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Article Summary: The largest unions and the major meat packers were involved in a national strike marked by violence in several cities in 1948. In Omaha packinghouse workers did not win concessions from the packers, but they benefitted from community support during the strike.

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Photographs / Images: Picket hut and pickets outside Armour plant; South Omaha packing district, 1947 (2 views); strikers around a picket hut outside the Armour plant

Workers, Bosses, and Public Officials: Omaha's 1948 Packinghouse Strike

By William C. Pratt

The 1948 packinghouse strike was one of the major American industrial disputes in the late 1940s. Every large packing center in the country was affected when the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), struck the "Big Four" in the industry—Armour, Swift, Cudahy, and Wilson—and three smaller packers. Approximately 100,000 employees went out on strike and the majority of them stayed out 67 days. And in the case of Wilson's workers, the strike lasted an additional two weeks.¹

The UPWA had organized most of the Big Four plants but the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and an independent union in the Swift chain had organized a substantial number of plants as well. Both of these unions accepted the packers' offer of a 9-cent-an-hour raise, and the UPWA went out alone. Inter-union rivalry was heightened by AFL attempts to raid UPWA plants in 1948. In addition, the "Red Issue" entered the controversy. Packers, AFL organizers, and conservative politicians charged both prior to and during the strike that the UPWA was Communist-dominated.

The 1948 strike was marked by substantial violence in midwestern cities. Three people were killed, and the National Guard was called out in three states. Ultimately, the UPWA felt compelled to settle for the 9-cent-an-hour raise which the packers had initially offered, and both sides began to prepare for the next round. Significantly, as David Brody notes in *The Butcher Workmen*: "For the first time, the industry experienced 'a "lost" strike that did not mean a lost union.'"² But the UPWA's greatest successes were achieved in the years following the 1948 setback, and many union members believe that this strike prepared the way for such later gains.

Omaha became the second largest packing center in the United States early in the 20th century. Its packing industry dated from the 1870s but did not grow to importance until the next decade, when major packers such as Swift and Cudahy established plants. The packing industry was based in South Omaha, a separate community until it was annexed by Omaha in 1915.³ Long a predominant economic force in the city, this industry employed more than 10,000 workers in the post-World War II era.⁴

Omaha has had an extended history of labor strife in its packing district. A UPWA account refers to an active Omaha union in 1879-1880, and there was a reported Knights of Labor victory over management in 1892.⁵ The apparent take-off in union organizational activity in the packing industry occurred in the 1890s and the early 1900s. Omaha witnessed a major packinghouse strike in the summer of 1894. With the outbreak of violence, the governor sent in the militia, and the strike was broken. Similar disputes in other packing centers also resulted in defeat.⁶ At the end of the decade, however, another attempt to organize the industry met with greater success. The Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen was organized in 1897. Near the end of the following year, South Omaha's Michael Donnelly became its president. Omaha initially served as his base of operations, but after two years he moved to Chicago.⁷

In the early 20th century the Amalgamated grew rapidly in the nation's packing centers. By late 1903 the secretary of the Packing Trades Council of South Omaha claimed that "the [South Omaha] packing industry has very close to 4,000 organized men."⁸ But 1904 proved to be the Amalgamated's peak year for more than a decade. As a result of a bitter strike that year, the union was routed in every packing center in the country and its membership plummeted.⁹

The Amalgamated underwent a national revival during World War I. In September of 1917, the South Omaha union grew from a reported 103 members to almost 5,000 following a short strike. A national work stoppage was later averted through government intervention, and a settlement which provided for arbitration of unresolved issues lasted into 1921.¹⁰ Hoping to buy time, the Amalgamated accepted a wage cut in March of that year. In the late fall, however, the packers



Picket hut (above) and pickets outside Armour plant. John Savage collection, Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.

announced further reductions. This time a nation-wide strike was declared, and thousands of workers went out in December of 1921. The strike lasted nearly two months, and ended with another union defeat. In Omaha and other packing centers, strikebreakers were widely used and there were repeated instances of violence.¹¹

Unionization was little more than a memory in the Omaha packing district for over a decade. With the coming of the New Deal, however, efforts were made to re-establish the Amalgamated. A local was formed, but according to former participants, it proved ineffective. Eventually in the middle and late 1930s, workers at Armour organized an independent union which later affiliated with the CIO. The CIO did not enter packing initially. Later it did so through the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC). According to one of the early organizers of the CIO in Omaha, the memory of the 1921-1922 strike inhibited the organization of some older packing workers. Another legacy of that strike and the Amalgamated's failure in the early 1930s was antipathy toward the AFL on the part of some workers. Armour was the first of the big plants to be organized, but eventually all of the Big Four plants were organized by the PWOC.¹²

