INTRODUCTION

Contesting Democracy: Working-Class and Growth Politics in the City

Wisconsin Avenue, which cuts across the center of Milwaukee, also bisects the twentieth century. This downtown thoroughfare held center stage in two contrasting early post-World War II episodes – a 1947 ordinance fight and a 1951 parade – that illuminate a pattern of change underway in the industrial city. At the core of these incidents and of this history were ongoing frictions between contending visions of the city, defined as working-class politics and growth politics. These were crucial components that fit together uneasily in the city’s mid-twentieth-century political culture. Both working-class and growth politics were shaped and reshaped by a series of social and policy clashes: from the hard-fought politics of housing and redevelopment, to controversies engendered by petty gambling, to questions about the role of organized labor in urban life, to a battle over municipal fiscal policy and autonomy. These local, everyday conflicts helped to shift the prevailing “common sense” of how a city works. As the second-half of the twentieth century began, an increasingly insistent growth politics reconfigured perceptions about the city’s public purpose and constrained democratic aspirations.

Accounts of urban change in the midcentury industrial Midwest, especially as precursor to the Rust Belt city, often evoke images of economic dislocation, empty factories, and deteriorating blue-collar neighborhoods. But this transition in the Great Lakes city known as “America’s Machine Shop” was not solely a function of changing economic circumstances. It also points to a rupture in urban political culture. Conflicts between working-class politics and growth politics propelled these changes, pitting the precepts of metropolitan efficiency and productivity against the principles of democratic access and distribution. This transformation toward a political culture driven by growth politics weakened the political and social arrangements that characterized the industrial city and its early
development. On the two sides of this divide, city residents thought and spoke differently about urban problems and prospects. Postwar democracy in the city, then, bore the imprint not only of changing economic relations, increasingly racialized images of urban disorder, and mounting Cold War fears, but also of the growth politics that had emerged dominant from this period of contention. This book contributes to the histories of the twentieth-century city and American political change by looking closely at local conflicts that both forged postwar growth politics and positioned it at the center of American urban political culture.

On Labor Day in 1951, business and civic leaders promoted the early phases of Milwaukee’s postwar development program with a parade along Wisconsin Avenue. Rather than celebrate labor’s power and place in the city, this Labor Day parade advertised the benefits that a “downtown modernization program” promised the city as a whole. Funded by a bond issue, the two-million dollar project removed streetcar tracks and rebuilt the city’s main downtown thoroughfare. During an earlier ground-breaking ceremony for the project, business leaders lauded this as a requisite first step forward for Milwaukee’s economic growth and promised to help develop a modern metropolis. The Milwaukee Journal boasted that “the new street will help make Milwaukee look like the big city it is.”

The Downtown Association, an organization of central city business leaders, sponsored this Labor Day parade which drew an estimated one hundred thousand onlookers. The labor councils for the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) each contributed a float. They were overshadowed, however, by the many other entries in the parade. The Milwaukee Journal’s report barely noted organized labor’s participation in this Labor Day event. Late in the article the CIO and AFL received a brief, belittling mention: “The AFL float had nice things to say about AFL workmen, and the CIO float felt the same way about the CIO.” The AFL’s Milwaukee Labor Press, perhaps made uneasy by unions’ marginal role, gave the parade minimal coverage. The CIO News expressed ambivalence, acknowledging “ironically enough this parade is sponsored by industry.”

---


2 “100,000 Here Cheer Parade.”

3 “Plan Labor Day Celebrations,” Wisconsin CIO News, 10 August 1951. CIO coverage of the parade consisted of just one front-page photograph of their float, with a caption blandly stating that the display depicted the “CIO’s goals in community welfare.”
Contesting Democracy

Max Raskin mourned the loss of Labor Day. Raskin, who had served as a Socialist city attorney in the 1930s, contrasted this parade with Milwaukee’s spirited Labor Day and May 1st festivities of the past. He lamented that the Downtown Association’s event was “hardly a day of celebration for organized labor.” Labor Day had ceased to be labor’s day.

