

Working Class New York

Joshua B. Freeman



Life and Labor Since World War II

CHAPTER 9.

“A Useful and Remunerative Job”

From the mid-1950s through the late 1960s, working-class New York confronted the challenge of deindustrialization, as runaway shops and automation eroded the blue-collar job base on which its culture and power rested. Slowly but relentlessly, the goods production and distribution sectors shrank. The stories of five groups of New Yorkers—garment workers, electrical and metal manufacturing workers, construction electricians, printers, and longshoremen—illustrate how unions fought with some success to protect the jobs of their members but had less success preserving blue-collar jobs for future generations.

In 1954, Mayor Robert Wagner Jr.'s first year in office, New York City lost forty-one thousand manufacturing jobs. These constituted only a small fraction of the city's total manufacturing employment, which stood near its all-time high, providing a livelihood for well over a million men and women. Still, the combination of a national recession, the decision by several large firms to move production out of the region, and threats by others to do so caused a wave of anxiety about blue-collar job loss.¹

Industrial relocation entailed two related developments, decentralization of industry within the New York region and movement away from it. Throughout the postwar period, New York City's share of regional manufacturing jobs diminished, as companies left the city for suburban areas and more manufacturing jobs were created there than in town. The change took place gradually; in 1953, New York City had 56 percent of the region's manufacturing jobs; in 1960, 54 percent. By 1966 a majority of the jobs lay outside the city.²

As factories migrated outward, so did workers. When at the end of World War II, Sperry Gyroscope moved from Brooklyn to Nassau County, many of its employees moved with it, as did its union, which began organizing other plants in the area.³ In 1952, Helena Rubinstein relocated her main cosmetics factory—which had been in Queens—to Nassau County, too. The union that represented her employees set up a private bus system to bring workers from the city to the suburban plant. It continued for seven years, until enough workers moved near the factory or bought automobiles to make it unnecessary.⁴

Workers could not always move with their companies; some firms left specifically to escape them. In the late 1940s, following two strikes by New York Teamsters, many trucking firms relocated to New Jersey, where Teamsters locals had lower wage scales and less vigilantly enforced contracts. To stem the exodus, Local 807, the largest Teamster local in New York (and the country), cracked down on wildcat strikes, accepted greater use of arbitration, and pushed for an area-wide wage equalization.⁵

Unions followed and tried to organize firms that moved away in order to diminish the incentives for suburbanization and check downward pressure on wages and conditions in the city. UE Local 1227, for example, aggressively pursued the electronics industry as it moved out of New York. When Yardley Electric, a maker of nickel-cadmium batteries, responded to city complaints about its dumping of toxic chemicals into the sewer system by shifting most of its operation to Connecticut, the local sent agents who unionized the new plant. In the city, Local 1227 business agent James Garry recalled, most electronics workers lived close to work, rooting the union in tight-knit communities and laying the basis for a strong class sensibility. By contrast, companies that moved outward generally set up shop in isolated industrial parks. Almost all workers drove to work, most from some distance, making the company parking lot their only common space outside the plant itself.⁶

The flight of industry to the suburbs hurt the city. First, it diminished the tax base. Second, workers entering the city job market, especially with limited skills, found fewer employment possibilities. The 1954 decline in manufacturing employment hit Puerto Rican workers particularly hard, given their clustering in low-skilled jobs and lack of seniority. Third, job relocation deepened the lines of racial segregation. Since housing markets in areas to which industry moved generally discriminated against nonwhites (in 1960, Levittown, near Nassau County's burgeoning defense industry, did not have a single African-American among its eighty-two thousand residents), blacks and Puerto Ricans could not easily follow manufacturing outward. Nonwhite urban newcomers found themselves locked out of the industrial jobs that had provided ladders of social mobility for previous generations. Fourth, the industrial exodus excluded the city, already largely outside the Fordist economy, from important sectors of economic growth. The relocation of electronic and aircraft equipment manufacturers to Long Island, for example, meant that New York benefited little from the Cold War boom in armaments spending. In 1963 only 3.5 percent of New York's manufacturing employees

engaged in defense-oriented production, in contrast to over half in Nassau County.⁷

In spite of these effects, New York business and political leaders remained sanguine about the suburbanization of industry. With overall city employment remaining steady, many argued that job losses to relocation were counterbalanced by growth in other sectors.⁸ Many prominent real estate owners, businessmen, planners, and politicians actually wanted manufacturing to move from Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn to either outlying areas of the city or its suburbs. Real estate owners believed that central city land values would go up if office buildings and housing replaced manufacturing. Many architects, planners, and politicians scorned the grime, pollution, and working-class ambience of industry, preferring civic buildings, office towers, housing, or parks.⁹

Industrial movement out of the entire area gave New York leaders greater pause than suburbanization. It threatened to weaken the regional economy while providing little opportunity for workers to move with their jobs. But even in this case, government and civic reaction to job loss proved muted, while labor's efforts, though extensive, had limited and ironic consequences.

The apparel industry, as the largest component of New York manufacturing, presented a key test of the area's ability to retain blue-collar jobs. In some ways, its peculiarities made it unusually susceptible to job retention efforts. When most industries moved, they did so in toto. In apparel, by contrast, design, sales, and fabric cutting usually remained in the city, giving unionists and businesses leverage over those parts of the industry that had left or were contemplating leaving. Well before World War II, the ILGWU began requiring New York-based manufacturers and jobbers to give preference to local contractors in the belief that union organization and labor standards could more easily be preserved in a geographically compact industry than a dispersed one. In 1951 the cloakmakers held a brief strike to force employers to agree to an "equitable" distribution of work between New York and out-of-town shops. In some sectors of the industry, the ILGWU even won the right to dictate to jobbers which contractors they could use, insisting that firms setting up operations outside of the city also establish shops within it.¹⁰

During the 1950s, the ILGWU made serious, somewhat successful efforts to unionize garment shops in the hinterland of the New York market, particularly Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New England, and Puerto Rico. (The union made fewer efforts in the South, which in 1950 accounted for 17 per-

cent of apparel employment, and ten years later 28 percent.)¹¹ However, even when the ILGWU unionized shops in the rural areas, small cities, and coal mining towns that relocating firms favored, it generally allowed them to pay wages below New York scale. Given the sharp differences between the labor markets and living costs in these locales and in the city, to do otherwise probably would have been impossible. Nonetheless, this left a residual wage gap that the union addressed by giving wage concessions and contract exemptions to New York companies threatening to relocate or claiming hardship. The practice became so common that employers routinely ignored their contracts, forcing the New York Joint Dress Board to hold its first strike in twenty-five years in 1958 to end what Local 22 activist Maida Springer called “gunka-munka business” in contract enforcement.¹²