World War II in some respects helped the labor movement. The AFL and CIO attempted to observe a no-strike pledge, and the War Labor Board provided for the maintenance of union membership for the duration of the contract. Unquestionably, this arrangement was a help to the PWOC, which became the United Packinghouse Workers of America in 1943. The gains of the late 1930s and early 1940s were consolidated, and the union of close to 200,000 members emerged from the war years in good condition and with a sense of militancy.¹³ In early 1946 both the Amalgamated (AFL) and the UPWA (CIO) struck the industry and prompted a government take-over of the plants. The ensuing settlement, a 16-cent-an-hour raise, was "almost twice as much as any raise in the history of the industry."¹⁴

During the 1946 strike, over 7,000 UPWA workers went out locally. Two small CIO plants were allowed to continue operation "in order to supply meat for the Army, the Veterans' Hospital, local hospitals and any other institution needing meat for health purposes."¹⁵ Significantly, the packers did not recruit strikebreakers, and there was no violence.¹⁶

Near the end of the strike, a reported 6,000 Omaha strikers attended a rally. It was a spirited occasion, as the comments of one strike leader suggest. "If the worst should come," he announced, "we shall call out the engine room workers [who operated the plants' refrigeration]. And we shall stay on the line till the odor of rotten meat covers Omaha." Such resolve, however, was not required. The workers returned on January 28, 1946.¹⁷

The AFL and CIO cooperated during part of this struggle. That, along with the Truman Administration's desire to maintain the supply of meat, resulted in considerable pressure upon the packers. However, two years later in 1948, the UPWA nationally and locally found conditions more difficult. Negotiations over a contract reopener bogged down in late 1947, and the CIO union again began planning a strike. This time, however, it proved impossible to enlist the AFL-affiliated Amalgamated into a common front. Much to UPWA dismay, the Amalgamated accepted the 9-cent-an-hour raise which the packers offered.¹⁸

While some UPWA leaders, perhaps even International President Ralph Helstein, had misgivings, the union opted for a strike. The initial union position was to hold out for a 29-cent-an-hour raise, and it was decided to begin the strike on March 16, 1948.¹⁹

Apparently some Omaha people shared in the misgivings about the wisdom of a strike at this time.²⁰ Without the Amalgamated's participation, the strike could not shut down the industry or approach the impact of the 1946 work stoppage. The AFL plants continued to produce, thus reducing pressure on the packers. In Omaha, all of the large plants were organized by the UPWA, and the AFL had not been a factor in the 1946 strike.²¹ Two years later, however, the Amalgamated attempted to raid UPWA plants.

Patrick Ratigan, a key figure in the 1946 efforts in Omaha, had subsequently been fired as a UPWA representative. After serving as president of Local No. 47 (Swift), he resigned and attempted to organize the Amalgamated in his plant. According to him the reason he left the UPWA was its leadership's refusal to sign the non-Communist affidavits required under the Taft-Hartley Act. Immediately prior to the packinghouse strike, the *Omaha World-Herald* featured an ar-



*South Omaha packing district, 1947. John Savage collection,
Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.*



ticle on Ratigan in a series on local Communism. Ratigan, according to this story, felt that much of the leadership of his old local was Communist.²²

On March 16, 1948, the *World-Herald* reported that over 8,000 Omaha packinghouse workers were on strike. As had been the case two years earlier, a strategy committee directed the strike effort. Each striking local was represented on the body, which was generally in charge of UPWA activities for the duration of the strike. Picket lines and picket huts were erected, and "paralysis set in on Omaha's great meat processing center."²³

At the outset, however, there was little indication that the strike would become the city's most disruptive in the postwar era. Early reports of striker activity assumed an almost festive mood:

Union workers here increased their efforts to keep up morale among strikers. A stage show and movies were held at Union Hall . . . Saturday. Wrestling and boxing matches were scheduled for Sunday. . . .

A daily, *On the Picket Line*, is distributed to strikers. A sound truck tours picket posts, playing such union songs as "Solidarity Forever."