The streetcar lines that this downtown development program displaced had been important for working-class life in the city. Workers had boarded Milwaukee’s streetcars to toil in the city’s factories and offices, to play in the city’s bingo halls and bowling alleys, to shop downtown and in neighborhood markets, and to display their power on picket lines and in earlier Labor Day celebrations. As in many other cities, streetcars and streetcar companies also had been flashpoints for labor and political conflict. An unsuccessful two-month strike in 1896 by motormen and conductors, which included a boycott that gained widespread support, helped to establish grievances against the “streetcar ring” as a staple for local politics and contributed eventually to the Socialists’ victories in municipal politics. An explosive four-day strike in 1934 forced the Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company to recognize the streetcar workers’ AFL unions and energized the city’s labor movement. Despite the company’s forcible efforts to break the unions, the strikers enjoyed strong public backing and earned the support of local officials. Mayor Daniel Float,” Wisconsin CIO News, 7 September 1951. The AFL promoted the parade to its members by claiming that the event would show “labor’s role in making Milwaukee a bigger and better community.” AFL coverage of the parade and Labor Day celebration consisted of just a photograph of their parade float accompanied by the slogan “AFL Skilled Craftsmen Built This Magnificent Mile – and On Time.” “Plan Labor Day Parade,” Milwaukee Labor Press, 9 August 1951; “Labor Float in Big Parade,” Milwaukee Labor Press, 30 August 1951; [photograph], Milwaukee Labor Press, 6 September 1951. The AFL float was sponsored by the Milwaukee Federated Trades Council (FTC), the Building and Construction Trades Council, the Union Label Trades Department, the International Ladies Garment Workers, and the Allied Printing Trades Council. The FTC’s Labor Day message stressed social harmony: “A Labor Day Message!”, Milwaukee Labor Press, 30 August 1951.


5 Democratic candidate David Rose (1898) was the first to benefit from the earlier strike upheaval, but working-class voters moved later to support the Socialists. During the 1934 strike, the company paid the Bergoff Detective Agency thirty-nine thousand dollars to break the strike. The Amalgamated Association of Street, Electric Railway and Motor Coach Employees of America, Division 998, emerged from the strike to play an active role in 1935 labor disputes. Thomas W. Gavett, Development of the Labor Movement in Milwaukee (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 153–56; John Gurda, The Making of Milwaukee (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1999), 198–99, 291–92; Florence Higgins, “Trial by Fire,” The Nation, 18 July 1934, 66–67; Karen Woolley Moore, “Missed Connections: The ‘Progressive’ Derailment of Public Transit in...
Introduction

Hoan condemned the company, writing emphatically: “Your attitude toward your employees, our people, our city, our Federal Government is more arrogant than that of any ruler in the world. ... You are now witnessing the harvest of pent-up public indignation you yourself have aroused.” The strike – the culmination of a forty-year fight for union recognition that was now spurred on by the promises of the early New Deal’s National Industrial Recovery Act – had demonstrated the power of working-class politics in the city.


7 “‘Magnificent Mile’ in Business Again,” MJ, 9 September 1951. The demise of Milwaukee’s streetcars was an extended process, beginning in the late 1920s with the replacement of some street railway lines with buses. The last streetcar route was closed in 1958 (a trolley bus continued until 1965). Harold M. Mayer, “By Water, Land and Air: Transportation for Milwaukee County,” in Trading Post to Metropolis: Milwaukee County’s First 150 Years, ed. Ralph M. Aderman (Milwaukee: Milwaukee County Historical Society, 1987), 373–74. The closing of streetcar stops and routes was not uncontested. See for instance: “A Petition to the Common Council of the City of Milwaukee,” July 1945, file 47–1070; William Ketterer, Assistant City Attorney, to Committee on Public Utilities of the Common Council, 1 March 1950, file 47–1067; both in Common Council files, City Records Center [hereafter CRC], City Hall, Milwaukee; and “Trolley Bus Fight Looms: Raised by Paving Plans,” MJ, 19 March 1951.

8 “Hub of City Has Continued to Grow,” MJ, 2 September 1951.
Contesting Democracy

5
cconvenience, and professional services.”9 Many of the advertisements tied to this campaign targeted white upper- and middle-class women as shoppers, highlighting easy access and ample parking.10

The postwar city imagined in the parade situated organized labor as just one among many interest groups invited to support the goals of urban efficiency and economic growth. Rather than a city marked by sharp antagonisms and conflicts over resources, this version of Milwaukee consisted of coexisting groups that both articulated their interests and concurred about the basic principles of growth politics. In a sense, each distinct contingent in the parade marched to the same drummer. Wisconsin Avenue on Labor Day in 1951 served as a forum for this postwar pluralist democracy built around growth. In order to realize their urban vision, however, postwar city builders had to displace more than the streetcar tracks on Wisconsin Avenue. This was not only a brick and mortar project, but one that sought to reconstitute the “patterns of shared values, assumptions, and behaviors associated with public life.” Business and civic leaders had to excavate, remove, and reconstruct the political culture of the industrial city.11

9 “Thousands Travel ’Magnificent Mile,’” MJ, 8 September 1951.
Four years earlier when business leaders had sought greater control over the use of downtown space, Wisconsin Avenue figured into a different calculus of working-class and growth politics. In 1947, the Milwaukee CIO Council (formally titled the Milwaukee County Industrial Union Council) opposed a business-sponsored measure to regulate downtown parades and demonstrations. Hoping to insulate commerce and economic life from the disruption of labor and political demonstrations, the Downtown Association proposed an ordinance prohibiting parades of more than twenty vehicles or two hundred persons on Wisconsin Avenue and other downtown streets during business hours.