Even after the strike, ILGWU leaders continued to grant concessions to New York employers out of a belief that only a policy of wage moderation would slow their exodus. The ILGWU’s Gus Tyler argued that external economies helped keep manufacturing in New York, but a large pool of low-wage labor was more important. Some ILGWU locals urged manufacturers to take advantage of the city’s growing Puerto Rican and African-American workforce by switching from the tailor system to less skilled section work, already dominant outside the city.¹³

In part as a result of these policies, earnings in the garment industry fell sharply relative to other manufacturing sectors. In 1950, New York City apparel production workers received an average hourly wage ten cents more than the city manufacturing average. Ten years later they made twelve cents an hour less. By 1965 the gap had widened to twenty-two cents. Economist Leon Keyserling, in a report on the New York dress industry, noted that between 1952 and 1962 “virtually no progress was registered either in average real weekly earnings or in average annual earnings.” Keyserling attributed part of the wage stagnation to low productivity growth, but he also blamed the ILGWU’s “lack . . . of sufficiently uniform and up-dated wage policy” and inadequate contract enforcement.¹⁴

The low-wage policy of the ILGWU probably retarded the exodus of jobs, but at a high price. By the mid-1960s, many low-skilled garment workers made little above the minimum wage. ILGWU endorsement of section work helped constrict opportunities for upward mobility just as Puerto Ricans and African-Americans entered the industry in large numbers. And while union policy may have slowed industrial dispersion, it did not stop it. Employment in the New York apparel industry dropped from 340,700 in

1950 to 267,400 in 1960 and 241,300 in 1965. The limited results of the sacrifices workers made indicated how difficult it was to influence industrial location decisions.¹⁵

Electrical and metal manufacturing provides another case in point of the difficulty of checking deindustrialization. In the early the 1950s, electrical, appliance, and metalworking firms began moving work out of New York and northern New Jersey to be closer to national markets and away from centers of labor militancy. Local leaders of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE) implored their national union to end its “complacency” and engage the rank and file in a national campaign “to stalk the runaway shops into the southland and the sagebush.” Dick Lynch, the head of an IUE local in Bloomfield, N.J., called for strict federal controls over plant relocation. In 1955, IUE president James Carey called on the governors and senators of the northeastern states to act together to stop industrial flight. But plants continued to leave the region, and New Jersey IUE leaders remained critical of their national union’s failure to devote sufficient resources to runaway shops and the resulting partial deunionization of the industry.¹⁶

A dramatic 1954 struggle between IUE’s rival, the United Electrical Workers (UE), and the American Safety Razor Company made evident the difficulties faced by even the most militant workers in trying to deny management the right to relocate. American Safety Razor made razor and surgical blades, employing fourteen hundred workers at its main factory in downtown Brooklyn. During World War II, the City Planning Commission announced plans for a grandiose civic center in Brooklyn that would entail the redevelopment of industrial space for office and residential use. American Safety Razor lay within an area designated for housing. Although the city never moved to take over the site, the company had understandable fears about its ability to continue to operate, let alone expand, at its current location.¹⁷

In 1953, as the civic center plan inched forward, American Safety Razor commissioned a relocation study. Once word went out that it was contemplating a move, communities—particularly in rural, low-wage areas— inundated it with offers, many including substantial subsidies. The company considered relocating within the New York region, but may have found moving far away more attractive because of its stormy relations with UE Local 475, which had struck the company in 1951 and 1952.¹⁸

In July 1954, American Safety Razor announced its intention to move to a modern plant that it bought in Staunton, Virginia, offering to pay the ex-

penses of any worker who wanted to go with it. Local 475 vigorously opposed the relocation. A committee it sent to Staunton reported that wages there were 50 percent below those in New York, housing inadequate, and segregation prevalent, making it an inappropriate home for most incumbent workers, 85 percent of whom were women, 20 percent black or Puerto Rican, and most over age forty. However, facing a company threat to relocate immediately, the union did agree in mid-August to a package of severance, early retirement, and relocation benefits in return for maintaining normal production until the transfer actually took place, which the company said would not be until May 1955 at the earliest.¹⁹

This verbal accord soon broke down. When Local 475 continued its campaign to stop the move, American Safety Razor insisted that the union cease its agitation before it would sign a contract incorporating the August agreement. Local 475 refused, believing that it still had a chance of stopping the company—its largest shop—from leaving.

On October 1, six hundred workers tried to force the company to put its pledges into writing by occupying its plant, a rare example of a post-World War II sit-down strike. After two weeks, the sit-downers left the plant, but the strike continued. On October 21 the company announced it would not honor the agreement to stay put until May nor provide pension, severance, and relocation payments. On November 3, police cleared pickets from in front of the plant so that the company could begin moving its machinery to Virginia. Local 475 launched a nationwide boycott of American Safety Razor products to force the company to pay the contested severance and pension benefits, but to no avail. In the end, the company transferred only eighteen production workers to the new plant. A UE study found that six months after the Brooklyn plant closed, 74 percent of its members surveyed were still unemployed. The most militant effort in the city's history to stop a factory relocation had, if anything, negative consequences for the affected workers.²⁰

Both the AFL and the CIO avoided involvement in the American Safety Razor battle—UE's unreconstructed leftism made it a pariah—but over the course of 1954 the New York City CIO Council expressed growing concern over runaway shops. Its leaders raised the issue, which particularly affected the Lithographers and the Furniture, Clothing, and Shoe Workers, with the mayor and set up a permanent council subcommittee on runaway shops that kept pressing Wagner for action.²¹

In the past, the city government had paid remarkably little attention to manufacturing. However, a 1954 jump in unemployment, along with pressure

from labor, brought new attention from city officials, the press, and civic groups. Well-publicized plant relocations kept the issue alive. In June 1954, the Alexander Smith Carpet Works, the oldest and largest company in Yonkers (just north of the Bronx), announced a move of all its operations to Greenville, Mississippi. Capitalizing on the ensuing fear, Otis Elevator Company threatened to close its 102-year-old Yonkers plant unless it received cost-reducing concessions from its union and the local government.²²

