at GM, and 800,000 steelworkers striking a week later. ‘Labor had effectively, for the first time, closed down the heart of America’s industrial might’. As Schatz noted, the “1946 strikes were the first national strikes in the electrical manufacturing industry and the first major strikes GE and Westinghouse had known since 1918”.

On February 12, the UE negotiated an 18½-cent an hour wage increase for its GM workforce. As the UAW sought a 19½-cent an hour increase at GM, it condemned the UE for selling out. However, in January, the UAW had agreed to an 18-cent and an 18½-cent increase from Ford and Chrysler respectively. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that the UE ‘sold out’ as the UAW already had agreed to the same amount with the other two big automakers. A month later, the UE also achieved an 18½-cent increase for its GE workforce. Two months after that, through what the UE called ‘… the magnificent courage and union solidarity displayed by 75,000 Westinghouse workers … [the UE] won a tremendous victory for Westinghouse workers’. The company, after initially refusing ‘to make any wage offer’ and then only offering approximately a 9-cent an hour increase, finally agreed to a 19-cent increase. GE’s insistence that while men would receive an 18½-cent increase, women should only receive 15 cents complicated the UE’s negotiations with the company. UE Secretary-Treasurer James Matles noted that GE said we’ll improve our offer but we will not give the bobby-soxers [GE’s name for women] the same as we give the men… So the fight then was for equality in the settlement in cents per hour. So we stayed out another four weeks. Then [in the final settlement] it was eighteen and a half cents across the board for everyone in the plants including the bobby-soxers.

Likewise, in the UE’s settlement with Westinghouse, the 19-cent an hour increase included ‘… a fund of one cent per hour per worker, to be applied to the equalization of women’s rates’. The GM settlement included ‘… an 80-cent minimum hiring rate for both men and women in the auto giant’s electrical division’. All the strikes were a success for the UE. While it did not
achieve its initial demand of a $2 a day increase, it achieved substantial pay rises for both male and female members and was a step towards equal pay. The UE’s record in consistently winning pro-labor contracts matches its success in organising workers. Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin in their comprehensive study of CIO unions’ contracts with employers from 1938 to 1955 argue that the UE contracts were more pro-labor than other unions.50 For example, they concluded that

[a]n examination of the local agreements of each of these Big 3 Internationals [UE, UAW, USWA] reveals that those won by UE Locals were more systematically pro-labor … than were the UAW’s; the USWA was a distant third in pro-labor provisions. The same pattern appears in these unions’ national contracts... [T]he agreements between UE and General Electric over the years were consistently pro-labor; those between UAW and General Motors less so; and those between the USWA and Carnegie-Illinois (which became US Steel in late 1950) were the least pro-labor.51

They noted that “… not one of the UE/GE national contracts … ceded management rights or prerogatives”.52

It is clear from the above that the UE matches the key components of Moody’s account of social movement unionism. It was democratic with extensive rank-and-file involvement, it organise the unorganised, and it fought for everything that affects working people in their communities and had alliances with the local community. Following the 1946 mass strike against GE, GM and Westinghouse, the ideological conflict within the union, and government oppression led to a dramatic decline in the UE. I do not intend to provide a detailed analysis of this period, but an overview is necessary to illustrate the relative powerlessness of a union in the face of a campaign by the government, employers and other unions to weaken or destroy it.

The Decline of the UE

Rival unions, businesses and the US government alleged many UE leaders were Communists or had links with the Communist Party. Ideological conflict had always raged within the UE between left-wing and right-wing factions. However, the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War brought this conflict to a head. Within the UE, a right-wing opposition caucus – UE
Members for Democratic Action (UEMDA) – formed in August 1946. It claimed that ‘… the choice of the [UE] membership lies between (1) returning the UE to the ranks of respectable CIO unions with sound union objectives, or (2) allowing the UE to hurry along its own destruction as a front for the American Communist Party and its program. There is no middle road’. Aiding the UEMDA was the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). It campaigned against communist influence in trade unions and was a very vocal critic of the UE. For example, a member of the ACTU transferred funds from CIO President Phillip Murray to forces within the UE’s right wing. Moreover, the 1947 CIO convention passed an anti-Communist resolution. The resolution rejected political parties (namely the Communist Party’s attempts to interfere with the CIO. Following this resolution, the UEMDA won control of six Locals in the eastern United States.