The Milwaukee CIO Council, its member unions, and allies mobilized quickly to thwart the proposal. Appealing to a sense of class injustice and citizenship rights, they decried such a restriction on downtown protests and political parades. Democratic participation necessitated access to this key city space. Union activists speaking at the Common Council hearings stressed their role and their rights as citizens, veterans, and workers. United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 283 President Joseph Konkel, representing workers at Wisconsin Motors, argued: “We want our civil rights preserved and extended. That’s what the boys fought for. That’s what labor believes in.” A representative from the Federated Trades Council, the AFL’s central body, also challenged the proposal, warning that this “precedent” to restrict parades downtown might be adopted by “businessmen’s associations” in other districts of the city. Bowing to union pressure, the Common Council soon dropped the measure.12

Attacked for having pushed this measure, the Downtown Association’s Perry Anderson responded that they “did not mean to step on any toes.”

12 “Milw. Parade Ban Killed as Labor Voiced Opposition,” Wisconsin CIO News, 3 October 1947, 3; and “Parade Ban Hits Snag,” Wisconsin CIO News, 19 September 1947, 4. See: Milwaukee County Industrial Union Council, “Minutes,” 3 September 1947; Milwaukee County Industrial Union, Memorandum To all Local Unions, 11 September 1947; and Milwaukee County Industrial Union, Memorandum to Recording Secretaries, 19 September 1947; all found in folio 4, box 9, Milwaukee County Industrial Union Council Records, Milwaukee Mss DU, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries, Archives Department, Milwaukee. See also the proposed ordinance and correspondence (especially Assistant City Attorney to Committee on Streets-Alleys-Sewers, 25 August 1947) in file 47–499, Common Council files, CRC. Although the Streets and Alleys Committee unanimously recommended the measure, in the face of opposition the full Council referred it back to committee and the proposal was dropped.
He claimed that the CIO misjudged the ban as an infringement on labor’s and citizens’ access to this important city space. The Milwaukee Journal, a major player in postwar development efforts, responded indignantly to the proposed ordinance’s defeat. The newspaper’s editors complained that the council had “caved in like a wet paper box when labor leaders and some others vigorously objected.” Declaring that the measure assisted business operations, just as prohibitions against double parking aided the flow of traffic and commerce, the Journal inquired: “Is it anybody’s constitutional right to tie a city’s traffic into knots? … To halt the movement of those activities on which the life of a city depends?” For the Journal and the Downtown Association, the life of the market and the life of the city were inseparable. An orderly, efficient downtown marketplace, they suggested, would help to produce a modern city. Regulations against parades and demonstrations were portrayed as technical measures (akin to traffic engineering), designed to make the city function efficiently. They were defined as axioms of growth: precepts beyond politics.

The CIO Council and its allies, however, were unwilling to let this issue be ruled out of bounds for political debate. This was not simply a matter of creating a more efficient city and market or of following the prescription for modernization and growth. Concerns about political and economic power also stood at center stage. For Milwaukee’s business leaders, Wisconsin Avenue represented a commercial vision of urban vitality, one presuming that private economic interests rather than labor or even the wider public ought to guide the city. For the CIO, in contrast, this public site symbolized unfettered access to urban citizenship and collective action. Their organizing experience, their hours on picket duty, and the city’s tumultuous labor history had taught them that the right of assembly, the protection of free speech, and the need to demonstrate power – above all in visible and strategic urban spaces – were decidedly political and relevant to this dispute. Democratic access and the ability to mobilize people in public view were crucial ingredients of urban working-class political power, which the CIO refused to sacrifice for the presumed imperatives of modern economic growth. They maintained this united stand for working-class politics even though the local labor movement had just been riven by a

fractious Allis-Chalmers strike (1946–1947) and despite the allegiance many labor activists held to New Deal policies inspired by Keynesian economics and to their own alternative visions of a modern Milwaukee. Those involved in the ordinance fight expressed a deep suspicion that this business-oriented version of urban growth politics threatened to remake the local landscape in ways that subverted working-class power.16