Religious services were to be held at some picket posts Sunday morning. And children of striking workers were to join the picket line at the Cudahy plant Sunday afternoon.²⁴

During the first several days of the strike pickets appeared on railroad tracks leading into the packing houses. Railroad crews would not cross their line, thus preventing the shipping of already processed meat. The union lawyer argued that strikers had a right to picket on the tracks just as they did on the sidewalk. On the fifth day of the strike, however, police began to clear the tracks of pickets and made their first arrest, Joe Millen, president of Local No. 62 (Wilson).²⁵

The packers, the South Omaha Cold Storage Company (which was also being struck by the UPWA in a different dispute), and the Omaha Stockyards sought to pressure the city council to arrest pickets on the tracks. A few days after Millen's arrest, the council was persuaded by a written opinion of the city attorney that it should do so. Accordingly, it ordered all pickets off the tracks by 9 a.m. the next day, March 25, 1948. The strikers disregarded the order, and 68 of them were arrested. A United Press report indicated "that this was the biggest 'mass-arrest' of the nine-day-old nationwide packing house strike."²⁶

But large scale arrests were just beginning in Omaha. By the time of the first hearing on the arrests, the *World-Herald* noted that "more than one hundred union members have been arrested on similar charges."²⁷ Such offenses, however, had been peaceful. On the first day of the mass arrest, at least one group—led in part by returning servicemen—marched lightheartedly to the South Omaha police station.²⁸

The packers' decision to continue production despite the strike encouraged confrontation. Armour and Wilson had asserted from the outset that they would keep their plants operating. Not all employees in the Omaha packinghouses had gone out on strike, and some former strikers and others sought to cross the picket lines. By early April the Omaha packing district was the scene of a large scale conflict. Pickets swarmed at the plant entrances in the morning, and would-be workers and delivery trucks were frequently repelled. On April 5, 1948, pickets converged on a strikebreaker's car and one of the strikers was shot. According to the police, this shooting was "the first major act of violence since the meat packing strike began."²⁹

The *World-Herald* began reporting accounts of strikers beating workers and stoning trucks. A few days after the shooting, strikers allegedly beat an Armour truck driver. The following day, two trucks ran into four pickets at an entrance to the Cudahy plant. During the excitement, 58 persons reportedly eluded the pickets and ran into the packinghouse. Two more were stopped by strikers. Significantly, the city police had "refused the non-strikers escort duty. That would constitute taking sides, Acting Police Chief Henry Boesen said."³⁰ Boesen's attitude in this incident and others irritated the packers, and they complained loudly and often.

Unable to secure ready access to their plants, the packers went to court to enjoin the strikers. They charged that the union was involved in mass picketing and requested that it be restrained from interfering with those who wished to return to work.³¹ Throughout the strike, packers argued that many employees wanted to work but were afraid of strikers.

The city's response—particularly that of the police commissioner and Boesen—was that the police department did not have sufficient manpower to guarantee access to the plants. Boesen became testy during a hearing on a suit that Armour

brought against strike leaders.³² Judge Jackson B. Chase attempted a compromise that would guarantee both safe entry into the plant and the rights of pickets. It called for "white lines to be painted along the sidewalk" to delineate where the pickets could walk "without interfering with traffic." These lines were then painted by the police.³³ Later, Armour's general manager claimed that the police painted the lines where the union wanted them rather than where the judge had indicated.³⁴ Whether or not that was the case, the corridor idea quickly proved a failure.

Over the next week the packers complained of increased violence. On one occasion, according to Wilson's general manager, plant windows were shot out. Police did ask pickets outside the Wilson plant "to move [a pile of] bricks across the street."³⁵ The district judge who had developed the corridor idea now handed down a restraining order against Local No. 8, which represented Armour workers. The *World-Herald* reported that it forbade interference with persons trying to enter or leave the Armour plant; mass picketing; profane language; and pushing, following, or intercepting persons at the plant. Similar restraining orders soon were issued on behalf of the other packers.³⁶ In these cases the packers' attorneys entered affidavits of workers who allegedly had been harassed by strikers.³⁷ Later some of these affidavits were submitted by the packers to a congressional sub-committee investigating the strike.³⁸

Following the Armour injunction, the police department shifted its approach from reliance on patrolling to stationing two to four policemen at entrances to the four biggest plants.³⁹ But even this arrangement did not satisfy the packers, and they began to talk increasingly about the need to bring in the National Guard.⁴⁰