Further aiding the right-wingers in the union was the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act, passed by the US Congress in 1947. The UE argued that the Taft-Hartley Act ‘… seeks to accomplish the domination or destruction of the American labor movement… [I]t will be used by Big Business as a club over the heads of workers – a club to reduce wages, increase speed-up and rate cutting and eliminate hard-won wage gains in working conditions’. A key clause in the Act was union officials had to sign an affidavit declaring that they were not communists. Not surprisingly, the UE General Executive Board refused to comply with the Act. At the UE’s national conventions in 1946, 1947 and 1948, the UEMDA attempted to pass right-wing resolutions and elect right-wing candidates to the UE’s national office. They were defeated, but the right wing continued to gain strength. As a testament to its democratic roots, union democracy, however, was one area where the UEMDA rarely criticised the UE. Indeed, despite the ideological conflict within the UE, “… virtually no charges of electoral improprieties were raised against the incumbents” at the Local, District, and National level.

Union raids also hurt the UE. Despite some opposition from the UEMDA – it disapproved of the raids because it wanted to change the UE from within (although the UE alleged that the UEMDA aided the UAW’s attempt to raid UE Locals) – ‘… between the passage of Taft-Hartley in the summer of 1947 and the withdrawal of UE from the CIO in the fall of 1949, rival unions conducted more than 500 raids on UE Locals’. Among the unions which conducted raids were the UAW, IAM, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), the International
Brotherhood of Teamsters, the AFL Jewelry Workers, the Glass, Ceramic and Silica Union and the AFL Carpenters. In an attempt to stop the raids, UE leaders decided to sign the anti-Communist affidavits as required by the Taft-Hartley Act. The factional battle within the UE reached a climax at its convention in September 1949. The right-wing delegates believed that they had enough support to defeat the Executive Board. However, a UE News editorial before the election refuted the UEMDA’s claim that the only way it would lose was if the left-wing faction rigged the election. At the convention, the Board won re-election in a closely fought race. The right-wing forces refused to accept the result as they claimed that the election was fixed (this was a rare instance of the right-wing claiming that UE elections were rigged). As Filippelli and McCulloch argued, it is difficult to determine whether this was true, but it was likely there were voting ‘irregularities’ on both sides. Moreover, the US government barred entry to the country to 81 delegates from 26 Canadian UE Locals because the government claimed they were Communists. At the convention, the left-wing faction noted that it had received telegrams from every one of these Locals signed by every one of the delegates stating that if they (the delegates) were present at the convention they would have ‘… supported the UE constitution and policies and they would have voted for [the incumbents] Albert Fitzgerald for President, [Secretary Treasurer Julius] Emspak for Secretary, Matles for Director of Organization’.

Following the convention, the UEMDA called for secession from UE. This finally happened at the CIO convention in November 1949. At the convention, the CIO expelled the UE. However, the UE had effectively withdrawn from the CIO before the convention as it withheld ‘… per capita [dues] from the CIO “until such time as the CIO returns to the principles of free, democratic industrial unionism”’. The UE boycotted the convention after the CIO refused to guarantee that CIO unions would not conduct any more raids on UE Locals. It is important to note that the UE’s withdrawal from the CIO was contrary to the Communist Party of the USA’s (CPUSA) position for all ‘red’ CIO unions. This further demonstrates that the UE did not just blindly follow CPUSA’s policy. The CIO convention witnessed the formation of a new union: the International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (IUE). The IUE almost immediately conducted raids on UE plants. The IUE was very successful because of red-baiting and with the CIO, spent over $5.5 million on its campaign to destroy the UE. By the end of 1950, the UE had lost 152,000 members and was the minority union at GE and Westinghouse. By 1952, the UE had 215,000 members compared to the IUE’s 231,000 members. Filippelli and
McColloch argued that the greater the seniority of UE members the greater the likelihood they would remain with the UE or switch to the IUE. Women and African-Americans were generally split evenly on the issue. The main factor that determined the IUE’s ability to raid a UE plant was its capacity to win over the Local union leadership. If the leadership defected to the IUE, the IUE usually defeated the UE.67

