

The Rise and Demise of America's Postwar Consumer's Democracy among Du Pont Chemical Workers in Toledo, Ohio, 1945-1972

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This essay examines the relationship between the Du Pont chemical company's post-World War II employee and public relations program and the experiences of workers at the company's Toledo, Ohio plant. During the post-war period, Du Pont corporate managers blurred their public and industrial relations in an employee communications program that mounted a concerted effort to sell the company's blue-collar employees a vision of America as a consumer's democracy—a nation in which individuals united as a collective of consumer citizens in commitment to achieving national economic progress. Du Pont communications argued the American worker played a critical role in building the consumer's democracy as both assistant producer and primary consumer of American material abundance. In exchange for high wages, generous benefits, job stability, and access to consumer pleasures, the worker needed only to pledge loyalty to the company and to a political economy that placed power in the hands of the entity capable of most efficiently producing America's material abundance—corporate capital.

The idea of the working-class consumer citizen constituted a direct response to the cultural and political power of the prewar American labor movement, as business leaders drew upon and reoriented understandings of working-class solidarity and commitment to social progress, to link blue-collar working men to their families, their jobs, and the nation. In the 1960s Du Pont abandoned the rhetorical campaign to promote consumer's democracy in its plants—and the related material commitment to employment stability and industry leadership in wage and benefit compensation. Workers in Toledo recognized that this shift threatened both their status in the company's strategic vision and their material well-being, and reacted angrily and with a spirit of increased labor militancy. Yet the company's postwar campaign to chip away at labor citizenship had reaped rewards both in the Toledo plant and among workers throughout the Du Pont system. Workers lacked and were unable to establish an institutional base from which they could combat the changes in business strategy they so deeply opposed.¹

The case of Du Pont Toledo highlights the link between national and international economic, social, and political forces and the local concerns and individual stories of American workers during the postwar period. Thus, the nationwide public and labor relations campaign emanating from Du Pont's corporate headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware provides more than a backdrop or context in which to analyze the case study of Toledo's workers. The company's postwar employee relations program specifically and deliberately sought to "nationalize" its workforce to take them out of local working-class communities. In a town such as Toledo, with a powerful and militant postwar union presence carrying on traditions of community unionism, the company battled for the allegiance of its workers by demonstrating their connections to an even larger national community of worker consumer citizens and to the national project of economic progress. Indeed, wide-ranging developments in the world economy, American political culture, and business strategy established a framework within which individual workers in Toledo thought and acted during the postwar period. While Du Pont Toledo workers were not powerless to act, their actions were frequently circumscribed and influenced by developments beyond the plant walls and Toledo's city limits.

Du Pont and Toledo in the 1930s

Du Pont established its Toledo plant in 1934. The company designed the plant to produce automotive paint—specifically the company's new and increasingly popular Duco brand—to distribute to automobile manufacturers in the Great Lakes region. The plant relied largely on several hundred semi-skilled and unskilled workers to produce the product through continuous process manufacturing. Initially, as in the vast majority of Du Pont production facilities, workers at the Toledo plant did not affiliate with any union.²

Events occurring elsewhere in Toledo in 1934 made a profound impact not only on the way Du Pont management administered its local plant, but also on the status and consciousness of workers around the nation. In April 1934, after a year of organizing workers in Toledo auto parts plants and several unsuccessful attempts to gain union recognition from local employers, leaders of American Federation of Labor (AFL) Local 18384 called a strike against several of the city's auto parts manufacturers. The strike drew organizational support and militant participants from the communist-backed American Workers Party (AWP)—an organization of unemployed workers. By the middle of May, strikers focused their ire on Toledo's Auto-

Lite plant. Outside the plant gates, pickets affiliated with both the AFL and the AWP faced off with Auto-Lite's private security force protecting the replacement workers inside. On May 23 company police took the offensive with the pickets and a crowd of approximately 10,000 sympathizers who had gathered outside the plant. The resulting two-day "Battle of Toledo" saw citizens armed with bricks, rocks, and coal picked from a nearby rubble pile battling company police and the Ohio National Guard. Ultimately, the company agreed to mediation of the strike and reached a collective bargaining agreement with the AFL local.

The union victory at Toledo marked a turning point in the history of the local and national labor movement. The Battle of Toledo provided organizational lessons, leadership, and inspiration for the burgeoning industrial union movement sweeping through the Midwest's auto industry. The Auto-Lite strike constituted one of the first victories in a Depression-era industrial union movement that not only affected Toledo and the auto industry, but altered the national political and cultural landscape. It marked a pronounced step toward what Michael Denning has termed the "laboring of American culture" in the 1930s. Ultimately, the strike represented more than a successful battle to win collective bargaining rights. As evidenced by the thousands of unaffiliated strike supporters gathered outside the plant, the Auto-Lite strike helped to forge a new sense of labor citizenship centered on industrial unions that would command the loyalty of Toledo's workers, the loyalty of workers around the nation, and the ear of an increasingly sympathetic federal government.³