As apprehension grew, various private and public agencies undertook studies of plant relocation. The resulting reports stressed the overall health of the city economy and minimized the problem of industrial exodus. Nonetheless, their surveys proved revealing about why businesses left the city. Some companies cited a desire to take advantage of interregional differences by moving away from militant unions to areas with lower costs. But the most commonly cited motive was the difficulty in finding suitable buildings in the city when forced to vacate existing facilities or seeking to expand. Mid- and large size companies with extensive, integrated operations—Fordist production—found it nearly impossible to find the large, one-story buildings with good road and rail connections they preferred. Small manufacturers could efficiently operate in multistory loft buildings, but they had a hard time finding such space at affordable rents, especially in Manhattan, where virtually no lofts had been built in decades and some had been converted to showrooms or offices. Additionally, manufacturers expressed frustration with high shipping costs stemming from poor transportation connections and traffic congestion.²³

To a considerable extent, the city itself created the problem of inadequate space. According to historian Joel Schwartz, between 1945 and 1955 redevelopment projects along the East River alone, including the Brooklyn Civic Center, United Nations, NYU-Bellevue medical complex, Stuyvesant Town, Peter Cooper Village, public housing, and the UHF's East River Houses, resulted in the demolition of buildings housing nearly eighteen thousand jobs. Slum clearance, public housing, and highway construction displaced tens of thousands more jobs in East Harlem, Greenwich Village, Lincoln Square, and elsewhere. Once forced to move, many companies left the city entirely. Furthermore, many manufacturers, fearing inclusion in a future redevelopment site, refrained from expanding or modernizing their buildings.²⁴

Little concrete government action resulted from the industrial relocation studies. Not until 1959 did the city launch even a modest effort to create new

industrial space. Using its power of condemnation, it assembled a ninety-six-acre site in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn for use as an industrial park. However, when Wagner left office six years later, the park had not yet materialized, as litigation, rising costs, and inattention led to repeated delays. A proposal by a mayoral committee for a "World Fashion Center" just south of Herald Square, with over four million square feet of new loft space, never got off the ground. A nonprofit corporation set up by the city as a conduit for cheap, state industrial mortgages did help finance the construction of twenty-two plants during Wagner's regime, but only thirty-five hundred jobs were saved or added, a modest figure considering that New York lost over two hundred thousand manufacturing jobs during the mayor's twelve years in office.²⁵

The state government, too, did little to address the problem of industrial flight. One study found that during Nelson Rockefeller's governorship "no bureaucrat or politician of consequence seemed to care, or to care very much, whether business came or went." By contrast, other states, especially in the South, mounted aggressive programs to attract industry, offering industrial development bonds, tax exemptions, industrial parks, and other inducements.²⁶

The diversity and fragmentation of New York's manufacturing sector partially explains the inattention to its needs by government leaders. With financiers and real estate operators dominating the most powerful business associations, no citywide organization promoted the particular interests of manufacturers. The Rockefellers, whose Manhattan real estate holdings led them to favor industrial decentralization, heavily influenced both the Commerce and Industry Association and the Downtown-Lower Manhattan Association which, like the Chamber of Commerce, generally backed redevelopment of industrial zones for non-industrial use. A few business groups, like the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, did fight to preserve industrial space, but pro-redevelopment coalitions of real estate interests, bankers, retailers, and local politicians usually outgunned them. The 1961 citywide zoning revision reflected the balance of power: it diminished areas designated for manufacturing, required a strict separation between residential and manufacturing districts, and established "performance standards" limiting noise, fumes, and noxious odors created by industrial activity.²⁷

In 1955, the AFL proposed a congressional investigation into the use of public inducements to lure companies to move, an end to the federal tax exemption for local development bonds, gradual elimination of geographical

wage differentials, nationalization of unemployment insurance, and repeal of state “right-to-work” laws permitted by Taft-Hartley, but little action resulted.²⁸ New York unionists fought to raise the federal minimum wage sufficiently to narrow the wage gap between New York and the South but failed. Though they pressed national unions to step up organizing in nonunion areas to eliminate incentives for relocation, the South remained overwhelmingly nonunion.²⁹

Forced to craft local approaches to job retention, New York unionists confronted their own differing interests. Perhaps the sharpest (though rarely articulated) conflict pitted the building trades against manufacturing unions. While the latter had an interest in freezing the physical development of the city to preserve industrial zones, the former saw construction of every sort—the bigger the better—as their very lifeblood. Fear of displacing manufacturing jobs proved no obstacle to the building trades’ backing for a vision of a rebuilt New York in which industry would be pushed outward, to be replaced by giant office and residential complexes which would boost land values and replace blue-collar jobs with white-collar ones. Manufacturing unions had more members than the building trades, but they lacked their attentiveness to employment issues, their unity of interest, and their structure for united action. Production unions tended to worry about jobs for their members only when a crisis arose, whereas the building trades, given the short duration of construction projects and the prevalence of union hiring halls, did so routinely. Thus construction unions proved to be the key labor voice on land use issues.³⁰ During the debates leading up to the 1961 zoning revisions, the only unions to speak up were the building trades, who opposed restrictions on permitted building size that would inhibit development.