During this period, the UE sustained a massive anti-Communist attack by the US government. In addition to the anti-Communist clause in the Taft-Hartley Act, the Atomic Energy Commission ordered all companies not to “… recognize unions that were labelled as security risks; the UE thereby lost its bargaining rights at the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory in Schenectady, New York”.68 The US government scheduled House Committee of Un-American Activities sessions at the same time as union representation election were planned. It forced UE leaders and members to testify about their alleged CPUSA links, while local newspapers reported on the ‘Red UE’.69 The UE did not accept the red-baiting campaign without a fight. It argued that McCarthyism was Hitlerism, as it was “… an attack on the freedom of religion, the freedom of belief, the freedom of speech … [and] the freedom of people to freely associate together”. Moreover, at a US government ‘executive session’, Matles told McCarthy that “… when you accuse me of spying, and when you accuse decent working people [in UE organized plants] in Lynn and Schenectady of spying and sabotage, you are lying, Senator McCarthy. You are a liar”.70 Nevertheless, the UE’s membership declined rapidly due to the attacks by the US government and the raids by rival unions: by 1954 membership was only 164,000.71 In comparison, the IUE’s membership increased to over 300,000. The UE, however, managed to survive these actions and membership was starting to stabilise in the mid-1950s.

Women’s issues remained an important part of the UE’s programme, in part, because of the anti-Communist attacks on the UE. The UE held a national conference on the problems of working women. In an attempt to counter rival unions’ raids on its membership, the UE leadership paid particular attention to the needs of its Locals, in which women were a significant portion of the membership. Further, because of its weakened power, the UE concentrated its bargaining strategy at the “… local level, where women were more likely to play an active role”.72 Moreover, the UE argued that discrimination against women favored business. It claimed that
companies discriminated against women ‘… because it pays off to the bosses in billion of dollars in extra profits’. For example:

According to the US 1952 census the average wage for women in factories was $1,468 a year less then men (men averaged $3,615, women $2,147). This difference of $1,468 when multiplied by the 4,182,000 women employed in factories that year makes the staggering total of 6.1 billion dollars. There’s the answer – in one year US corporations made six billion one hundred million dollars in extra profits from their exploitation of women.73

While UE membership was starting to stabilise, in part because of its focus on its Locals, it was to suffer a crippling blow in 1955. The CPUSA issued a directive to its ‘union cadres’ to join unions within the newly merged AFL-CIO. This led to the UE losing half its membership. Many UE Local leaders, who were either CPUSA members or supporters, persuaded their Local to certify an AFL-CIO union as the bargaining agent. For example, ‘[f]our UE district presidents and thirty staff members and local union business agents announced that the UE was “finished,” proclaimed it time to find a “haven in the ‘mainstream’, and … prevailed on their members to secede from the UE”. However, the haven that the leaders sought often turned out to be not quite as they imagined, as many were expelled from the union that they joined.74

UE membership declined to 75,000 in 1957, and it fell even further to 58,000 in 1960, while the IUE’s hovered around 300,000.75 Arguably, this action by the CPUSA’s ‘union cadres’ demonstrated the true influence of the CPUSA on the UE. While the UE’s trade union performance cannot be questioned, it is likely, as the UE’s policy on WWII demonstrated that CPUSA members or supporters strongly influenced its political positions. It is equally likely that CPUSA influence on the UE dramatically declined after the exodus as its members and supporters transferred to AFL-CIO unions. However, as the managing editor of UE News Peter Gilmore noted, there were CPUSA members and cadre who stayed loyal to the UE. Having survived the McCarthy hearings and the persecution of the UE, usually at great personal cost, they did not want the Communist Party or any other organisation telling them to which union they should belong.76 The number of CPUSA members within the UE is open to question. While some UE leaders such as William Sentner, James MacLeish (‘president of District 4 in New York’), David Davis (‘business agent for Local 155 in Philadelphia’), and Nat Cohen (‘executive
board member of Local 474') admitted belonging to the CPUSA, other UE leaders such as Secretary Treasurer Julius Emspak and Director of Organisation James Matles continually denied belonging to the party. However, it is important to note that recent research by historians with access to the Kremlin’s files ‘… have not found a single Communist who was active in the leadership of a CIO union, at any level, whom they could even insinuate to have acted in any way to endanger “national security”’. Attacks by the US government, raids by rival unions, and the CPUSA’s betrayal more than devastated the UE: between August 1945 and 1960, the UE lost almost 700,000 members, although the membership losses suffered by the UE were partly because of the decline in the arms industry. The UE managed, however, to survive, and continued to achieve good collective bargaining agreements for its members. Indeed, at Westinghouse in the 1950s, the UE achieved better contracts for its members than the IUE did.