Du Pont commenced operations in its Toledo plant amid this flurry of union organizing and working-class militancy. Riding the crest of labor militancy rolling out of the Auto-Lite strike, a fledgling AFL chemical workers union immediately attempted to organize Du Pont Toledo in 1934. In response Du Pont embarked on a campaign to keep international unions out of its new plant. Du Pont management urged Toledo employees to affiliate with a Works Council administered by the company's Employee Representation Plan—a company union program established in 1919—in lieu of affiliating with an international union. Local plant management in Toledo received a guide for dealing with union drives prepared by executives in the Wilmington Service Department. The guide advised supervisory personnel not to be "coercive" in their dealings with employees, but to express opinions, advise workers in a "friendly way," and circulate "information on the true facts." The Service Department guide also supplied local management with the "true facts" in case they did not already know them, urging

supervisors to stress the independence of the Works Councils from outside influences, that they required members to pay no dues, that they allowed workers to exercise freedom of choice in deciding whether or not to join, and most importantly that they worked cooperatively with management to avoid costly work stoppages.⁴

Du Pont's Toledo employees eventually voted to form a Works Council called the Du Pont Employee Association in 1937. In 1940 Du Pont complied with an NLRB recommendation that it eliminate management's role in choosing the membership for the Works Councils, and the existing agencies became independent local unions. As a result, in late 1941 the Toledo plant superintendent recognized the Toledo Du Pont Employee Association as an independent, non-affiliated local union.⁵

The Postwar Consumer's Democracy at Du Pont

In the postwar period Du Pont corporate management continued its campaign for the allegiance of its workforce by building upon the industrial relations system established in the prewar period. Ideally, according to George Mitchell of the company's Industrial Relations Division, individual managers would maintain "direct, informal, and friendly contact" with individual employees, and if plants operated properly, employees would simply "not feel the need for representation."⁶ Recognizing the impossibility of achieving the ideal of one-to-one communication in a company as large and diverse as Du Pont, and that individualized employee relations ultimately limited the Wilmington office's ability to control industrial relations policy, management settled for a compromise solution of offering a single, cohesive company message, while limiting the ability of its workers to respond collectively. The company continued to promote independent local unions at the expense of internationals; however, rather than merely staging a reactive campaign to keep international unions out of its plants, the company fought an aggressive battle that sought to alter workers' conceptions of their communities, the American nation, and their role within the two. Thus, rather than providing barriers to union organization for working-class labor citizens, the company sought to change its employees' conceptions of citizenship. Ultimately, the company attempted to demonstrate to workers that they lived as part of a national collective of working consumer citizens who benefited from and served the expansion of large-scale corporate capitalism. By giving up efforts to institute shop-floor industrial democracy, and more importantly by abandoning efforts at instituting a national social democracy, workers would ensure themselves

a place in a consumer's democracy. To mount this campaign the company embarked on the novel approach of introducing public relations methods, and employing the expertise of its own Public Relations Department, to speak to its employees.

The man who deserves the most credit for bringing the concept of consumer's democracy to its full fruition in the postwar period was Harold Brayman. As director of the Public Relations Department from 1944 to 1965 Brayman developed and practiced what he called the "precinct system" of public relations to communicate the idea of the consumer's democracy to Du Pont employees. He argued that every business directly influenced a public opinion "precinct" composed of its own employees, suppliers, plant communities, stockholders, and customers. If each individual business canvassed its precinct and won its members over to a positive view of the company and the business system in general, then American business would ultimately win the favor of the American public. Brayman believed blue-collar employees to be the most important precinct sector of any industrial enterprise, because they had the most direct contact with the company, because they spoke to the largest secondary audience about the business, and because they often had the most negatively skewed perceptions of the business world. Brayman argued that the most effective way to convince the employee of the overall positive effect of big business was to appeal to his or her self interest or "to show him where he benefits and not speak in broad generalities about free enterprise."⁷ He believed a positive view of business "would be greatly to the individual interest of the employees themselves" because "it would assure the continuance of freedom of the American people and the steady increase of the American standard of living which sets us apart from the rest of the world."⁸ Thus, Du Pont's postwar public relations policy hinged on the company's employees, who needed to accept the idea of a superior and uniquely American standard of living and to link their own living standards to the welfare of Du Pont and corporate capitalism in general.