Wage policy also divided labor. No union liked to admit that it tempered wage and benefit demands as a strategy for retaining jobs, but many did just that. At the venerable Steinway & Sons piano factory in Queens, veteran members of the Furniture Workers kept reelecting as their business agent James Cerofeci, who pursued a policy of wage restraint in the face of company pleas of poverty and periodic threats to move. Only after the older generation of workers began retiring in 1960s did younger activists, promising greater militancy, oust him. Similarly, in UE Local 475, younger workers, with few responsibilities and confident that they could get jobs elsewhere, wanted to press even marginal firms to upgrade wages, while older workers, with more responsibilities and fewer options, preferred wage restraint to risking that their employers might move or go bankrupt.³¹

The fear that excessive demands might drive firms out of business reflected bitter experience. Many workers remembered the 1949 strike against the city's fourteen breweries, which gave giant, out-of-town beer companies an opportunity to expand their presence in the city. Within two years, three of Brooklyn's seven breweries closed; over the next three decades they all did. Though poor rail connections and high costs for land, water, electricity, sewerage, and taxes all played a role, so did the high cost of labor. Similarly, a 1955 strike by the Newspaper Guild demanding that the *Brooklyn Eagle* pay its members the same wages as the Manhattan-based dailies led to the paper's demise.³²

Wage restraint, even when in the best interest of a particular group of workers, hurt the city workforce as a whole. A 1962 study by Nicholas Kisburg of Teamsters Union Joint Council 16 charged that the low-wage policy of the garment unions had depressed the earnings of unskilled New Yorkers across-the-board in comparison to their peers in other cities. In 1950 the average hourly and weekly earnings of manufacturing production workers in New York exceeded the national average; by 1957 the hourly advantage had been eradicated while weekly earnings had fallen below the national average.³³

Many unionists and civil rights leaders saw government action as a way to counteract the erosion of wages. In addition to pressing for a higher federal minimum wage and its extension to such exempt groups as retail workers, they asked the legislature to establish a state minimum above the federal level. A NAACP representative testified in 1952 that "Negroes and members of other minority groups . . . especially need the protection provided by such legislation." But in spite of sustained lobbying, the state legislature did not establish a state minimum until 1960, and then set it at the federal level, thus helping only those workers not already covered by federal statute.³⁴

Frustrated by inaction in Albany, in 1959 a coalition of African-American and Puerto Rican groups proposed that New York City establish its own minimum wage of a \$1.50 an hour, fifty cents above the federal floor. A city-sponsored study found that a local minimum wage would most help retail, hotel, hospital, nursing home, and laundry workers, groups with high percentages of women and nonwhites. Many unionists backed the idea, distressed by the sinking city wage level and eager to address the widely decried "exploitation" of Puerto Ricans, who made up a growing segment of the unskilled work force. The rub was the opposition of the ILGWU. Although the average hourly wage in the New York garment industry easily exceeded \$1.50,

a large spread between the highest and lowest paid workers meant that a considerable number of ILGWU members—by one estimate 15 to 20 percent—made less than that. Seeing the proposed city minimum as a threat to their job retention strategy, garment union leaders maneuvered to prevent its enactment.

For Mayor Wagner, the minimum-wage proposal presented a political nightmare. Having broken with Tammany leader Carmine DeSapio, he faced a 1961 reelection bid in which he needed the support of both the Liberal Party, controlled by the ILGWU, and labor, black, and Puerto Rican groups. Only after the election, did Wagner, under growing pressure, take a first step toward a city minimum wage; he signed a city council bill requiring all firms selling goods or services to the municipal government to pay their workers at least \$1.50 an hour. But he hesitated about going farther, instead appointing David Livingston from District 65 and Luigi Antonini from the ILGWU to a committee to study the city economy. With Commerce Commissioner Louis Broido, a key leader of the Liberal Party, as its chair, the committee first stalled and then drafted a toothless report. But Livingston—backed by the bulk of the union movement—succeeded in substituting a recommendation for a \$1.50 city minimum wage, which the city council promptly passed and Wagner reluctantly signed.³⁵

Undoubtedly to Wagner's relief, the New York State Court of Appeals declared the new city law invalid. In response, labor and civil rights leaders, shifting their focus back to Albany, demanded both an increase in the state minimum and legislation enabling local governments to pass minimums of their own. However, in spite of heavy lobbying and a mass demonstration in Albany, the Republicans only agreed to raise the state minimum in synch with the federal minimum. The Central Labor Council kept plugging away at the issue, but when in 1965 the legislature finally did pass a \$1.50 minimum, Governor Rockefeller vetoed the measure. Thus a dozen years of labor and civil rights efforts to use the power of state and local government to raise the wage floor led to what Van Arsdale termed “complete failure,” in part because of the rift within labor's own ranks.³⁶

Surprisingly, even as debate continued over issues associated with runaway shops, industrial exodus per se disappeared as a major political issue. After 1955 it rarely got discussed by labor leaders or politicians, until the 1970s when the city economy and its manufacturing sector took a devastating plunge. Yet during the intervening years some of the city's biggest and best-

known industrial concerns moved away. Pharmaceutical maker E. R. Squibb, founded in Brooklyn in 1858, transferred its manufacturing operation to New Jersey in 1956. Soon thereafter, the Mergenthaler Linotype Company decamped from Brooklyn to Nassau County and Pennsylvania.³⁷

No doubt a rapid recovery from the 1954 recession helped assuage fears about joblessness. Between 1954 and 1956, New York gained nearly one hundred thousand jobs. Even manufacturing showed modest growth before resuming its slide.³⁸ When in 1958 the jobs issue did reemerge in the face of a new recession, the worst in two decades, New York unionists and public officials highlighted automation as a threat to economic security rather than runaway shops.

Elsewhere in the country, "automation hysteria" had begun earlier. Employers had been introducing labor-saving technology since the country's earliest days, but the post-World War II spread of mechanized material transfer systems and sophisticated, self-regulating electronic controls raised widespread fear of mass unemployment.³⁹ In April 1958, over five hundred New York unionists attended a conference on unemployment sponsored by the AFL and CIO councils, which called for federal antirecessionary action. Shortly thereafter, Harry Van Arsdale convened a small group of AFL leaders to discuss automation, its effect on employment, and the need for a shorter workweek, laying the basis for his creation of an ongoing AFL-CIO Shorter Work Week Committee. Automation fulfilled Van Arsdale's desire for an issue that would unite the local labor movement at a time when a long, difficult effort to merge the city AFL and CIO councils neared fruition.⁴⁰ Unlike industrial relocation, which largely affected manufacturing, automation impacted almost every type of economic activity.