1960-Present

During this time, there was an increase in rank-and-file revolts and militancy in general. For example, in 1970 there were 66 million days lost because of strikes: the third highest on record. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the birth of such rank-and-file reform movements as the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, Miners for Democracy within the United Mine Workers of America, and Teamsters for a Decent Contract. Teamsters for a Decent Contract eventually led to the formation of one of the most successful rank-and-file reform movements, Teamsters for a Democratic Union within the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. For the UE, however, it was a period of stagnation. In the mid to late 1960s, the UE “… experienced its biggest organizational surge since the 1940s… Some shops lost earlier in the decade were won back”, with other organising victories across the US. This was because there were fewer anti-Communists attacks on the union by the US government, companies and rival unions. In 1969, the factional war within the electronic industry was partly healed as the IUE agreed to cooperate with the UE in the forthcoming GE and Westinghouse negotiations. This was in part because of the UE’s and IUE’s continued failure in negotiations with the companies. In the 1969 negotiations, GE tried to remove long-standing agreements, such as the right of unions to bargain national contracts. Following a deadlock in negotiations, GE workers went out on strike (16,000 UE members were on strike out of a total workforce 170,000). This was the first time since 1946 that the entire GE workforce struck together. The unions had support from community groups, politicians, and students. A UE Local leader summed up the UE’s position:
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[General Electric have] been trying to tell … [the workers] … there are three separate groups in GE: the company, the employees, and the union. That’s what they’ve based themselves on. We have to show them they’re wrong. The UE represents the workers. The workers are the union. We have to show them there are not three groups but just two: the company and the union. Them and Us.82

The strike was successful. GE agreed to withdraw its demands for an end to national contracts. Workers received wage increases, and “… improvements in pensions, sick pay, vacations, hospitalization, weekly sickness and accident benefits, life insurance, and non-hospital medical expenses”83 The UE argued that the success of the strike was partially because of the support it received from the Teamsters, UAW and the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union. Moreover, a “… key factor in the success of the strike was the unity of the UE and IUE at the negotiating tables, a unity which was strengthened and continually reinforced by the determination of the rank and file of both unions to cast aside anything which interfered with winning the fight”.84 This strike was arguably, the UE’s last great triumph. As the success against GE occurred at the end of 1969, there was renewed hope for the decade to follow. However, the downturn in the US economy severely hampered the UE. Despite some organising victories, UE membership continued to decline and by 1975 stood at 67,000.85

After the betrayal of the CPUSA, the UE was more independent politically; a key characteristic of Moody’s account of social movement unionism. The UE was actively involved in the civil rights movement. It condemned the jailing of Martin Luther King. It ‘… sent an exceptionally large delegation to the 1963 March on Washington [it was one of the sponsoring organizations], and the union pushed hard for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act’.86 UE President Albert Fitzgerald claimed that the Act was ‘… the most crucial piece of legislation now pending, perhaps the most important bill of the past ten years, we must take special measures to mobilize our membership to insure its passage’.87 Likewise, the UE condemned the Vietnam War. A resolution adopted at the 1966 UE Convention argued that many men, including UE members, were fighting and dying 9000 miles away from home. The resolution gave an anti-capitalist tone to the UE’s opposition to the war. It noted that in the US, the “… cost of living has been rising
rapidly, taxes have been going up and the fight against poverty is being sacrificed, while corporations are wallowing in the greatest profits in history”.88