In 1945 the company introduced an employee magazine called *Better Living*, which served as the centerpiece of the company's overlapping public and employee relations campaign from its introduction through the mid-1960s. Aping the photojournalism format pioneered by *Life* magazine, *Better Living* consisted largely of photo essays depicting Du Pont employees at work, and most frequently, at leisure. The PR department aimed the publication at the company's blue-collar workforce and frequently used production operators, warehouse workers, and maintenance personnel in

its pictorials. While the editors concentrated on workers as both objects of study and target audience, they made no effort to convey the subjectivities of individual workers or workers as a group. Rather, the magazine circulated a tightly-controlled, singular message reflecting the vision of the company's PR Department. The editorial staff at *Better Living* repeatedly demonstrated to their readers that the postwar consumer's democracy boiled down to one fundamental truth—postwar American workers lived better, much better. They lived better than both their American working-class forebears and better than contemporary workers around the world. Over and over, the magazine developed illustrations, charts, and photo essays that explicitly and favorably compared the reader's material life with the lives of workers from other eras and nations.

An illustration that appeared on the back cover of the magazine's May 1947 issue exemplifies the editors' method of comparing the postwar working class to previous generations. The illustration depicted two families on either side of a gleaming Romanesque statue labeled "chemistry." The family on the left represented life from a time before industrial chemistry. Shrouded in dark shadow, a man strained under the weight of a load of firewood tied to his back, his eyes fixed on the ground below. In the background, his two children clung desperately to their frowning mother. Pointedly, none of the family members looked at any of the others in this picture. They appeared too saddled with fear and the literally back-breaking labor required to maintain subsistence to cultivate loving relationships with other family members. Before industrial chemistry, drudgery and material deprivation robbed the American family of its physical and emotional energy.

The family on the right, removed by space, time, and "chemistry" from the family on the left, enjoyed the benefits of a twentieth-century world shaped by industrial chemistry. They basked in the beauty of a bucolic hillside before a backdrop dominated by a working, but clean, industrial city. The woman held a picnic basket, not quite large enough to contain the food—undoubtedly wrapped in Du Pont cellophane—spilling from its mouth. The man held one of his children and arched backward so his gaze fell on the child. The two children in this picture, pointedly lacking the fear that characterized the faces of the children on the left, looked out of the picture toward the right and a future characterized by further industrial progress. Liberated from the constant care of frightened offspring, the woman gazed lovingly at her husband. Industrial chemistry had freed this family from the tradition of hard labor, self-denial, and fear that had shaped the lives of the working masses for centuries. Yet the city in the background

and icon of industrial chemistry lording over the family reminded the mid-century reader that this family, and their material prosperity, did not exist independent of business and industry. The picture showed an industrial worker on his day off, and the panorama stressed the man's integration into a wider economic system and underscored the material support that industry had lent to his respectable working-class manhood. Ultimately, his cooperative relationship with corporate capital liberated him to fulfill the crucial emotional obligations of marriage and fatherhood.⁹

A 1951 Better Living photo essay exemplified the method of comparing the material lives of American workers to those of other workers around the contemporary world. The essay featured a large photograph of a warehouse worker at the company's Cleveland works named Steve Czekalinski, his wife, and his two children surrounded by an enormous bounty of food—the equivalent of a year's supply for the average American family of four. The photograph loomed over the entire top half of the first page and stretched across most of the top of the second page, giving a sense of grand and overwhelming abundance. Five smaller duplicates of the original photo were spread across the bottom of the first two pages beneath the larger original, each with a portion of the food from the original photo pointedly obscured. Each of the smaller photographs represented another of the world's nations—the United Kingdom, Belgium, West Germany, Poland, and China. The missing food represented the portion that the average family of each of these nations could not afford, based upon average hourly wages and prices of commodities in these countries. The material abundance literally spread out before the American worker in this photograph distinguished him and his family from the rest of the world's workers. His standard of living made him an American.¹⁰

The postwar Public Relations program worked in concert with and helped to extend the company's industrial relations program developed in the 1930s. Specifically, central management continued to tolerate independent local unions, and even supported them when they were challenged by international unions, while concurrently circumscribing their power by refusing to recognize any alliance among these unions, and thus preventing them from bargaining collectively for Du Pont employees. The central Service Department (later the Industrial Relations Department) developed a systematic program to use wages and benefits to quell union organizing. In 1947 the department undertook a nationwide study of benefit programs and produced an extensive chart comparing Du Pont with other chemical companies, manufacturing sectors, and national averages. A Service De-

partment executive instructed local managers on how to use the information his department had gathered.

The outline merely gives Plant Managers facts and figures which should enable them as occasion requires to discuss the subject of pensions with the unions, point out to them the comparative generous features of the Company's Pension and Retirement Plan, and determine through such discussions the unions' reactions. Prior to this time there has been available no detailed information such as this, and it seems important that it be used to the fullest advantage.¹¹

The company adopted a policy of pointedly granting and loudly publicizing wage and benefit increases to local employees when independent unions found themselves threatened by raiders from national unions and before those national unions could make demands on local or corporate management.¹² As early as 1940, this strategy had paid dividends in Toledo as the president of the local Du Pont Employees Association sent a letter to plant managers praising them for "a very generous wage increase" and pledging to repay "the fine spirit of cooperation shown . . . by management" with "loyalty and service."¹³ Evidencing the continuing success of Du Pont's strategy, twenty-three years later a report from the international Research Department of the International Chemical Workers Union (ICWU) noted that the most important reason behind the union's failure to organize Du Pont workers was "the fact that the company's wage and fringe policies in many instances compare favorably with the unionized segment of the industry."¹⁴ Thus, from 1945 through the early 1960s Wilmington management orchestrated an industrial relations program that linked public relations with personnel management and the rhetoric of paternalism with the material reality of high wages, generous benefits, and job security.