In the packers' eyes Acting Police Chief Boesen was a major obstacle to their efforts and they charged him with bias toward the strikers.⁴¹ Interviews with Omaha strike participants reveal that they felt Boesen was sympathetic to their cause. One member of the Armour local said, "The chief of police was a friend of mine and I could call him and the cooperation was 200 percent."⁴² In early May Boesen received "loud applause" at a strike meeting.⁴³ Representing the police union, he and the president of the fire fighters union were

photographed handing a \$200 check to Adolph Pechar, chairman of the strikers' strategy committee. The *World-Herald* ran the picture in both morning and evening editions and subsequently joined the packers' demands that Boesen be removed.⁴⁴

The following day Boesen offered to step aside as head of the police strike detail, but the city council refused his request. According to the *World-Herald*, council members "were satisfied with the work Chief Boesen has been doing." Two police captains were given primary responsibility for day-to-day police duties in the packing district, but Boesen continued as acting chief until May 22, when the permanent chief returned to duty.⁴⁵

Perhaps the holding of municipal elections during the strike period encouraged a relatively permissive attitude on the part of the city council. Neither the mayor nor the council was willing to request the National Guard. And the *World-Herald*, though disturbed by the continuation of the strike, did not recommend that step either. It supported the incumbent mayor's bid for re-election and perhaps felt a call for the National Guard would hurt his chances.⁴⁶

On Saturday, May 1 a delegation including the general manager of the Armour plant and the president of the Omaha Stockyards traveled to Lincoln to see Republican Governor Val Peterson to try to convince him that the strike situation required his action. Marshalling earlier arguments, they pleaded that the National Guard was needed to restore order. While some packers had urged the calling out of the Guard almost from the outset of the strike, the particular timing of this visit to the governor may have been due to a packer decision to launch a major campaign to bring back their employees. Reported the *World-Herald*: "The 10 men had told the governor that there would be 'much more trouble' when a back-to-work movement starts at the plants—possibly Monday."⁴⁷ However, the governor did not respond.

Three days after Governor Peterson met with the pro-packing delegation, he was visited by union representatives, including two members of the strike strategy committee, the UPWA farm-relations director, and an Omaha Catholic priest. Governor Peterson reiterated the state picketing requirements and read the statute to his visitors. The priest,

Father F. L. Lubiszewski of St. Stanislaus Church in South Omaha, asked that the governor not call out the National Guard, and referring to his parishioners who were on strike, said: "They are not a riotous people." When asked by the governor whether he had been at the scene, he replied that he and other priests often were on the picket line.⁴⁸

Near the end of the strike, the *World-Herald* reported that Governor Peterson had told "Sheriff Dorrance and Mayor Leeman that calling the guard would 'cost the taxpayers up to 60 thousand dollars a week!'"⁴⁹ Governor Peterson had met with both sides and arranged to receive reports on the strike twice a day from his own observers.⁵⁰ Although he did not rule out the contingency of martial law, neither did he give the packers much hope. Thus early in May, the packers had apparently developed a two-front strategy which was not dependent upon the National Guard being activated. They (1) sought legal action through the courts to restrict and punish individual strikers and union leaders; and (2) attempted to coerce striking workers to return to their jobs or lose their seniority rights.

Packer lawyers argued that the strikers had violated earlier restraining orders and requested that such injunctions be broadened to further restrict picketing. For example, Armour's attorney requested that all pickets be removed from the main entrances to three of the city's largest plants.⁵¹ At one point Wilson's manager complained that the police did nothing to protect workers from pickets and added that the police "might as well be painted on a post."⁵²

Cudahy, Armour, and Swift had set a May 10, 1948, deadline for striking workers to return or lose seniority rights.⁵³ The *World-Herald* subsequently reported that Patrick Ratigan had decided to comply with this deadline and quoted his criticism of the UPWA leadership. The story also noted that he had earlier left the CIO-affiliated UPWA and more recently was identified with the AFL effort to organize Swift employees.⁵⁴ On the following day Ratigan was again in the news. He had attempted to go to work but, according to his account, was stopped and roughed up by pickets. The *World-Herald* published a picture of his treatment by a Swift nurse in the plant.⁵⁵ On the May 10 deadline approximately 1,000 pickets gathered on the main street through the packing

district, most of them outside the Armour and Swift plants. Some workers attempting to return were caught by strikers; many more were deterred from showing up at all.⁵⁶ A few days later a representative of Swift and Company referred to the recent "12-hour reign of terror."⁵⁷

The local judge who had dealt with earlier cases broadened his restraining orders against the strikers. Now he required that the unions take positive steps to see that they were implemented. The *World-Herald* paraphrased his comments: "[A]ffirmative action' must be taken by union leaders to see that pickets obey court restraining orders." Criminal charges also were filed against numerous strikers, including Ratigan's alleged assailants.⁵⁸ Some strikebreakers also were charged. Earlier two would-be strikebreakers had received two-year prison sentences for "carrying concealed weapons."⁵⁹ More strikers were arrested, but it is also apparent that many other strikers were not apprehended for their illegal activities. When the strike finally ended on May 22, Omaha was relatively quiet.