The labor movement long had seen reducing work hours as a way to both create jobs and lessen the burden on working people. No doubt Van Arsdale got the idea for his committee from the national AFL, which had had its own shorter workweek committee. During the post-Korea recession, the AFL had called on Congress to reduce the workweek to thirty-five hours without loss of pay. Some elements within the CIO also had advocated a shorter week, seeing it as a way to forestall technological unemployment. But UAW and CIO president Walter Reuther opposed them, portraying reduced work time as at most a distant goal. Reuther argued that an immediate cut in hours would reduce the nation's output, threatening its military security and ability to provide ever-greater consumer bounty.⁴¹

Because of New York's industrial mix and the strength of its union move-

ment, workers in the city generally worked fewer hours a week than those elsewhere. Between 1950 and 1964, New York manufacturing production workers averaged between 37.3 and 38.1 hours of work a week, compared to 39.7 to 40.7 nationally. New York lithographers cut their workweek to thirty-five hours in 1946, while brewery workers, as a result of their 1949 strike, won a thirty-seven-and-a-half hour week. Privately employed bus workers—now covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act—won the forty-hour week only in 1953, after a twenty-nine day strike. That same year, the ILGWU made the thirty-five-hour week an industry-wide goal, which it achieved within three years.⁴²

In the late 1950s, at Van Arsdale's prodding, New York unionists began to systematically link the issues of working hours and automation. Van Arsdale promoted shorter hours not only among local unionists, but to state and city labor councils throughout the country. His June 1958 call for a four-hour work day garnered extensive publicity. Nevertheless, his drive initially had little practical effect.⁴³

In some industries, where automation was wiping out whole categories of work, shorter hours seemed irrelevant. Between 1950 and 1970, for example, the introduction of passenger-operated elevators reduced the number of elevator operators in the city by 55 percent from over 24,000 to 11,000. The Building Service Employees had some success winning termination pay, pensions, and retraining programs for laid-off workers, but could not stop the rapid elimination of a group of workers who when World War II ended had brought the city to its knees simply by withdrawing their labor.⁴⁴

Other unions facing automation gave short shrift to shorter hours because of their confidence that industry growth would compensate for technological job displacement. The massive expansion of telephone service, for instance, allowed workers in jobs being automated—most notably telephone operators—to find other positions in the industry. The Communications Workers of America (CWA) never opposed technological innovations nor aggressively fought to shorten hours, seeing the higher productivity that came with automation as “a lever” for improved pay, benefits, and security.⁴⁵

Few business or political leaders endorsed shorter hours, as evident at a June 1960 conference on automation organized by Nelson Rockefeller. In his keynote address, Rockefeller came much closer to Reuther's approach to automation than Van Arsdale's. “We should welcome automation,” the governor said, “because our problem over the coming decade promises to be not one of creating enough jobs but one of creating enough production.” Job

displacement, he argued, could best be addressed though “accelerated economic growth.” Rockefeller opposed any cut in working hours as undermining economic expansion, hoping to see a “moratorium on increased leisure.”⁴⁶

In a newspaper editorial, Van Arsdale’s union praised Rockefeller’s call for faster economic expansion without mentioning his opposition to a shorter workweek. When the Central Labor Council held an automation conference of its own in November 1960, union leaders reiterated many of Rockefeller’s themes, including the benefits of automation if linked to faster growth. But they devoted far more attention than he did to the need for increased protection for displaced workers.⁴⁷

Van Arsdale also kept pushing for shorter hours. In the months following the conference, he canvassed unions to support a four-hour workday and convinced thirty-nine locals to set up shorter workweek committees.⁴⁸ But it was his own local that catapulted the workweek issue to national prominence. In December 1961, Van Arsdale announced that the construction electricians would strike on January 1 unless employers agreed to reduce their workweek to five, four-hour days, from their current five-day, thirty-hour workweek, with a mandatory hour a day of overtime (paid at time-and-a-half).⁴⁹

Local 3’s demand raised a storm of criticism. As the Building Trades Employers Association pointed out, the electricians faced no shortage of work with their current schedules. A *New York Times* editorial argued that by driving construction costs “prohibitively high,” the shorter workweek would create joblessness rather than alleviate it. It noted President Kennedy’s recent pronouncement that the United States needed the forty-hour week to meet the Soviet industrial challenge, keep its goods competitive, and prevent inflation.⁵⁰

A threat by a second major union to strike for shorter hours at the very same time as Local 3 made the situation especially ominous to business leaders. In June 1961, TWU Local 100 officials announced their intention of making a four-day, thirty-two-hour workweek their main demand in negotiations to replace contracts with the Transit Authority (TA) and seven private bus companies expiring at the end of the year. Between 1955 and 1960, the TA, with the tacit approval of the union, had cut its workforce through attrition from 42,068 to 34,360. Now it was preparing to test an automated, crewless subway train on the 42nd Street shuttle line, raising the specter of even greater job loss. Terming this newest move “a terrific threat” to the union,

TWU president Michael J. Quill resolved to block crewless operations and seek a shorter workweek to preserve jobs.⁵¹

In mid-December, the TA drive to automate nearly shut down the city; when the agency scheduled a test of its crewless shuttle while negotiations for a new contract were taking place, Quill threatened an immediate, general transit strike. Arbitrator Theodore W. Kheel defused the crisis by ordering the TA to postpone its test.⁵² Still, with the TWU insisting on a thirty-two-hour week, for a brief moment it looked like two of New York's most powerful labor leaders would simultaneously lead their troops to battle for less work time.

Appearances, though, proved deceptive. The TWU and IBEW actually viewed the hours issue quite differently. Though nominally the transit union had been committed to shorter hours as a cure for automation since 1955, it used the demand tactically. By contrast, for Van Arsdale shorter hours represented an end in themselves.

On December 28, the Transit Authority and the TWU signed a two-year contract that provided a pay raise and improved benefits but no hours reduction. Instead, the union won a guarantee of no layoffs during life of the contract and agreement that during a trial period of the automated shuttle a motorman would be on board, with a final resolution of the manning issue to be negotiated later. With alternative means of dealing with automation in place, the TWU's pursuit of shorter hours all but ended. As promised, the TA had motormen standing by when it tested the automated shuttle, which it found disappointing in its cost savings and eventually abandoned. Meanwhile, the size of the TA workforce stabilized. In the next round of contract talks, the TWU again demanded a thirty-two-hour week only to drop the issue in the final stage of negotiations, making clear its status as a bargaining ploy rather than a serious goal.⁵³

By contrast, on January 11, 1962, nine thousand construction electricians began Local 3's first general strike since 1941, after the contractors with whom it normally had a harmonious relationship refused to budge on the hours issue. Eight days later the strikers returned to work with victory in hand: the employers agreed to a twenty-five-hour workweek, the shortest ever stipulated in a major union contract.⁵⁴