In the current era of globalisation, the UE strongly opposes neoliberalism and free trade. It argues that they are ‘… further examples of imperialistic policies that exploit peoples around the world for the benefit of Local elites and Western consumers… The economic exploitation of the mass of human beings for the benefit of a few is not inevitable’. The 2001 UE Convention noted the UE ‘… actively supports organizations that are attempting to create an alternative globalization based on a worldwide fellowship and not on the continued exploitation of one segment of the world’s population for the benefit of another’.89 The UE’s stance on such issues as civil rights and the Vietnam War and its independence from the Democratic Party (unlike the majority of US unions), clearly demonstrate that the UE in recent years undertakes independent political action.

However, since 1970 the UE’s history is one of ‘treading water’. For example, the 1970s was such an uneventful period for the UE that in their authoritative history of the UE, Filippelli and McColloch devote less than 10 pages to the UE’s activities in the 1970s. The 1980s and 1990s were a bittersweet period for the UE. The union largely resisted concessions in collective bargaining agreements, and led the fight against plant closings, but its membership halved (see below for details). This led the UE to increase its efforts to organise the unorganised. The UE argued that ‘… the survival of our union depends on our ability to organize’.90 In 1980, while the UE only had 65,000 members, it organised 5000 new workers, which as Filippelli and McColloch noted, was “… no small feat in the midst of one of the worst periods in the annals of organized labor”.91 In the period 1972-1984, the UE’s success rate in NLRB certification elections was 60.4 per cent, with only the American Federation of Teachers having a higher success rate (63.8 per cent) amongst all major unions. In comparison, in the electrical industry, the IBEW had a 51.2 per cent, and the IUE only had a 43.4 per cent success rate.92 Likewise, in 1994, the UE had the best record of any US union in gaining first contracts with companies, and in the period 1996-98 consistently achieved wage increases above the average for all US unions.93
The UE has had recent success in organising new members, albeit on a much smaller scale than in the past. In 2000, the UE organised new 1600 workers, which was the eighth consecutive year that the UE organised more than a thousand workers. While not at the level of its organising successes in the 1940s, and unlikely lead to a revival in the UE’s fortunes, the union’s recent organising efforts are noteworthy considering the size of the union. In comparison, the Canadian Auto Workers, which has more than seven times the membership of the UE, only organises approximately 6000 workers per year, which is still a good achievement in itself. The UAW has over 20 times the members of the UE, but only organises 13,000 new workers per year. Despite the UE’s recent organising efforts, membership has slumped to its current level of 35,000. The major contributor to the UE’s slump has been the health of the US economy, and multinationals moving production abroad. The US recession in the early 1980s led to thousands of UE members losing their jobs. Thus, by the mid-1980s, it has lost much of its influence in negotiations with Westinghouse, although it maintained some power at GE. However, the IUE suffered an equally dramatic decline. In 1979, the IUE had 243,000 members, but by 1993, the union’s membership was only 143,000.

Partly due to outsourcing, the UE is forming alliances with unions and workers worldwide and is at the forefront of labor internationalism in the US. As a result of the production shift to Mexico, UE formed an alliance with the Authentic Labor Front [Frente Autenico del Trabajo (FAT)]. Moody noted that this was UE’s “most active and ambitious cross-border alliance”. FAT is like the UE in that it is “… independent of political parties, business and government”, unlike other Mexican labor federations. The UE’s International Representative David Johnson noted that in “General Electric alone, we’ve lost over 10,000 jobs in the last few years. They’ve moved … [mainly] to Mexico… To put it a little simplistically, either our wages or conditions are going to go down to the level of Mexico, or we’re going to figure out ways to help Mexicans raise their wages and conditions up to our levels”. While there is self-interest involved in the UE’s commitment to international solidarity, this is not its only concern in such alliances. The UE argues that corporate-led globalisation would lead to a global ‘race to the bottom’, with no concerns for labor and the environment. It noted that there is a “… polarization of wealth [and] environmental degradation… Instead of the race to the bottom, we must pull working people throughout the world to the top”.