The Decline of the Consumer's Democracy in Toledo

Du Pont corporate executives, public relations staff, and production workers ran headlong into the fundamental contradictions of the consumer's democracy in the 1960s. On the one hand the idea of the consumer's democracy promised workers stable, high-paying jobs. On the other hand, it promised those same workers the most affordable goods produced through the most efficient and inexpensive methods possible, which in turn meant a limitation of labor costs. During the 1940s and 1950s spiraling demand for such patented products as nylon and the company's dominant

position over the market for many of the commodities it produced allowed Du Pont public relations staff to ignore the contradiction. By the 1960s, as new competitors in the chemical industry and slack demand for Du Pont products squeezed profit margins, company management eschewed their postwar strategy of long-term growth and embarked on a new strategy of maintaining short term-profitability. That new strategy emphasized limiting labor costs rather than cultivating a stable internal labor market. The company's public relations professionals responded to that new strategy by abandoning their campaign to speak to Du Pont's blue-collar employees as a "public."

The content and tone of *Better Living* changed along with the company's business strategy and its larger approach to public relations. Amid a loss of production jobs that began in the late 1950s and spiked during the 1960s, the company became much less dependent on the good will of the industrial workforce. In addition, the promise of material abundance for the industrial working class rang hollow as automation and capital mobility took their toll on Du Pont's production workforce. By 1964 the editors offered far fewer depictions of leisure and consumption and shifted the magazine's focus to the need to streamline production and weed out obsolete processes in order to maintain a strong position within an increasingly competitive chemicals market. Furthermore, by the mid-1960s, new social movements from outside the company, such as the Civil Rights Movement and a new generation of consumer activism, emerged to pose challenges that overshadowed the labor movement's fading vision of social democracy. As a result, by the mid-1960s the editors began to speak increasingly to a wider public relations audience outside the plant, particularly to community institutions and leaders such as universities, teachers, clergy, and journalists. The magazine highlighted what it termed the company's "social responsibility," discussing efforts to combat problems like urban poverty and pollution. These more "socially responsible" articles first clashed with, then began to eclipse, discussions of American material abundance and perpetual economic growth. By the late 1960s, the publication division produced a disjointed and ineffective employee magazine lacking a strong message or a real target audience, and in 1972 the company discontinued its publication.

Workers at Toledo and those in other Du Pont plants had never possessed the ability to bargain over wages and benefits. The company developed a pattern of bargaining—or rather a thinly disguised yet legal refusal to bargain—that essentially rendered irrelevant independent local unions like Toledo's. Members of the corporate staff in the Wilmington

office repeatedly informed Du Pont workers that they could only bargain with local plant management, while simultaneously setting all wage, benefit, and employment policies from the central office. As a result, union officials talked exclusively with local plant managers, while never gaining an audience with members of the central Service and Industrial Relations Departments who actually set policy. Tellingly, in 1964 the central Public Relations Department issued a typewritten document, labeled "Suggested News Release," for local plant managers to send to "local newspapers." The release detailed company-wide improvements in the retirement plan, but was worded so that the improvements it discussed would appear to have been the result of decisions made by local management. The document even left two blank spaces in which the local plant manager could place his or her own name and the name of the local plant respectively, so that he or she would not need to alter the remainder of the news release. Ultimately, this centrally administered change in corporate retirement policy would have been spun as a *local* initiative for local news media by any manager following the PR office's suggested formula.¹⁵

While the company had maintained a position of leadership in employee compensation, few Toledo workers complained about their inability to bargain with the Wilmington staff who really set compensation rates and built benefit programs; however, in the 1960s, Toledo employees began to loudly express a growing sense of frustration as they saw their symbolic importance within the company's hierarchy and strategic vision slipping. Leaders of the Toledo Employee Association began communicating with employees from other Du Pont plants in the mid-1960s about these changes. In one of these communications in 1966, a worker from another company plant noted for Toledo workers that the company had shifted from its traditional policy of "paternalism to a 'don't give a damn attitude' toward unions and local plant employees." The company's new "take our answers and like it attitude" had alienated workers in plants throughout the country.¹⁶ Toledo Employee Association president Vic Teall noted this change, and lamented not only workers' loss of status in the company's vision, but also the consequent material cost for Toledo employees. In a 1969 letter to members of the Employee Association, Teall argued that bargaining on a local level had "always been somewhat of a joke. But it [was] not funny. The Company [was] the one that [was] doing the laughing." Due to Wilmington's changing strategic vision, management no longer sought to pacify their workforce through high wages and benefits. "At one time we were way ahead of everyone else and the need to bargain on these benefits was not great. But now (as Management tells us) we are just average. Now we

need an effective voice on these Plans Anymore all they are doing is giving us the very least we will accept."¹⁷ Teall argued that although Du Pont had once lived up to its postwar commitment to provide for its workers' material needs, management no longer met its commitment voluntarily.