Electricians did not actually work only five hours a day under the new pact. Rather, the preexisting system of an hour a day overtime continued, so that electricians minimally worked thirty hours a week. Furthermore, during peak building season many worked two hours overtime a day, leading some

contractors and union critics to charge that the shorter workweek merely had served as a cover for boosting earnings. Ted Kheel, appointed by Mayor Wagner to monitor the pact, reported that it did create new jobs in spite of a drop in the volume of construction, but not as many as originally anticipated.⁵⁵

Such subtleties got lost in the blare of publicity attendant to the contract settlement. A few labor leaders, like Quill, hailed the agreement, but criticism came from many quarters. A *New York Times* editorial bemoaned “unjustified excess payments,” while national AFL-CIO leaders, the same paper reported, found the pact “an embarrassment.” The sharpest comments came from the Kennedy administration, which hoped to keep union settlements at what it deemed a non-inflationary level and opposed workweek reductions. At a press conference in late January, the president scorned the Local 3 pact for failing to meet either standard.⁵⁶

The electricians contract had an important, unexpected result. To help finance shorter hours, the agreement loosened restrictions on the use of apprentices, who received lower pay than journeymen. Van Arsdale pledged to recruit a thousand new trainees, doubling the apprenticeship pool. Almost immediately, the NAACP, seeing an opportunity to open up the notoriously racist construction trades to nonwhite workers, called on Local 3 to recruit “a substantial number of Negro apprentices.” Local 3 had a few nonwhites in its construction division (along with many in its manufacturing divisions), which put it a cut above most of the building trades. However, by admitting mostly sons of construction electricians to apprenticeships, it perpetuated the disproportionate hold whites had on the best jobs in the industry. (The 1960 census found only seventy-nine black electrical apprentices in the whole country.)

Politically shrewd, and in his own way committed to civil rights, Van Arsdale quickly claimed that it had been Local 3’s intention all along “to incorporate as many Negroes as possible” into its enlarged training program, though little evidence indicated that to have been true. In any case, the union recruited over two hundred African-Americans and Puerto Ricans to be among the 1,020 apprentices it signed up in 1962. Union leaders kept tight control over the desegregation process, as those with family ties to the union continued to receive favored treatment. Nevertheless, the implementation of the 1962 contract constituted a major step toward desegregating the electrical trade. Its exceptionality heightened awareness of the deep racist streaks within organized labor, especially in the construction unions.⁵⁷

Ironically, though the Local 3 contract had notable unanticipated effects, the widespread push for shorter hours that many expected would come in its wake never materialized. The Central Labor Council held conferences on automation in 1962 and 1963, with Van Arsdale claiming that since 1958, sixty-three of its affiliated locals had won shorter hours. None, however, had achieved breakthroughs like Local 3. Within a few years, the council's Shorter Work Week Committee slipped into inactivity.⁵⁸

The shorter hours movement petered out amid a general decline in concern over automation. A robust economy, stimulated by heavy government spending on the Vietnam War, all but erased fears of mass unemployment. In New York City, the unemployment rate fell from 5.3 percent in 1963 to just 3.1 percent in 1969. With jobs there for the taking, and academic experts claiming that automation would not lessen the demand for labor, only exceptional groups of workers fretted about the long-term effects of technological change. At the moment when the bargaining power of New York labor reached its historic high, most workers and unionists did not see the need for structural innovations to ensure economic security for themselves or the city. Those who did were generally those who faced imminent crisis.⁵⁹

Nowhere did the struggle to protect workers' livelihoods prove more complex or capture greater public attention than at the city's daily newspapers. Proud of its status as part of the country's oldest labor organization, Local 6 (“Big Six”) of the International Typographical Union (ITU) held extraordinary control over the composing rooms of New York's newspapers: foremen belonged to the union, members with steady jobs (“situation holders”) could hire a substitute for themselves whenever they liked, seniority dictated assignments, and strict rules regulated the division of labor with members of the many other newspaper unions. Publishers in other cities introduced new technologies after World War II to circumvent worker control, provoking bitter strikes. In New York they shied away from taking on Local 6, which retained a virtual veto over automation. Only gingerly—after negotiations with the union—did they introduce new equipment such as teletypesetters, which allowed linotype machines to be operated by punched paper tapes produced off-site.⁶⁰

In the early 1960s, New York newspaper publishers sought a freer hand to use teletypesetting and convert to “cold type” (photocomposition and computerized typesetting). In response, newly elected Local 6 president Bertram A. Powers put together an alliance of ten newspaper unions for mutual

support. On December 8, 1962, after the ITU and the newspapers failed to resolve wage, benefit, and automation issues, Big Six struck four of the city's dailies, whereupon the publishers of the four remaining papers locked out their employees.

In a city addicted to the word, the newspaper strike left a palpable void. Television stations beefed up their news programs, while several leading literary figures took advantage of the walkout to found the *New York Review of Books*. (Edmund Wilson remarked, "The disappearance of the *Times* Sunday book section . . . only made us realize it had never existed.")

Both sides proved capable of waging an extended battle. All the papers except the *News* had strike insurance, diminishing their losses. The printers received extremely generous strike benefits, financed in part by a three percent assessment on the earnings of ITU members throughout the country, provoking resentment among members of the other newspaper unions who received more modest benefits or none at all. Though rife with tension, the union coalition held together as Van Arsdale, whose union represented about 150 newspaper electricians, pushed hard for unity. When in early January the Publishers Association hinted that the struck papers might resume publishing without Big Six members, the Central Labor Council mobilized twenty-five thousand people to circle the *New York Times* headquarters, possibly the largest picket line in the city's history. In late February, the Publishers Association itself cracked, with the *New York Post* announcing plans to end its lockout.

