

Packinghouse Workers of America United

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LOCAL 56  
SUPPORTS  
UNION'S FIGHT  
for a

LOCAL 77  
SUPPORTS  
UNION'S FIGHT  
for a

LET THE  
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WE WANT  
A WAGE  
INCREASE  
NOT A WAGE  
FREE!

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United Packinghouse Food and Allied Workers (AFL-CIO)  
Publications Department

THE UPWA STORY

# A Word in Advance . . .

Much of this historical booklet is necessarily the story of the meat packing workers; but UPWA is much more than a packing-house union for we are the principal union of the nation's sugar workers—and of the stockyards workers, too. Our locals are in various food processing plants and related industries—from pharmaceuticals to fertilizer.

We are one of the strongest labor organizations in Canada—and by far the biggest union (50,000 members) in Puerto Rico, that beautiful Caribbean Commonwealth, so intimately associated with the United States.

That the record of our sugar refinery workers would make a dramatic success story is attested by the fact that hourly minimum wages in the New York area have risen from 70 cents, when sugar workers “went union” in 1938, to \$2.52. And Louisiana sugar workers, suffering though they have from historical differentials, have made the sensational journey from 37 cents an hour in 1941 to \$2.39 in 1961. Also of deep significance is the 2,000-hour guaranteed annual wage won by sugar workers, north and south, and the literally millions of dollars worth of welfare benefits.

Stockyards workers, too, could tell of advancement—265% in 20 years. Indeed, UPWA's brand of unionism, from the fruit and vegetable industry of the west coast to the cheese factories of New York state, has worked a massive transformation in the lives of the workers and their families.

**We're happy to have you with us!**

*At PWOC's historic mass meeting  
which launched the great drive for  
contracts with Armour & Co. in 1939*

*John L. Lewis, Van A. Bittner, Bishop Bernard J. Sheil.*

**The United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers (AFL-CIO).**  
**Chicago, Illinois.**  **May, 1961**

# THE UPWA STORY

## OF MILITANT DEMOCRATIC TRADE UNIONISM

Telling the detailed story of our union—our struggles, and our victories and accomplishments—would require many thousands of words.

To tell that complete history is not our present purpose. What we do want this little booklet to do, however, is to accomplish two important functions:

1. To remind veteran members that their pride in this union, the United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers, is fully justified.
2. To show to new members—and to men and women whom we hope will choose to become members—that UPWA is a union of good works which attracts to its membership men and women of good will.



## The Story Starts

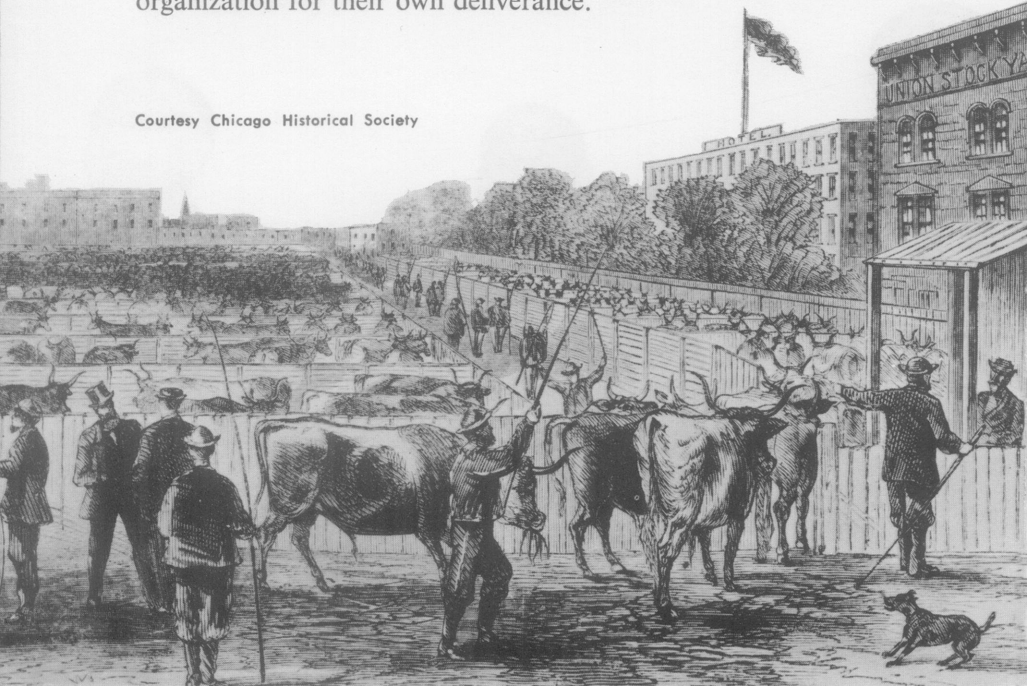
The United Packinghouse Workers is a young union, as unions go, but our aims and our aspirations are as old as mankind's search for a better life of dignity, security and well being.