Teall's letter evidenced a new spirit of labor militancy at Du Pont Toledo, born of the company's broken promise to its workers. Teall, along with Toledo production employee William C. Rosenberry, led a militant faction of employees that took control of the local Employee Association in the late 1960s. After 1967, the union took a more confrontational stance toward local and corporate management. Local leaders first sought to forge institutional links with employees at other Du Pont plants, and after achieving little success in that endeavor, affiliated with the International Chemical Workers Union (ICWU)—an AFL-CIO union. Yet despite these efforts Toledo workers never established an institutional base from which they could bargain with local or corporate managers. While Toledo's Du Pont workers attempted to use the language of mutual loyalty pervading the idea of the consumer's democracy to leverage the company, the institutional weakness that language had helped forge in the 1940s and 1950s left workers with little recourse as the company chose to opt out of the bargain.

Toledo union members first sought to strengthen their employee association by aligning with the Federation of Independent Unions—a loose affiliation of Du Pont independent locals from plants around the Midwest and Northeast. Leaders from several Du Pont New Jersey and Delaware locals first convened the Federation of Independent Unions in 1945. From that date through the late 1960s the federation claimed from twelve to twenty-two affiliated locals.¹⁸ Federation leaders conceived of the organization as both a venue for disparate locals to share information and as a unified voice for Du Pont's independent unions. Beginning in 1947, federation leadership repeatedly requested that company presidents allow their organization to engage in company-wide collective bargaining over wages and benefits with the Wilmington office. Federation members became increasingly frustrated by the mid-1950s as the Wilmington office continually refused to comply with written requests for a Wilmington labor summit.¹⁹ When the Toledo Employee Association joined the federation in 1967, the organization's leaders still sought unsuccessfully to gain recognition as a company-wide collective bargaining agent. Federation leadership continued to tilt at the windmill of the corporate office's bargaining strategy, making repeated calls to member unions to push for "unification" of union membership throughout the Du Pont system in order "to avoid the farce we face in bargaining."²⁰

The Toledo delegation helped to transform the federation into a more tightly unified and aggressive labor organization. In 1968 and 1969 the federation held its annual convention in Wilmington where its members picketed company headquarters to demand that the company bargain collectively through the federation.²¹ In 1969 the federation pushed its affiliated locals to standardize their names. In March of that year Toledo employees voted to change their union's name from the Du Pont Employee Association of Toledo to Local 16 of the Federation of Independent Unions-Du Pont System over resistance from local management. In the bitter war of words leading up to the vote, local union leaders stated local managers wanted "a Company dominated union" because "a dominated union cannot be an effective representative of its Membership." Ultimately, union leaders argued, the name change constituted a "show of unity and progress."²² Later that year, during the federation convention, members of the Toledo local sought to demonstrate solidarity with other Du Pont locals and to draw attention to the company's unfair labor practices by staging an "informational" picket outside the Toledo plant.²³

In 1970 Toledo local president Vic Teall successfully ran for the office of federation president. Backed by federation delegates from Du Pont plants in Cleveland and East Chicago, Teall and the Toledo delegation pushed the federation to adopt a more confrontational stance toward Wilmington management. Eventually, Toledo employees became so frustrated with the federation's ineffective tactics that they sought to dissolve it, and bring its membership into an international union en masse.

The exodus from the federation occurred at the organization's annual convention in 1971. The day before the convention, Frank Ludwig and Bill Rosenberry of the Toledo local traveled with delegates from Cleveland and East Chicago to the Du Pont corporate offices in Wilmington. The federation delegates entered the corporate office and demanded to see company president C. B. McCoy to discuss the company's labor policies. After four hours of bickering between the union men and office staff, McCoy agreed to speak with the men as company employees, but not as union representatives. According to Rosenberry's report on the incident, "Toledo duPont employees finally had a voice at Wilmington" and "by direct action, accomplished more . . . than any Union, individually, or the Federation had before."²⁴