Both of these postwar episodes centered on Milwaukee’s Wisconsin Avenue. The distance between them, however, indicates a shift underway in the city’s political culture during the 1940s. This change, in turn, recast urban policy. The 1947 debate over the downtown parade ordinance arose amid a contested political culture. Organized labor and other working-class groups championed the principle of democratic access and contended that business leaders’ priorities of economic efficiency and growth were fair game for political debate. The Wisconsin Avenue of 1947 harkened back to the first four decades of Milwaukee’s twentieth century, in which the politics of the Social Democrats, the rising power of organized labor, and the patterns of everyday life in working-class neighborhoods shaped the social relations of the industrial city and the ways in which people imagined that city. The 1951 parade down Wisconsin Avenue, in contrast, reflected a pluralist conception of postwar urban politics in which the discourse of growth provided the glue for a new consensus. Diverse players, or interests, gathered together publically to celebrate growth. Decisions about the urban economy were placed outside the purview of political contest. Whereas in 1947 labor and its allies defended Wisconsin Avenue as a political space, in 1951 the Downtown Association and its allies defined this same thoroughfare as a commercial space. The ground had shifted from a vigorously contested terrain in which working-class politics held sway to a “vital center” in which growth politics set the direction for the postwar city. The Wisconsin Avenue of 1951 anticipated 16 “Parade Ban Stopped,” Wisconsin CIO News, 3 October 1947, 4. Wisconsin Avenue was also home to the CIO’s headquarters. “State CIO Moves to Wisconsin Avenue,” Wisconsin CIO News, 31 January 1947. On labor’s public visibility, involvement in postwar cities, and defense of the right to strike, see especially: George Lipsitz, Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Joshua B. Freeman, Working-Class New York: Life and Labor since World War II (New York: Free Press, 2000); and Josiah Bartlett Lambert, “If Workers Took a Notion”: The Right to Strike and American Political Development (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). On limits black and female workers faced in making citizenship claims, see: D’Ann Campbell, Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 44–45; and Ira Katznelson, When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005). On the Allis-Chalmers strike, see Stephen Meyer, “Stalin over Wisconsin”: The Making and Unmaking of Militant Unionism, 1900–1950 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
the last four decades of the twentieth century when the growth politics espoused by civic and business leaders would set the pace for Milwaukee’s political culture. With unintended but glaring irony, Labor Day at the beginning of the 1950s foreshadowed the neoliberal city.¹⁷

Challenges over democracy framed these contests and changes. As the 1930s drew to a close, New Deal supporters and opponents fought over the meaning of democracy in the United States. World War II became a war for democracy against dictatorship and the U. S. homefront was remade into the “arsenal of democracy.” As the Cold War escalated, both internationally and domestically, democratic prospects and threats stood at the forefront. The language of democracy also showed the effects of an ongoing but complex clash between growth politics and working-class politics. In Milwaukee during the “long 1940s” (roughly the late 1930s to the early 1950s), workers, civic leaders, businessmen, reformers, conservatives, and other residents fought, compromised, and then fought some more in battles over policy and social order that posed urgent questions about self-rule, the prerogatives of private property, economic and political power, social welfare, access to urban spaces and resources, and participation in public life. Toward the end of this period a new understanding, or common sense, about the city had gained the upper hand, establishing different terms for urban development and civic order, while also altering expectations for postwar democracy.

Both working-class politics and reactions to workers’ power played a pivotal role in this history of urban democracy.¹⁸ The mid-twentieth-


A century city housed a politically and culturally robust working class. In the 1930s and 1940s, workers, working-class organizations, and allied groups laid claim to the city, extending the power they built in the workplace, in local communities, and in national politics. During the Great Depression, urban workers organized and established themselves as a political and social power. A rapidly growing CIO and a resurgent AFL, combined with increasing commitments to the national New-Deal Democratic Party and upsurges of support for local social democratic and progressive organizations, demonstrated the strength and vitality of the urban working class. At the same time, these organizations that faced regular attacks from outside were tested continually by the social and economic insecurities of their members’ daily lives. These challenges accounted for much of the volatility and contingency of working-class politics in the 1930s and later.\footnote{On 1930s urban working class politics and culture, see: Lizabeth Cohen, \textit{Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Cecelia Bucki, \textit{Bridgeport's Socialist New Deal, 1915-36} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Michael Denning, \textit{The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century} (New York: Verso, 1996); Elizabeth Faue, \textit{Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Gary Gerstle, \textit{Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Robert H. Zieger, \textit{The CIO, 1935-1955} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).} As the new decade began, labor unions, civil rights groups, women’s organizations, and progressives rallied to protect New Deal gains and to seize wartime political and social opportunities. The urban working class also changed rapidly during the war and in the years immediately following, as thousands of women found temporary jobs in defense plants, the city’s black working class grew, and organized labor assumed a prominent place in society and politics. The wartime city, a busy and clamorous place,