We can look back at a record of extraordinary accomplishment; yet we must face grave challenges in the years ahead. If we hold fast to our ideals, the job we set ourselves will be done.

Our union's own story starts October 24, 1937, when the Committee for Industrial Organization—the CIO—presented a charter to the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC). The workers of the whole nation were busy creating a new miracle as thousands and thousands of working men and women in the mass production industries began to build great industrial unions under the banner of the CIO.

In auto, steel, rubber, textile, and other industries the workers were on the march in the early 1930's. Those who labored in the packinghouses of the country shared that yearning to forge an organization for their own deliverance.

Courtesy Chicago Historical Society



It wasn't a new dream, this hope for a union that could rival the mighty power of the big packers. For sixty-five years, the packinghouse workers had struggled to build unions, yet every time one was fairly started it was ruthlessly smashed and its leadership scattered.

Packinghouse workers were tragically close to the bottom of the economic ladder. Many of them gave their courage and allegiance to the PWOC because they had nothing to lose. They had no place to go except up. Employers were able to keep wages low as the ranks of the workers filled to overflowing with each successive wave of immigration. Working conditions were not merely hard and unpleasant—they were well-nigh unbearable.

## **Two Bits an Hour**

The basic wage rate in Chicago—the hub of the industry in those days—was an unbelievable 25 cents an hour in 1917. The cost of living was climbing because of World War I. The Chicago Federation of Labor established the Stockyards Labor Council, a form of industrial unionism that allied all groups from casing room women to butchers on the killing floors and mechanical craftsmen.

In 1918 a government arbitrator, faced with a national strike threat, awarded raises of  $3\frac{1}{2}\phi$  to  $4\frac{1}{2}\phi$  an hour and a basic eight-hour day. These were hailed as extraordinary gains—and they were! Within a year, however, the Stockyards Labor Council began to break up as the Amalgamated Meat Cutters withdrew and other groups splintered along craft and even racial lines.

The packers had become alarmed at the appearance of militant unionism, however, and soon formed their own “plant conference boards”—the bosses’ fancy name for company dominated organizations in which management had complete control. In 1921, when wages had reached an “excessive” 53 cents an hour, the conference boards obediently voted to accept a ten percent wage cut at Christmas time. The Meat Cutters union waged a futile strike against the wage cut, but was forced to abandon it.

The workers were left hungry, cold, defeated and disillusioned.

(A direct descendant of the old plant conference boards is still in evidence within a few of the Swift & Co. plants where house unions go under the name of the National Brotherhood of Packinghouse Workers.)