This period of calm, however, proved a lull in the struggle rather than acquiescence on the part of packinghouse workers. Nationally workers at all plants except those of Wilson voted to return to work for the previously offered 9-cent-an-hour raise and the agreement that all cases involving suspension or termination for activities during the strike be determined through arbitration.⁶⁰

In Omaha, however, strikers were not willing to return, and every local voted overwhelmingly against the proposed settlement. Local 8 (Armour) voted 646 to 125 against; Local 47 (Swift) voted 441 to 76 against; Local 60 (Cudahy) voted 873 to 126 against; and Local 62 voted 262 to 29.⁶¹ During the strike the packers and some letter writers to the *World-Herald* had claimed that a majority of local UPWA members opposed the strike and wished to accept the 9-cent raise.⁶² However, the voting results suggest otherwise.

While there was no question that the packers had won this round, their victory had come at a relatively high cost. Company profits were significantly reduced, and packer tactics during the strike had often reinforced earlier employee resentments. The union, despite its defeat, had gained experience during the strike and learned some important lessons as well.



Strikers around a picket hut outside the Armour plant.

In Omaha and many other packing centers, the strike had evoked a great deal of support from the community. Acting Police Chief Boesen proved a major benefactor, but the Omaha packinghouse workers found other important friends. Other unions, including those of the police and firefighters, made contributions to the strike fund. The chairman of the strike strategy committee recalls that sides of beef were donated to the strikers and their families by some of the small packers. He also observed: "The churches in the South Omaha area gave us a hell of a push." Father Lubiszewski of St. Stanislaus was not the only priest who supported the strikers' cause.⁶³ In some respects the 1948 strike was a community-wide struggle in South Omaha and that proved an asset that year. Of course, strikebreakers often lived in the community as well, and it should not be assumed that their social networks were insignificant. But it is apparent that packinghouse strikers were not isolated from the rest of the community during the work stoppage. They received material and moral reinforcement to help sustain their efforts over the course of the 67-day strike.

The strike itself did not materially weaken the union, even though union members were forced to return to work for the original offer and some of the most militant had been fired for strike-related activity. Attempts to raid CIO plants had little impact locally, as the UPWA handily resisted the Amalgamated's challenge in the wake of the strike.⁶⁴ This conclusion follows that of David Brody's *The Butcher Workmen*, but additional evidence can be marshaled. In June of 1948 workers in both the Armour and Wilson plants walked out, protesting what they perceived as arbitrary action. Close to 300 Armour employees stayed off the job almost a week.⁶⁵ Their morale seemed high under the circumstances. In the early 1950s Local No. 8 acquired what amounted to a union shop, despite Nebraska's "right-to-work" law, when the Armour employment office regularly provided new employees with union membership cards.⁶⁶

UPWA members had a rough equality on the picket line during the 1948 strike. Blacks and women were active in the episode, and many were arrested along with white males for alleged infractions at picket sites and elsewhere. One woman who served as a picket captain tells of being arrested three

times in one day in early April of 1948.⁶⁷ Local No. 47's president, Edward Danner, was black and years later was elected to the Nebraska Legislature.⁶⁸ Blacks served on the strike strategy committee, and black women were among the relatively few fired employees who were unable to regain their jobs through arbitration.⁶⁹ In the pre-CIO era packers in Omaha and elsewhere had used blacks as strikebreakers, but during the 1948 strike it was a white strikebreaker who shot a black picket outside the Armour plant. Blacks may well have had their greatest influence in the Omaha labor movement in the era when CIO packinghouse workers were at their greatest strength. In 1953 the Nebraska CIO elected James C. Harris, a black member of Local No. 47, as its president. After the local packing industry declined—and, along with it, the UPWA—the influence of black unionists seemingly declined as well.⁷⁰