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The UE provides FAT with “… financial support, research capability, and the prospect of rank and file action” in the US in support of Mexican organising drives.101 In return, FAT helps the UE in its organising drives. For example, FAT “… provided Mexican organizers, whose work with Mexican employees in a … virulently anti-union Milwaukee foundry was vital to the UE’s successful unionization drive there”.102 As part of the strategy to organise the foundry workers, the Mexican organiser distributed a leaflet to workers. It stated that “… the UE and the FAT fight for the same ideals… I feel proud to see my countrymen demanding their union rights. And it’s moving to see workers of all races and nationalities joining forces… Keep on, brothers and sisters. The way to the future is the union!”103 While the UE is at the forefront of labor internationalism and independent political action, it was still a male-dominated union. For example, in the early 1980s, there was a decided lack of women in leadership positions. In 1984, only one woman was on the 15-member General Executive Board. However, this changed dramatically in subsequent years. In 1985, three women were elected to the Board, and by 1991, there were six women Board members, which exceeded “… the female percentage of union membership”.104 Thus, while the UE does not have a perfect record on women’s issues and the role of women in the union, it does have a very good tradition. Likewise, while the UE’s record on African-Americans was far from perfect during WWII, it has improved in subsequent years. As previously noted, the UE condemned the jailing of Martin Luther King and was very active in the 1963 March on Washington, and campaigned for the “… passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act”.105 Similarly, an increasing number of UE Locals are leading the fight against racism. For example, UE Local 150 in North Carolina has a ‘… multiracial membership and black leadership’. Moreover, in 2001 the UE co-sponsored a march and rally in Raleigh State, North Carolina in an attempt to promote African-American and ‘Latino unity in the South’.106

**The UE at Stewart-Warner**

The UE has an excellent organising record; it has great success in achieving good collective bargaining agreements, and it is at the forefront of efforts to build international labor solidarity. However, the UE’s campaign to keep Stewart-Warner’s Chicago plant open in the 1980s demonstrates the lack of power the UE (or indeed, any union) has in comparison to business in poor national economic conditions. It is also an example of the decline of the industrial sector in the US. The IBEW was the certified bargaining agent at the Stewart-Warner Chicago plant. However, following worker dissatisfaction with the union, the UE eventually gained certification
at the plant in 1980. In 1985, following financial difficulties at Stewart-Warner, the UE formed the Coalition to Keep Stewart-Warner Open (CKSWO). Amongst its members were the UE, other ‘… labor activists, church groups, the University of Illinois at Chicago … and aldermen from the Chicago city council’. In 1986, Stewart-Warner announced that it was to transfer 150 jobs to its Johnson City plant. However, the UE demonstrated “… that in the longer term some twenty-five hundred jobs were at stake … [because of] … underlying weakness in the company’s wage and financial policies”. In 1987, Stewart-Warner merged with the British multinational British Thermoplastics and Rubber. Reverend Jesse Jackson urged all Chicago workers to help in the fight to keep Stewart-Warner in Chicago. He claimed that the reduction of US jobs was “… just another form of economic violence that must be ended the same way we ended racial violence about 20 years ago”. However, later that year, Stewart-Warner announced that in 1988 it would cut approximately a quarter of its Chicago workforce. In June 1989, the company revealed that its Chicago plant “… may be on the endangered species list because high operating costs at the plant make it difficult for the firm to compete”. Andrew Jonas, a Reader in the Department of Geography at the University of Hull, noted that the … campaign to save Stewart-Warner was built around a well-organized community base and was linked to a wider political movement to transform economic policy in Chicago. In this respect, the CKSWO’s concerns and goals fed into a broader program of action to protect inner-city neighborhoods from manufacturing displacements… Opportunities to link with political movements beyond the city limits also came up during the course of the struggle.