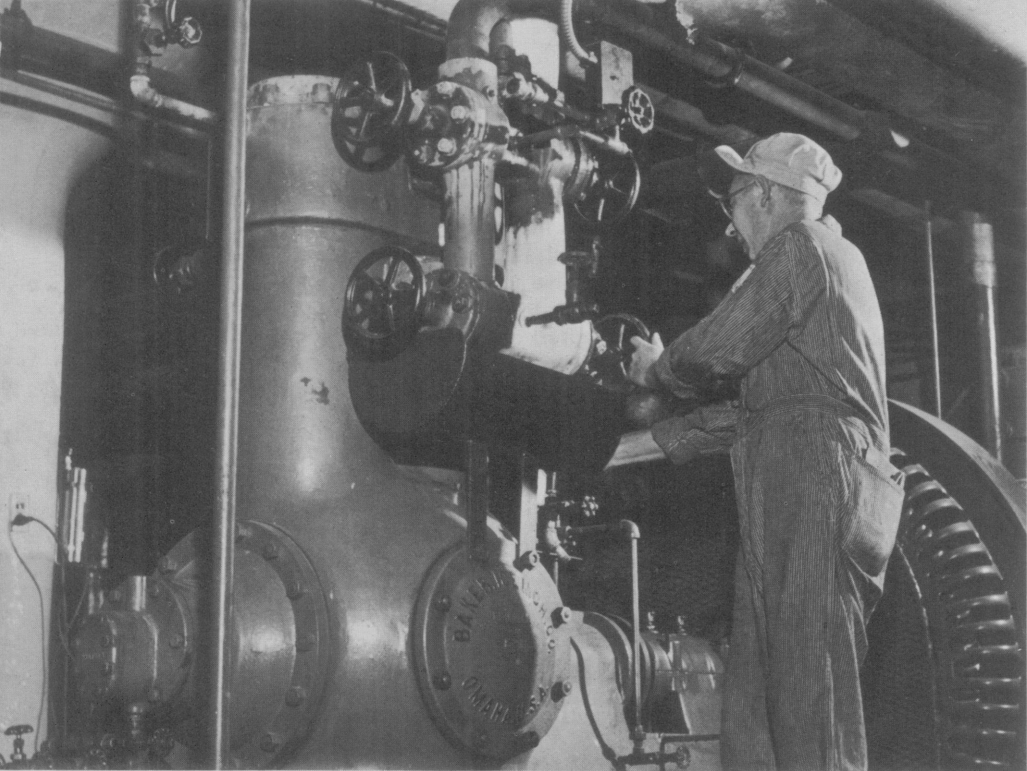
## **1933 and the Big Bust**

Came 1933 and the Great Depression. The basic labor rate in Chicago packinghouses fell to 36 cents an hour—the lowest since 1919. Thousands of packinghouse workers were idle. Others clung precariously to their jobs only by currying favor with the supervisor, perhaps with a small bribe or, maybe, by cutting his grass or painting his house.

Against this stark background, Franklin D. Roosevelt took over the reins of government and, in the dramatic days of the New Deal, restored to American workers confidence in their own abilities to solve their problems through organization. Leaders emerged from the workers' own ranks, men like Frank Ellis, later to become a UPWA vice president, who built a militant group in Austin, Minn. In Austin, Chicago, Cedar Rapids, St. Paul and many other packinghouse centers, a spirit of militant trade unionism that had seemed dead flared into bright, new life.

It was in this period—in 1935 to be exact—that John L. Lewis created the Committee for Industrial Organization after his pleas for extending union organization to mass production workers were ignored by the craft-minded heads of the American Federation of Labor. Workers at Austin and Cedar Rapids asked for CIO's help. In Chicago a group of 18 met in a tavern "Back of the Yards" to enlist the aid of Van A. Bittner, regional head of the CIO.

Hoping to forestall the CIO-type of union organization already sweeping the auto and steel industries, the packers announced a nine-cent hourly wage increase designed to "buy" the workers away from the union idea—still a favorite stunt of employers who dread the coming of the union.