The extent of violence in the local strike and in other packing centers supports the conclusions of the 1969 Taft-Ross study, which stated that conflict “between pickets and strike replacements. . . has been the single most important source of all strike violence.” Packing strikes in the pre-New Deal era had often been characterized by violence, and the 1948 strike was a throwback, in some respects, to that earlier time.⁷¹ Some might argue that violence could have been suppressed by the stern methods utilized in Kansas City or by the activation of the Nebraska National Guard; others note that there also has been substantial violence in labor disputes involving Iowa Beef Packing plants in more recent years. Guarantees of collective bargaining and graceful acceptance of that process reduce the level of violence in labor-management relations.⁷² In 1948 some packers may have attempted to use the issue of striker violence as a lever to avoid collective bargaining or to oust the CIO from their plants.⁷³

The Omaha strike clearly suggests the importance of relations with local authorities and timing in labor disputes. In fact, this situation and some others like it may provide additional insight into why organized labor in the United States has not normally turned to independent third parties. Some observers have criticized the labor movement's persistent backing of the Democrats as shortsighted.⁷⁴ In the short run, however, support for existing political arrangements may mean the difference between a lost strike and a victory. While

the Omaha packinghouse workers did not win in 1948, their losses were not great. That Omaha had a municipal election while the strike was in progress may also have benefited strikers. A reported 8,000 workers were on strike, and they and their families constituted a voting block that politicians would hesitate to alienate. That the Omaha district elected that year Nebraska's first Democratic congressman since 1940 may have had some relationship to the strike. Successful candidate Eugene O'Sullivan had criticized the packers during the dispute, while his defeated opponent had built a staunch anti-labor voting record in Congress.⁷⁵

This episode also suggests that the union had a fairly high degree of community support in 1948. Herbert Gutman's studies of 19th century labor disputes offer insights which help explain events in the South Omaha strike.⁷⁶ Although the packinghouses had been there for more than half a century, they may not have been entirely accepted as part of the community. South Omaha in some respects may well have resembled those earlier close-knit communities which Gutman studied. Further investigation along these lines—locally and in other packing centers—promises additional insights into both labor and social history.

NOTES

1. David Brody, *The Butcher Workmen: A Study of Unionization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 233-234.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

3. Garneth O. Peterson, "Historical Framework," in *A Comprehensive Program for Historical Preservation in Omaha* (Omaha: Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, 1980), pp. 32-34.

4. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), January 5, 1946. This story indicated that the UPWA (CIO) had approximately 10,000 members in local plants, while the AFL union had "only about one hundred." The bulk of the Amalgamated's membership in Omaha was outside the packinghouses.

5. Leslie F. Orear, "20 Years with UPWA," supplement, *Packinghouse Worker*, September 1957.

6. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), July 30-August 17, 1894.

7. Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, pp. 24-35; Gary M. Fink, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of American Labor Leaders* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), p. 81.

8. *Workers Gazette*, December 26, 1903. Not all of them were in the Amalgamated, however.

9. Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, pp. 50-58; Jerry Bexten, "The Great Pack-

inghouse Strike of 1904: South Omaha" (unpublished paper loaned to author by Harl A. Dalstrom.)

10. Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, pp. 75-98; *Omaha Bee*, September 12, 1917.

11. Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, pp. 98-105; *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), December 5, 1921-January 31, 1922.

12. Interviews with Nels Petersen, December 23, 1980; Hubert (Red) Lockard, February 26, 1981.

13. Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, pp. 203-215.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-230; Leslie F. Orear and Stephen H. Diamond, *Out of the Jungle* (United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers, 1968).

15. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 15, 1946. According to the *World-Herald* "[a]t least seven independent plants continued operations." *Ibid.*, January 16, 1946.

16. *Ibid.*, January 14, 1946; *Ibid.* (morning), January 26, 1946.

17. *Ibid.* (morning), January 26, 1946; *Ibid.* (evening), January 28, 1946.

18. Brody, *Butcher Workmen*, p. 233.

19. *Ibid.* In an interview with Ralph Helstein, October 12, 1981, he indicated that he had not favored a strike in 1948.

20. Interview with Nels Petersen, December 23, 1980.

21. See note 4.

22. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), January 27, 1946; Harold Anderson, "Red Minority Won Rule of Omaha Union," *Ibid.*, March 15, 1948. Ratigan was fired by A. T. Stephens, District No. 3 director, in the fall of 1946. Letters in Folder 2, Box 35, United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers (AFL-CIO) Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

Subsequently he was elected president of Local No. 47. Minutes of Local No. 47, April 17, 1947. This local's minutes indicate internal controversy in 1947 prior to and during Ratigan's tenure in office. Then in mid-October "letters [were] sent to Local Union Members by the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen under his [Ratigan's] signature." His resignation as local president was discussed at a "Special Executive Board Meeting" the following day. *Ibid.*, October 15, 16, 1947.

23. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), March 16, 1948 (source of quotation). Telephone conversation with Adolph Pechar, March 6, 1982. Pechar was chairman of the 1948 strike strategy committee.

24. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), March 21, 1948. The following day the paper reported that children "aged 3 to about 10, wore placards that read: 'My daddy can't buy me butter and meat on a 9 cent raise. He needs more money.'" Religious services were not held after "it was learned that most of the members of the union's chorus were on picket duty." *Ibid.*, March 22, 1948. Plans were made to conduct Easter services "on the picket lines." *Ibid.*, March 28, 1948.

25. *Ibid.* (evening), March 20, 1948; Minutes, Local No. 62, February 4, 1948.

26. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), March 24, 25, 1948; *Ibid.* (evening), March 25, 1948 (source of quotation).

27. *Ibid.* (morning), March 30, 1948.

28. *Ibid.*, March 26, 1948; interview with Nels Petersen, December 23, 1980.

29. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), April 5, 1948; *Ibid.* (morning), April 6, 1948 (source of quotation). At the time of the shooting, perhaps as many as 3,000 pickets were outside the Armour plant.

30. *Ibid.* (morning), April 9, 10, 1948.

31. *Ibid.* (evening), April 10, 14, 15, 16, 21, 1948.

32. *Ibid.* (morning), April 15, 1948. Boesen reportedly said, "I don't think there's been any mass picketing. Everybody that wants in gets in. There may be someone stop them, yes. But no trouble." Later he was quoted as saying: "I figure what the hell. . . things have been pretty good. There always will be some one cracked in the jaw in a strike. But we have more trouble in South Omaha on a regular Saturday night than we've had so far." *Ibid.* (evening), May 1, 1948.

33. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), April 21, 1948.

34. Arbitration [:] Armour and Company, Omaha, Nebraska, and UPWA, CIO, Local No. 8, Omaha, Nebraska, p. 45.

35. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), April 26, 27 (source of quotation), 28, 1948.

36. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1948.

37. *Ibid.* (morning), April 24, 30, 1948; May 5, 1948.

38. US Congress, House of Representatives. Subcommittee Investigating Strikes in the Meat-Packing Industry in Twenty States, *Investigation as to the Administration of the Laws Affecting Labor Disputes, Interstate and Foreign Committee and the Antiracketeering Statute, the Interstate Transportation of Pickets, and the Activities of the Department of Justice, in Connection with Strikes in the Meat-Packing Industry in Twenty States*, 80th Congress, 2nd Session (Washington, D.C., 1948).

39. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), April 29, 1948.

40. Wilson's general manager was quoted as saying: "My personal opinion is that you will have to get the militia in. I don't believe the police and the sheriff can do the job. I can tell you that negotiations are through. They'll never get another penny. We've got to get operating. The only way it can be done is with the militia." *Ibid.* (morning), April 29, 1948.

41. The attitude of Kansas City, Kansas, authorities toward strikers was far less favorable. There police conducted a mass raid on UPWA headquarters during the 1948 strike. According to the detective captain who led the assault: "We're not going to have any more trouble here. We'll beat them all on the head if necessary. I intend to maintain peace." *Ibid.* (morning), April 24, 1948. *Packinghouse Worker*, April 30, May 14, 1948.

42. Personal interview with Hubert "Red" Lockard, February 26, 1981.

43. "Chief Boesen told the strikers at the meeting that he appreciated their co-operation with police. He was greeted by loud applause." *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), May 3, 1948.

44. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1948; *Ibid.* (evening), April 28, 1948. In the evening edition the picture ran on the front page. The *Omaha World-Herald* (both editions), May 1, 1948, carried an editorial urging Boesen's removal. The editorial also argued that police officers should not be allowed to be union members. Boesen later explained that money was given primarily "to pro-

mote some votes for our pension plan we had on the ballot the 7th of this month," that the sum was raised by individual contributions, and that he had been asked by the president of the firemen's union to "go down with him when he handed this check over to them." *Investigation as to the Administration of the Laws*, pp. 146-147.

45. *Ibid.* (evening), April 29, May 3, 22, 1948; *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), April 30, 1948 (source of quotation).

46. For *World-Herald* endorsement prior to the April primary, see *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), April 3, 1948.

47. *Ibid.* (morning), May 2, 1948.