Moreover, in an attempt to keep the plant open, Stewart-Warner workers agreed to concessions, which would have saved the company $2.5 million per year. Stewart-Warner’s management rejected the offer as inadequate. On November 4 1989, Stewart-Warner announced that it was shutting its Chicago plant “… and moving its operations to Mexico in two years”. However, the Stewart-Warners’ Chicago plant remained open to mid-1995. During this time, the UE managed to achieve a contract without concessions, and wage rises for the few remaining employees. But, despite alliances with the local community and politicians, the UE was unable to keep Stewart-Warner’s Chicago plant open. The Stewart-Warner campaign demonstrates that in specific circumstances the UE’s power is weak in comparison to that of business.
doomed to failure, the UE’s attempt to keep Stewart-Warner open utilised labor-community alliances, alliances with politicians, and even offered wage concessions.

The UE’s experiences at Stewart-Warner were not isolated events in the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in 1982 UE Local 610 defeated a concessionary contract and achieved contract gains following a 205-day strike at American Standard’s Westinghouse Air Brake and Union Switch and Signal, in which the striking workers received strong community support. However, by 1985, and despite strong labor and community support, American Standard decided to shut the plant.116 There was a similar situation at Morse Cutting Tools. The UE defeated a concessionary contract in 1982, but management decided to close the plant in May 1987.117 However, two months later, and following a UE-community campaign, Morse Tools reopened amid much fanfare. But, there was not to be a happy ending. Morse finally closed its operations for good a few years later.118 Nevertheless, that the UE and community groups managed to reopen a closed plant, and provide UE members with good wages for a few extra years was a substantial achievement.

Conclusion

The UE’s polices and practices correspond to the key components of Moody’s account of social movement unionism. The UE is highly democratic, with extensive rank-and-file involvement. It organises the unorganised, and with its alliance with the FAT, the UE is at the forefront of international labor solidarity. The UE undertakes independent political action, is hostile to capitalism, and has alliances with the local community. Finally, while not perfect, the UE’s record on minorities is above average. This demonstrates that while social movement unionism is being portrayed as something new it has been in existence within the US for almost 70 years. The UE also provides union reformers and labor academics with two key findings.

First, social movement unions potentially achieve better collective bargaining agreements and organise more new workers per capita than right-wing unions. As noted above, the UE has a very good record in collective bargaining. As the study by Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin demonstrated, the UE’s agreements were more pro-labor than any other CIO union throughout the CIO’s existence as a separate labor federation. Even though it was the minority union at Westinghouse, the UE achieved better contracts than the IUE in the 1950s. Likewise, the UE has a very
impressive organising record, with a very high NLRB certification election win rate. These findings correspond with Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin’s research. Stepan-Norris and Zeitlin established that left-led unions achieved greater pro-labor contracts than center and right-wing unions. While the first finding is positive for those hoping that social movement unionism will revive US unionism, the second is not. The UE was unable to stave off the ideological conflict that raged within it. The anti-Communist attacks from within its ranks, from other unions, the CIO, and by the US government, and the CPUSA’s betrayal decimated the UE. As Ian Robinson argued,

… the radical agenda of SMUs [social movement unions] means that government and employers often target them with higher levels of repression than rival union types. We have seen this dynamic recur in U.S. labor history, and the result was clear: SMUs were marginalized except during the great economic crises of the 1930s. The lesson, it seems, is that even with superior mobilization capacity, SMUs will be crushed by the superior power resources of the state, employers, and more conservative unions – if they are willing and able to cooperate. Less inclusive and radical forms of unionism will thus come to dominate unless such a coordinated repressive response proves impossible.

It is not necessarily the case that social movement unions face greater repression than other types of unions (which Robinson does note). Nevertheless, in the majority of situations, especially in the era of neoliberal globalisation, governments and conservative unions will likely try to prevent any radical unions’ agenda from succeeding, especially anti-capitalist activities. As J.M. Barbalet argued:

Every time that radical unionism has flourished in the USA, it has been destroyed or severely damaged by political repression. In addition, the ‘mainstream’ labor movement ‘came under special attack when it showed signs of becoming radical’. In particular, state repression had the effect of totally removing the radical element form the labor movement, and of providing a strong incentive away from the radical end of the political and industrial organizational spectrum.
Nevertheless, that the UE has managed to survive is testament to the success of the UE’s brand of trade unionism. Indeed the UE managed to survive the IUE as a stand-alone union. IUE’s membership continued to decline throughout the 1990s. By 2000, its membership had slumped to 113,000. In the same year, the IUE merged with the Communications Workers of America in 2000. As Filippelli and McColloch argued in relation to collective bargaining, “perhaps the best testimonial to UE’s trade union performance lies in the fact that throughout the civil war in the union, the right wing never raised a telling criticism in this sphere”. The UE, despite its faults, is one of the great examples of the benefits of rank-and-file unionism, or to use another term, Moody’s social movement unionism. The UE, while not being a perfect example of a social movement union, is the best example of a social movement union in the US. However, its dramatic decline from its heyday due to ideological conflict, government repression and attacks from employers demonstrates that social movement unionism alone will not lead to the revival of the US union movement.
Notes

7 Schatz, 64.
10 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
20 Matles and Higgins, 163.
21 Zieger, 145.
22 Matles and Higgins, 162, 164.
24 Feurer, 108-12.
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30 Filippelli and McColloch, 80; Schatz, ‘The End of Corporate Liberalism’, 195.


32 Ibid., 235; Filippelli and McColloch, 81.


34 Ibid., 224-5.

35 Schatz, The Electrical Workers, 128.


37 Critchlow, 234-7; Feurer, 115; Step-norris, Zeitlin, Left Out, 216-7, 218-23.


40 Matles and Higgins, 138-9.

41 Ibid., 139; Filippelli and McColloch, 84.


45 Schatz, ‘The End of Corporate Liberalism’, 199


47 Matles and Higgins, 147.


49 Milkman, 185; ‘Organizational Report by Director of Organization For the Months of May, June and July 1946’, (1946): 4; UE News, Box 1523.

50 Step-norris and Zeitlin determine whether a contract is pro-labor in the following areas: management prerogatives; the right to strike; contract term; trade-off provisions; and grievance procedure, see Judith Step-norris, Maurice Zeitlin, ‘Union Democracy, Radical Leadership, and the Hegemony of Capital’, American Sociological Review, vol.60, no.6, December (1995): 839-40.

51 Ibid., 844.


53 ’Statement of Principles: Issued by UE Members For Democratic Action’, UEA, Box 1858, file: Miscellaneous.


55 ‘Organizational Report by Director of Organization For the Months of February, March and April 1947’, (1947): 1, UEA, Box 1523.


57 Schatz, The Electrical Workers, 184.

58 Filippelli and McColloch, 9.

59 Ibid., 119-21; UE News, March 27 (1948): 3, 7; Matles and Higgins, 192-4.
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60 Filippelli and McColloch, 133-4.
64 Stepan-Norris, Zeitlin, Left Out, 302.
65 Filippelli and McColloch, 140; Schatz, The Electrical Workers, 185.
67 Filippelli and McColloch, 149-50.
68 Oshinsky, 519.
69 Matles and Higgins, 201-2; 210-4; Stepan-Norris, Zeitlin, Left Out, 282.
71 Filippelli and McColloch, 157.
72 Kannenberg, 316.
73 ‘How To Tackle Job And Rate Discrimination Against Women’ (file: Facts on Women Workers) undated (approx 1955), 2, UEA, Box 2062.
74 Stepan-Norris, Zeitlin, Left Out, 322.
76 Interview with Peter Gilmore September 10, 2002.
77 Filippelli and McColloch, 6-7.
78 Stepan-Norris, Zeitlin, Left Out, 21-2 (footnote 49).
80 Filippelli and McColloch, 170-1; Stepan-Norris, Zeitlin, Left Out, 324-5.
81 Filippelli and McColloch, 173; Matles and Higgins, 260-1.
83 Matles and Higgins, 281.
85 Filippelli and McColloch, 178.
87 ‘Albert J. Fitzgerald to UE Legislative Committees, Local Unions, General Executive Board, Staff’ February 6, (1964), UEA, PM421.
91 Filippelli and McColloch, 178.
94 ‘2000 UE Convention Resolutions: Organizing the Unorganized’.
95 Filippelli and McColloch, 179-81.
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104 Filippelli and McColloch, 182.
105 Ibid., 172.
108 Ibid., 337.
121 Filippelli and McColloch, September 1, (2000).