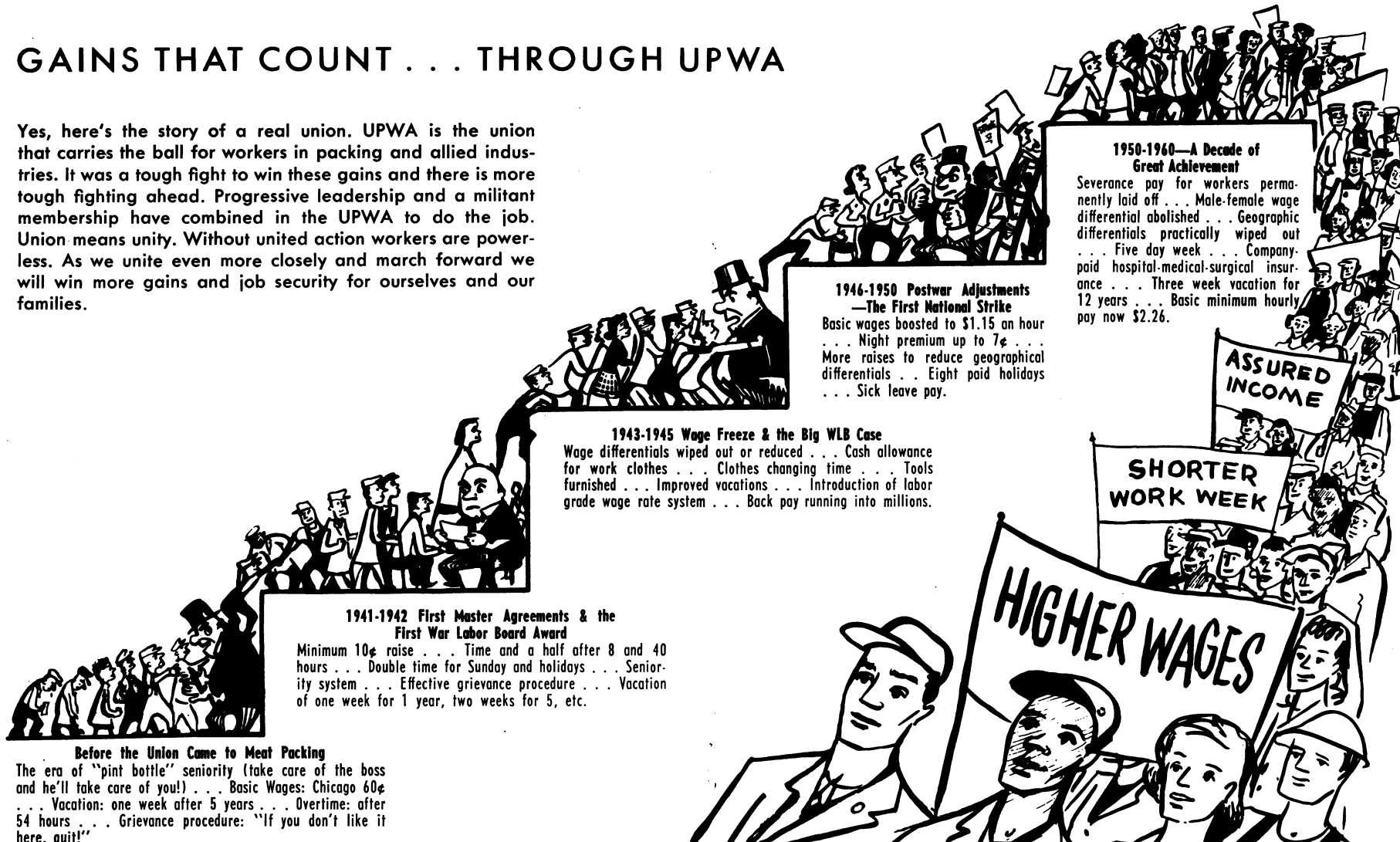
But the workers weren't stopped. They took the nine cents as a payment too long deferred—and went on organizing in the CIO. So, on October 24, 1937, about 70 groups, most of them only tiny beginnings of local unions, met in Chicago to launch the Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee, CIO.

### **PWOC Drives Ahead**

PWOC aimed its main organizing drives at the heart of the industry, the Big Four meat packers—Armour, Swift, Wilson and Cudahy. It took courage to organize (just as it often does today), for the companies resisted with everything they could muster—stool pigeons, firings, threats to close, and bribes for leaders in the plants.

# GAINS THAT COUNT . . . THROUGH UPWA

Yes, here's the story of a real union. UPWA is the union that carries the ball for workers in packing and allied industries. It was a tough fight to win these gains and there is more tough fighting ahead. Progressive leadership and a militant membership have combined in the UPWA to do the job. Union means unity. Without united action workers are powerless. As we unite even more closely and march forward we will win more gains and job security for ourselves and our families.



1902	1916	1920	1921	1929	1932	1934	1937	1946	1948	1952	1954	1956	1958	1959	1960
15¢	22 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> ¢	53¢	37 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> ¢	42 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> ¢	33 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> ¢	47 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> ¢	60¢	96¢	\$1.15	\$1.45	\$1.55	\$1.79	\$1.99 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	\$2.16 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub>	\$2.26

**BREAD AND BUTTER IN THE MEAT PACKING INDUSTRY**





We owe something to the spirit of men like the shop stewards at the Cudahy plant in Sioux City who came to work one morning with whistles around their necks. When the whistles blew on signal, every worker stepped down from the work bench in a stop-work demonstration for a grievance settlement.

And we owe something to the 500 daring men who went through a four-day sitdown strike at the Armour plant in Kansas City to back up a \$22 wage claim on behalf of six fellow workers from the hide cellar.

Those were thrilling days that still bring tingling emotions when they are recalled by the men and women who shared them. . . .