As the strike dragged on, criticism of Local 6 grew. At a February 21 press conference, President Kennedy upbraided Bertram Powers and his local for excessive demands, the second time in just over a year that he took a New York union to task. But it took more than a month longer for Ted Kheel, once again acting on behalf of the mayor, to craft a settlement that included a token shortening of the printers' workweek, improved wages and benefits, strict limits on the use of typesetting tape, a ban on layoffs due to its use, and the sharing of savings generated by it. After 114 days, the presses finally rolled again.⁶¹

The 1962–63 walkout proved to be just the first of a series of newspaper strikes involving automation issues. In 1965, when the *New York Times* refused a Newspaper Guild demand that like Local 6 it be given a veto over the introduction of new equipment, the white-collar union struck the paper. All the other dailies except the *Post* stopped publishing in sympathy. This time it

took twenty-five days to settle the dispute, with the Guild failing to get its veto.⁶²

The final resolution of composing room automation issues did not come until 1974. That year, after *Daily News* printers started a slowdown, management succeeded in producing the paper without them, a measure of how far automation had advanced and how disunited the newspaper unions had become. After being locked out for eighteen days, the printers signed a pathbreaking contract with the *News* and the *Times*. Running for an unprecedented eleven years, it provided lifetime job guarantees for all eighteen hundred situation holders and substitutes at the papers. In return, the printers granted management the unlimited right to automate and freed them to disregard seniority in assignments and retraining, reduce the workforce through attrition, and eliminate longstanding work rules. To lessen the number of unneeded printers, the newspapers offered a twenty-five-hundred-dollar bonus to those agreeing to retire and granted each worker a six-month paid “productivity leave” (while refusing to shorten the workweek, fearing that other unions would demand the same).

The 1974 printers contract embodied one solution to the dilemma of automation: trading job guarantees for an incumbent workforce for management’s right to eliminate future jobs through technology. Within just a few years, the extraordinary increase in productivity that came with cold type and computerization turned newspaper composing rooms into “ghost towns.” The ITU survived only through a merger with the much larger Communications Workers of America, while rapid automation made it possible for management to put out a paper even when most workers struck, opening the way for fierce attacks by the *News* and *Post* on their unions two decades later.⁶³

The waterfront exemplified how automation could change the very character of the city. When World War II ended, all interested parties agreed that New York’s docks—about half of which the city government owned—needed massive renovation. However, various business and labor interests disagreed about who should take charge. Although the Port Authority of New York, which had been established in 1921 to coordinate port activity in New York and New Jersey, seemed like the most logical choice for port development, waterfront businessmen, International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) leaders, and mobsters with ties to the Democratic Party blocked its participation, fearing any threat to their existing arrangements. Left to its own devices, the city invested tens of millions of dollars on shipping facilities, but by the

mid-1950s had constructed only one new dock, at ten times its original estimated cost.⁶⁴

While the city let its docks become outmoded, the state stepped in to address other problems that were driving away business, namely worker militancy and dockside corruption. Longshoremen held wildcat strikes in 1945, 1947, and 1951, and an official strike in 1948, giving the port a reputation for worker strife and high labor costs. Organized crime, especially a truck loading racket and massive pilferage, added to shipping expenses. Rank-and-file militants, some working with Father John M. Corrigan of the Xavier Labor School (the model for the Karl Malden character in *On the Waterfront*), helped publicize mob control of the docks, feeding journalists information about loan-sharking, kickbacks needed to get work, and violence against union dissidents. In 1951, Governor Thomas Dewey ordered the state Crime Commission to investigate the waterfront. Its hearings and reports documented pervasive mob influence, rooted in an oversupply of labor and the shape-up system. At its urging, in 1953, New York and New Jersey formed a Waterfront Commission empowered to require that all waterfront hiring take place through government-run hiring halls. To decasualize labor, the commission allowed only longshoremen who put in a set number of hours a year to continue working. To get rid of troublemakers, it banned convicted felons and those whose presence endangered “public peace or safety” (in practice, Communists) from the industry.⁶⁵

Many longshoremen disliked the Waterfront Commission, which they called the “Gestapo” or “N.K.V.D.” (Soviet secret police). However, within a few years it succeeded in reducing the workforce, leading to steadier work and rising incomes for the those who remained.⁶⁶ But just as longshoremen began enjoying improved conditions, two new technologies threatened their livelihood, jet airplanes and containerization.

Commercial jets, which began flying in 1958, revolutionized the airline industry. From 1960 to 1966, the tonnage of air freight passing through New York increased fivefold. In 1967 it accounted for a quarter of all foreign trade in the metropolitan area. Flights to and from John F. Kennedy Airport—by the end of the 1960s the largest air freight center in the world—carried everything from fur coats to flowers to war dead from Vietnam.

Air passenger travel increased even more dramatically. In 1955 an equal number of people crossed the Atlantic by plane as by boat; by the late 1960s they outnumbered them twenty to one. Within a few more years, regular transatlantic passenger ship travel ended altogether, with only a rump cruise

industry remaining of the bustling passenger trade that for decades had given New York so much of its feel.⁶⁷

Though less visible, containerization had as dramatic an effect. Sea-Land Services introduced the first commercial container service in 1956, serving the New York to Puerto Rico run. Packing goods into large, standardized metal containers that could be lifted by crane onto and off of ships, trains, and trucks offered enormous savings in time, labor, and breakage over the traditional method of loading loose cargo by sling. Since containerization required specialized ships and port facilities, it spread slowly, so that in 1966 it accounted for only 3 percent of the general cargo in the port. But the potential productivity gains had become apparent well before then.

Containerization raised two major questions: what arrangements would be made with labor to permit its deployment, and where would container facilities be built? The ILA at first resisted employer pressure to decrease the size of work gangs as mechanization changed labor requirements. But in 1964, after a strike by Atlantic and Gulf Coast longshoremen, the union agreed to a phased reduction in gang size, while the employers agreed to guarantee a minimum of sixteen hundred hours a year pay for longshoremen who regularly reported to the hiring halls, regardless of the amount of work actually performed, to be financed by a tonnage assessment on goods passing through the port.⁶⁸

The combination of decasualization and containerization drastically decreased the size of the waterfront workforce. In 1954 over 35,000 men registered with the Waterfront Commission. By 1970, only 21,600 longshoremen and checkers remained; by 1980, only 13,177. Nine years later, some 8,000 longshoremen moved 50 percent more goods than 35,000 men had handled thirty-five years earlier.⁶⁹

Containerization helped shift the center of port activity away from New York. In 1958, New Jersey accounted for just 18 percent of portwide longshore hirings; by 1989, 78 percent. Manhattan, which as late as 1960 handled a quarter of the cargo in the port, lacked the open space and rail and road connections optimal for containerization, whereas the Jersey shore had plenty of available land for sprawling facilities, less congested traffic, and superior rail connections. But politics played a role, too. Having been spurned by New York while embraced by Newark, the Port Authority invested hundreds of millions of dollars developing the New Jersey waterfront, building the first berth designed specifically for container operations in Port Elizabeth in 1962. Eventually the Port Authority developed a container port in Brook-

lyn, but at the end of the 1970s its facilities in Newark and Elizabeth handled seven times as much cargo as its New York City operations.⁷⁰