The following day, Rosenberry took the floor at the federation convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. He reported on his successful effort

to gain an audience with the company's president. Then he read a long statement attesting to his local's loyal service to the federation since joining in 1967 before blasting the federation for its ineffectuality and weakness. He stated that the federation had sought to achieve unity among Du Pont employees, but never planned to capitalize on that sought-after unity. "Federation philosophy," he argued, "is directed at convincing DuPont that the Federation is representative of something, assuming DuPont will then voluntarily offer more in wages and benefits." Indeed this philosophy played into managements hands, constructing some unity, only to see it dissipated when the company granted "minor increases" in wages and benefits. Rosenberry concluded that "DuPont has *repeatedly* indicated that they could care less about the Federation's so-called unity. DuPont will *never* willingly bargain nationally. DuPont must be forced to bargain nationally." Because the federation never sought to use unity as real bargaining leverage, it would never serve as a true representative of Du Pont employees, and as a result, "Toledo is not more effective in bargaining for DuPont employees as a result of our Federation affiliation." Rosenberry then moved to dissolve the federation. Backed by the Cleveland and East Chicago delegations, the measure came to a vote. Although the vote failed, the Toledo and East Chicago delegations organized a walk-out that included not only rank-and-file delegates from the convention floor, but most of the federation's executive board, including president Vic Teall of Toledo.²⁵ Following their protest at the convention, Toledo's union leaders recommended to local union members that they vote to disaffiliate from the federation, a recommendation they followed.²⁶

The Toledo delegates and their allies left the federation in hopes of sparking an international union organizing drive within the Du Pont system. In fact, according to other federation delegates at the convention, the Toledo faction had contacted international chemical unions—including the ICWU—in advance, and representatives of those unions met with federation members following the walkout.²⁷ The ICWU was the largest and most powerful union of American chemical workers in 1971, and although they had made few inroads into organizing Du Pont plants, ICWU officials saw Du Pont as ripe for organization. In response to the Toledo employees' overtures and the collapse of the federation, ICWU organizers created an official program for unionizing Du Pont employees. The ICWU program asserted that as the company turned toward a strategy of scrutinizing individual plants for profit and productivity, workers had become frustrated with the "lack of a voice in the decision-making process, the erosion of the relative position of DuPont plants versus others in the community, and

the arrogance of the company concerning their Plans and Practices.” The international circulated a four-part plan to attract Toledo employees and other disaffected local union members into the ICWU fold. The plan called for the absorption of independent local unions, a campaign to organize non-union workers throughout the Du Pont system, technical assistance for ICWU locals in the form of research, education, and public relations, and the creation of a special Du Pont Council within the ICWU that would allow locals within the company to share information and resources and to develop company-wide collective bargaining mechanisms.²⁸ In October 1971 members of Du Pont independent locals received a letter from ICWU president Thomas Boyle announcing the organizing program. Members of the Toledo local immediately went to work on the Du Pont Organizing Council, and in 1972 Du Pont employees voted to become Local 901 of the ICWU.²⁹

Given their access to militant organized workers searching for an organizational title following their disaffiliation from the federation, the ICWU anticipated rapid success in organizing Du Pont; however, the flood of Du Pont employees into the ICWU never materialized. Thirty years of the rhetoric of consumer’s democracy continued to bear fruit for Du Pont, even after executives had begun to withdraw the actual material benefits of that labor regime. A team of young law students studying Du Pont corporate culture in the 1970s during the period of the ICWU’s organizing campaign uncovered a general attitude of passive opposition to international unions among the company’s blue-collar employees. Terming the company “Uncle Dupie,” blue-collar workers tended to “expect the company to take care of them” and had even come to “believe the company line that there [was] no need for a union because the company [was] so good to its workers.”³⁰ Pro-union militancy among the company’s blue-collar employees proved to be the exception rather than the rule. For example, in late 1971, workers at the company’s East Chicago plant voted against affiliating with the ICWU even though their local leaders had helped orchestrate the exodus from the federation earlier that year. Ken Tucker, the president of the East Chicago local pushing for a more powerful union, recalled the vote against affiliating with the ICWU and noted, “Du Pont has traditionally been a very paternalistic company. One of the problems we faced, and other Du Pont unions faced, was that for years Du Pont did take care of its employees.” Tucker noted particular difficulty in convincing the many employees who had hired in at Du Pont before 1960 of their need for union representation. “They were there when Du Pont was the best . . . For them Du Pont can do no wrong.” Ultimately Tucker concluded that his own desire for more

effective union representation simply didn't reflect the attitude of the average rank and file member of the organization he led. Their opinion of labor relations at Du Pont could still be summed up in the question "Why do I need a union?"³¹

Because Du Pont employees expressed little initial interest in the ICWU and because the international lacked the financial resources for a sustained, widespread organizing campaign, the union abandoned its efforts to organize Du Pont employees after only a single year. The ICWU never claimed more than seven Du Pont locals during the 1970s. The union's Du Pont Council simply acted as a forum for local delegates to share information. By the mid 1970s most of this information consisted of complaints about the international's reluctance and frequent outright refusal to attempt to organize more Du Pont locals. As a result, the Toledo employees, although now affiliated with an international union, found themselves right back where they had started—in a weak, isolated, local labor organization unable to influence a powerful and intentionally unresponsive corporate hierarchy.³²