- When the vast Chicago Coliseum was jammed with workers, many from far-off points like Omaha, St. Joseph, Denver, who came to hear John L. Lewis pledge a fight to the finish with Armour for a union contract.



- When nobody but the packinghouse workers had a good thing to say for our union—while companies and rival unions combined to damn our fledgling organization.
- When one center after another “caught fire”, and workers flocked to the banner of PWOC-CIO.
- When we came of age—October 16, 1943—and were granted our charter as the United Packinghouse Workers of America, CIO, a fully autonomous international union with its own elected officers and a structure that has since withstood every test of industrial democracy.

### **Building the Union**

Yes, those were thrilling days when we were building our union! It is easy to recall the triumphs, but we can never permit ourselves to forget the heartbreaks and the setbacks. People have been beaten and jailed. Our union was pummeled severely in

the bitter strike of 1948 (three strikers were killed while on picket duty); and, like most human institutions, we have had to defend ourselves at times from factional quarrels and attacks from the petty and disgruntled.

But our interest does not center on the trials of the past or on the glories of a bygone era. UPWA is very much a union of today, ready and determined to put up a battle for the welfare of today's UPWA member.

The American trade union movement knows and respects us for our spirit of militancy and for our readiness to cooperate when others call for assistance.



This was brought home forcefully in 1959 when Wilson & Co., the third largest meat packer, refused to grant its employees contract conditions equal to those agreed to by the other major packers. A long and searing national strike ensued. The company recruited strikebreakers and employed every tactic to smash the union. But the solidarity of our Wilson membership, coupled with skillful leadership and massive support from their fellow unionists, brought the great Wilson strike to a successful conclusion.

## **A Record of Achievement**

We've travelled far and fast in the 25 years since the meat packers tried with a nine-cent raise to balk our birth as an organization. That raise brought the common labor rate up to 62½ cents an hour in metropolitan areas. The industry's basic minimum at this writing is \$2.28 an hour—nearly four times higher than in 1937!

Fringe benefits in meat packing are beyond the rosiest dreams of those pioneer unionists:—an extensive vacation program, second shift differential, a 5-day guaranteed 36-hour work-week, eight paid holidays, paid sick leave, payroll severance allowance, promotion by seniority, hospital and medical benefits, and a comprehensive pension program are among them.

All these impressive gains were fruits of what were often tense collective bargaining sessions as skillful union negotiators presented the irrepressible strivings of the packinghouse worker for a greater share in the nation's abundance.

And while we have been improving the economic lot of every UPWA member, we've also fought to win a larger measure of human dignity. No trade union has ever been a greater champion of civil rights than UPWA. Indeed, we have literally torn down walls of segregation to bring opportunity and fraternity to all, be they male or female, Negro, Spanish-speaking, Catholic, Protestant or Jew.

## **Profile of the Union**

In 1960 our official title was expanded to become the United Packinghouse, Food and Allied Workers. Although we are best known as the Packinghouse Workers, right from the beginning workers in many associated fields have helped to build and shape the UPWA.

You'll find UPWA in the stockyards, the sugar industry, in poultry houses, canning plants, vegetable oil processors, pharmaceutical manufacturers, soap and chemical makers, among fruit and vegetable producers, and many others. Such famous names as Campbell Soup, American Sugar, and Libby are on our roster of collective bargaining agreements.

But, wherever we work, all of us are bound by a common spirit of vigorous democracy and aggressive union spirit, by a theme of mutual assistance and the conviction that there is really no better union anywhere than the UPWA.

Perhaps because UPWA came up the hard way, we have produced hundreds of rank-and-file leaders of whom any union could be proud. And we firmly believe in developing initiative among our members and their energetic, resourceful local leaders.

We've never sold ourselves short. We have always set our sights just a little bit higher—one reason why we have forged so far ahead. But we cannot say that any of us has yet "arrived". We stand, in the Sixties, in the shadow of a wholly new challenge—the transition to the Age of Automation with all its dangers and potential rewards. We will need all the skills and courage of the mountain climber to pass safely through the hazards and climb to the high ground of assured income and rewarding jobs. Let us exercise our best judgment to pick out the correct route. We will rope ourselves tightly together for mutual protection and support. Beware of slippery surfaces and falling rock.

**THERE IS NO TURNING BACK!**

**Winning the 1955 Louisiana  
sugar strike was a family affair.**



**Cannery  
workers are UPWA  
members,  
too.**