There is little reason to pine for the days when tens of thousands of New Yorkers worked on the docks. Though some longshoremen derided work at the highly mechanized containerports as unmanly—"Clean it may be, interesting it isn't," said one—during its heyday the waterfront had been a dangerous, grueling, insecure world, a "pirates' nest" as veteran labor journalist Mary Heaton Vorse termed it, that few survived without physical or spiritual scars. Furthermore, as longshore work disappeared, air transportation generated a greater number of jobs; between 1958 and 1969 employment in air transportation in New York City nearly doubled, from 29,600 to 56,700 (with Kennedy Airport inheriting from the docks the distinction as the mob's favorite hunting grounds).⁷¹

Still, changes on the waterfront divorced the city from its past. When ships began docking at New Jersey piers far from Manhattan, and staying only a day instead of the better part of a week, many sailors stopped going into the city at all, depriving it of a presence that went back to the colonial Jack Tar. The ships chandlers, rope works, and saloons that had lined the shores of Brooklyn and Manhattan since the days of Melville disappeared. The maritime unions, once so important in the labor politics of the city, imploded, as containerization and the end of the passenger lines drastically diminished the need for sailors as well as longshoremen, and more and more shipping lines used foreign crews.⁷²

Nothing better symbolized the passing of maritime New York than the closing of the Brooklyn Navy Yard, a vast facility with six drydocks, eight piers, 270 buildings, nineteen miles of streets, and thirty miles of railroad track. In operation since 1761, the yard's workers had built the Navy's first oceangoing steamship during the War of 1812, outfitted the *Monitor* during the Civil War, and constructed the battleships *Maine*, whose sinking in Havana led to war with Spain, and *Missouri*, on whose deck Japan surrendered, ending World War II. At its height, in 1944, the yard employed seventy-one thousand women and men, making it the Navy's biggest shipyard and the largest industrial enterprise in the city. After the Korean War, however, work contracted sharply, as the Navy shifted production elsewhere. In 1965 fewer than seven thousand workers still toiled there. The next year, the Navy shut down the yard.⁷³

By the 1970s much of New York's glorious waterfront lay abandoned. Decaying piers on Manhattan's West Side routinely burnt up in spectacular

fires. Some docks were used as parking lots, others as bus barns and sanitation department garages. A few served as impromptu sunbathing decks. City officials and private interests continued to discuss the need for new waterfront investment, but no longer to serve industry or transportation. Instead, they envisioned high rise offices, luxury housing, and recreation facilities to service corporate New York, the “headquarters town” that had grown and grown during the decades when industrial New York reached its peak and began its long decline.⁷⁴

When Mayor Wagner left office at the end of 1965, New York still had a massive goods producing and distributing economy. But relative to the past, blue-collar labor had diminished. In 1946, 41 percent of the city labor force had consisted of craftsmen, operatives, laborers, foremen, and kindred workers; in 1970, only 29 percent, nearly matched in number by clerical and secretarial workers, who made up 27 percent of the labor force.⁷⁵

Elements of the labor movement recognized early on the economic trends that transformed the city. Some unions proved extraordinarily adept at protecting their members in the face of the relentless change so characteristic of capitalism. A generation of printers and longshoremen lived out their lives with economic security and personal dignity even though their occupations underwent near extinction, a magnificent accomplishment of trade unionism.⁷⁶ Unions in the garment, electrical, metalworking, construction, and transit industries, too, managed to provide at least some job protection for their members through hours reductions, seniority systems, manning level guarantees, subcontracting rules, and other devices. The fate of these workers sharply differed from that of the millions of Americans—workers and managers alike—who had to fend for themselves under the impact of deindustrialization and corporate restructuring.

New York unions, however, generally proved unable to protect jobs for future generations from the impact of industrial relocation and the shrinkage of the blue-collar trades. Probably unions, no matter what they did, at most could have had a modest effect on the evolution of the New York economy, given suburbanization, automation, and the increasing ability of business to flee high costs and well-organized workers. Most major northeastern and midwestern cities suffered postwar declines in manufacturing employment as steep or steeper than New York’s, a measure of the national and international scope of the forces at work.⁷⁷ Still, a number of factors undercut what influence working-class New Yorkers might have had.

First, on some key issues they had few allies. Most civic, business, and political leaders favored the redevelopment of industrial zones into office and residential districts, while even labor-backed liberals like John Kennedy viewed as utopian or misguided the notion that workers should have more leisure as a way to preserve jobs and as an end in itself. Second, disagreements among workers along industrial and political lines undercut their ability to intervene in or create debates over macroeconomic issues. Third, many working-class leaders simply did not see it as their place to try to shape the long-run future of the region.

Finally, few working-class New Yorkers found the shift in the city economy distressing, except to the extent that it threatened their own jobs. Instead, they commonly saw the shift from blue-collar to white-collar work as a natural, positive progression. Told over and over again by businessmen, the mass media, academics, and political leaders that “post-industrialism”—the world of offices, service work, and white-collar employment—promised an easier, more lucrative, more secure way of life than blue-collar labor, most saw little reason to bemoan its displacement of industry. Workers in some trades, like construction, longshoring, and printing, encouraged their children to follow their path, as long as jobs remained. However, most men and women who made, moved, or maintained things—practical-minded and committed to progress—hoped that their children if not themselves would escape manual toil. One veteran needle trades worker—a strong union supporter—pointedly asked an interviewer in the early 1970s, “Would *you* want your children to work in the garment industry?”⁷⁸

From 1955 through 1969 nonagricultural employment in the city rose in every year but three, with a net gain of 321,500 jobs over the fifteen-year period. The city unemployment rate fell below the national rate every year except one from 1958 through 1970.⁷⁹ As long as employment opportunities in other domains grew, evolution away from manual work did not seem terribly threatening. Few anticipated the severe economic difficulties that the city would begin experiencing as the 1960s ended. But none could miss noticing what a different place New York had become.