By the 1970s employees at Du Pont Toledo could decisively conclude that "the company's 'concern' and 'appreciation'" for them—which had once been evidenced both in its public relations language and its wage and benefit structures—were "a dead and buried sentiment."³³ Toledo's Du Pont workers recognized and lamented the decline in the pecuniary elements of the consumer's democracy tied to this change in "attitude," particularly the company's slide from the upper echelon of pay and benefit scales among industrial producers. In fact, Toledo employees steeped their arguments about declining wages in the language and ideology of the consumer's democracy developed in *Better Living* during the postwar period. In 1973 a self-described "Disgruntled Housewife" wrote a letter to the manager of the Toledo plant arguing for a larger wage increase than the one offered to her husband and his fellow employees by the manager. Having internalized the breadwinner and family ideals central to Du Pont's postwar vision, she felt she had "a right of sorts" as the wife of a Du Pont worker, to comment on the company's wage scales. She allowed that she had "no statistics to offer to represent [her] point of view" but mobilizing her power and sovereignty as a consumer, she could argue from the "everyday knowledge of a housewife who shops at the grocery store, buys clothes for the kids, and tries to make ends meet with the weekly budget." She drew from a notion of citizenship defined by a standard of living to demand more for her husband, stating flatly that offering employees the same wage

increase “as last year, when the price of living is so much more at this time just doesn’t seem at all fair.” Finally she lamented the passing of the idea of perpetual material progress for the blue-collar family that constituted the heart of “better living” and the consumer’s democracy:

I feel we are the middleman being squashed between retailer and employer. I realize everyone has a budget to live with and I realize we’ll never have all the luxuries of life, nor do we want that. We just want a comfortable life for ourselves and our children, maybe moving ahead a little at a time, at worst staying the same, but never, never moving backwards! ³⁴

Her complaints represented a call for the company to continue to fulfill the postwar promise Du Pont personnel and public relations professionals had made to employees. In using the plural pronoun “we” in her petition she spoke not as a member of a local working-class community nor even as a member of a plant community; rather, she petitioned for her immediate family, a family linked by a wage and by mutual loyalty to the company and its fading vision of collective economic progress.

Conclusion

Just as *Better Living* placed postwar Du Pont employees within a global historical context, the story of Du Pont’s Toledo workers told here is inextricably linked to developments stretching beyond the temporal and spatial confines of postwar Toledo. The simultaneous downfalls of better living and *Better Living* for Du Pont workers stemmed from the collapse of what Alan Wolfe has called postwar America’s “growth coalition.” Wolfe argues that a broad political coalition brought together both capital and social democrats around the idea of economic growth in the immediate postwar period. Rather than squaring off in an ideological battle, these groups determined that capitalists as well as the poor, minority, working and middle-class populace benefited from economic growth. Economic growth would allow capital to reap large profits, while offering the voting public benefits in the form of generous social services and material abundance.³⁵ *Better Living* had served as the voice of growth politics at Du Pont, supposedly uniting workers, management, and stockholders around a common dream of profits and abundance. But by the 1960s, both at Du Pont and in the wider political arena, the contradictions within growth politics and the promise of a consumer’s democracy, as well as within the majority political coalition that had tolerated this

particular version of corporate liberalism, had surfaced.³⁶ The Civil Rights Movement and the rising awareness of the urban crisis pointed out that the supposedly all-encompassing nature of economic growth had failed to benefit poor, inner-city, largely African-American citizens. In addition, a new generation of consumer activists called for “corporate responsibility.” They noted that contrary to capital’s claim that growth offered only positive fallout in the form of material rewards, many of the indirect consequences of corporate power and profits—such as pollution—harmed American citizens.³⁷ In the postwar period business public relations and Du Pont public relations in particular had staked a claim for big business in general and the chemical industry in particular as the only institutions that could provide the “more” and “bigger” that constituted the “better” way of life for Americans. Therefore, when environmental groups attacked big business and the chemical industry by drawing a correlation between greater material production and environmental degradation, they attacked not only the industry’s waste management practices, but the viability of the cycle of ever increasing production and consumption at the center of the company’s postwar world view.

Du Pont’s shift in strategy from long-range growth to short-term profit also prefigured a broader transition from innovative to adaptive investment that William Lazonick argues characterized American business practice by the 1980s. The most common strategic model for large American business in the immediate postwar period sought gradual capital growth rooted in product development and innovation, establishment of strong market shares, expansion of physical plant, and cultivation of a stable labor force. Long-term growth strategies led corporate managers to practice *innovative* investment. While innovative investment requires large sums of money to fund basic research and long developmental periods, the strategy ultimately *creates* value as it develops and produces new goods and services at affordable prices. Du Pont in particular could fund such projects due to a sizable income generated by its stockholdings in General Motors and its strong market shares in chemical products. Yet beginning in the 1960s, due to increased competition and higher production costs, large American manufacturing enterprises, including large chemical firms like Du Pont, became much more dependent on investment banking and individual investors for capital. As a result, corporate accountants needed to demonstrate strong quarterly earnings to maintain shareholder equity and to keep themselves atop brokerage “buy lists” to attract new investment. In addition, rather than seeking to *create* value, investors—particularly the increasingly powerful investment brokers—seek to *extract* it in the form of regular dividends and annuities for their clients. As a result, rather than