48. *Ibid.*, May 4, 1948. During the 1921-1922 packinghouse strike, another priest from this church strongly identified himself with the strikers' cause. *Omaha Daily News*, December 14, 1921.

49. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), May 21, 1948.

50. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1948.

51. *Ibid.*, May 11, 1948.

52. *Ibid.*, May 3, 1948.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1948. Earlier the *World-Herald* reported that Ratigan had praised an Illinois Congressman "on his plan to ask a probe of 'Communist domination' of the UPWA-CIO union." *Ibid.*, April 9, 1948.

55. *Ibid.*, May 7, 1948.

56. *Ibid.*, May 10, 1948.

57. *Ibid.*, May 12, 1948.

58. *Ibid.*, May 15 (source of quotation), 17, 1948.

59. Two men, "challenged . . . by pickets near the Armour plant," were arrested and given two-year terms. *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), April 21, 1948.

60. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1948. Wilson strikers remained out an additional two weeks. *Ibid.* (evening), June 7, 1948.

61. *Ibid.*, May 22, 1948.

62. The head of the Omaha Stock Yards Company had told the governor "he believe[d] nine out of 10 packing house workers want to return to work." *Ibid.*, May 1, 1948.

63. Telephone conversation with Adolph Pechar, March 6, 1982. The union paper quoted a sympathetic black minister during the strike: "I was greatly encouraged by the Mass Meeting at the hall." *Packinghouse Worker*, May 14, 1948.

64. In the only Omaha plant in which the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen forced an election, the UPWA won 771 to 160. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), January 22, 1949.

65. *Ibid.*, June 8, 10, 14, 1948; interview with Nels Petersen, December 23, 1980.

66. Personal interview with Hubert "Red" Lockard, February 26, 1981.

67. Telephone conversation with Betty Watson, March 7, 1982. Women had been active in earlier packinghouse strikes as well. See William C. Pratt, " 'Union Maids' in Omaha Labor History, 1887-1945," in *Perspectives: Women in Nebraska History* (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Education and Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies, 1984), pp. 196-213.

68. See Anne McConney, "Danner: No Philosopher, I Just Represent Folks," *Omaha Sun*, December 9, 1965, in W. Dale Clark Library clipping file.

69. Personal interviews with James C. Harris Jr., January 30, 1981; George Fletemeyer, February 3, 1981.

70. Harris was elected twice to this post. Interview with James C. Harris Jr., January 30, 1981; and *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), September 13, 1953. He may have been the nation's first (and perhaps only) black CIO state president. These comments should not be interpreted as suggesting a lack of black participation in prior union efforts. For example, some served picket duty during the 1921-1922 strike, and others played influential roles in the packinghouse organizing drives of the late 1930s and early 1940s. For discussion on black women and the CIO union during World War II, see Jeff Ferber, "Black Women and Discrimination in the South Omaha Packinghouses" (unpublished paper in author's possession).

71. Philip Taft and Philip Ross, "American Labor Violence: Its Causes, Character, and Outcome," in Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, eds., *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: Signet Books, 1969), p. 349. These authors suggest that the 1948 packinghouse strike was one "which had all the hallmarks of past struggles."

72. A recent strike against IBP in Dakota City, Nebraska, resulted in violence and activation of the National Guard. One *World-Herald* article is headed: "Violence Mars History of Union, Iowa Beef." It begins: "Iowa Beef Processors Inc. has had a history of violent strikes, with the most violent episodes coming when the company has reopened its Dakota City, Neb., plant during a strike." *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), July 21, 1982.

73. The 1948 strike violence played a role in the passage of an anti-mass picketing law the following year. *Ibid.* (evening), March 24, 1949. Recently a *World-Herald* story asserted: "The Legislature's action [in 1949] was prompted by violence during the South Omaha packinghouse strike of 1948." *Ibid.* (morning), July 21, 1982.

74. Mike Davis, "The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party," *New Left Review*, 124 (November-December 1980), pp. 43-84. Omaha municipal elections were officially non-partisan. But the large number of pro-union voters probably affected the behavior of city officials in the spring of 1948.

75. "O'Sullivan thus became the first Democrat elected to a major office in Nebraska since 1940." *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), November 4, 1948. He had issued a statement requesting action from the secretary of agriculture "to bring reason and fairness back to these ultra-stubborn packers by compelling them to conduct fair wage negotiations with the unions." *Ibid.* (evening), May 3, 1948.

76. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture & Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).