innovative investment, responsive corporate managers will practice *adaptive* investment targeted mainly at minimizing the production costs of well-established goods and services. In this new equation, upper management began to think of labor less as an ally and a resource to cultivate for long-term growth in productive capacity but as an immediate cost to minimize or even eliminate in the interest of short-term efficiency and profitability. Thus, the causes and consequences of Du Pont's strategic shift in the 1960s anticipated the problems and debates over downsizing and unsound accounting practices that have dominated professional and popular discussions of American enterprise from the 1980s through the present.³⁸

Finally, the story of Du Pont Toledo offers insight into the decline of the American labor movement, particularly indicating why the collapse of the postwar consumer's democracy amid American economic stagnation of the 1970s did not give rise to working-class militancy similar to the decline of welfare capitalism at the dawn of the Depression.³⁹ Authors who discuss prewar welfare capitalists note that they incorporated workers into a plant culture and often provided collective venues, such as baseball and bowling leagues, citizenship classes, and even tightly controlled plant communities, where employees formed close associations with fellow workers and their families. In so doing welfare capitalists helped workers to forge a collective identity that ultimately spurred a degree of independence from and even opposition to the original benefactor.⁴⁰ Ironically, while Du Pont's public relations painted the consumer's democracy in broad strokes, placing workers within a national capital/worker/consumer collective, the actual process of the company's postwar employee relations policies narrowed the possibilities for worker collectivity. In fact, the consumer's democracy campaign pointedly sought to disconnect workers from local working-class communities like Toledo's and to link them through the cash nexus in the form of high wages, benefits, and material prosperity to an imagined national community of worker consumers. Despite the watchful eye of management, prewar welfare capitalism afforded workers the opportunity to develop personal bonds and a class identity through direct contact with one another in real physical spaces. Du Pont's postwar consumer's democracy, experienced outside the workplace in detached homes with one's own nuclear family, provided no such collective venue. When Du Pont and other American companies reneged on their promises to provide the material underpinnings for the consumer's democracy in the 1960s, workers had no institutional base from which to fight these changes. Indeed, the tale of Du Pont Toledo in the 1960s, tells the story of a group of workers, belatedly, desperately and ultimately unsuccessfully seeking to establish collective institutional power.

NOTES

1. For the definitive institutional history of Du Pont chemical and the company's critical role in developing the modern corporation, see Alfred D. Chandler and Stephen Salsbury, *Pierre S. du Pont and the Making of the Modern Corporation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971). See also Chandler's *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of Industrial Enterprise* (Boston: MIT Press, 1962). For an excellent discussion of Du Pont's pre-World War II public relations, see William L. Bird, *Better Living: Advertising, Media, and the New Vocabulary of Business Leadership, 1935-1953* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999). For a more complete discussion of Du Pont's postwar employee and public relations, see Steven T. Sheehan, "The Rise and Fall of the Consumer's Democracy: Class, Consumption, Manhood, and Citizenship in American Public Relations and Popular Culture, 1945-1972" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2003), especially chapters 2 and 5.

2. For the acquisition of the Toledo plant see "Du Pont Company Plants--Reference File" at Hagley Library, Wilmington, Delaware. For the development and market share of Duco finishes see David Hounshell and John K. Smith, *Science and Corporate Strategy: Du Pont R & D, 1902-1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 138-46. In 1934 the Du Pont Company owned a controlling interest in General Motors stock and placed many past and current members of its own leadership hierarchy on GM's Executive Committee. Not coincidentally, GM was an early, substantial, and loyal client for the Duco brand.

3. For the Auto-Lite strike see Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Workers, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 219-29 and Philip A. Korth and Margaret R. Beegle, *I Remember Like Today: The Auto-Lite Strike of 1934* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1988). Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso Press, 1997).

4. Guide in E. I. du Pont de Nemours, Willis F. Harrington papers, Accession 1813, Box 18, "Unions (1934)" Folder. Hereafter cited as WFH Papers, Box #, Folder name. All Du Pont collections cited in this paper are located in the Hagley Library, Soda House in Wilmington, Delaware. See Julius Rezler, "Labor Organization at Du Pont: A Study in Independent Local Unionism," *Labor History* 4 (No. 2, 1963): 178-83 for the history of Du Pont company unions.

5. For the formation of the Toledo local see International Chemical Workers Union, Local 901 Records, MSS-085, Ward M. Cannady Center, University of Toledo Library, Box 1, Folder 1 letter from CV Chew to TF Burns dated 7/6/37 and Folder 2 Plant Memorandum dated 12/18/41 (hereafter cited "ICWU Records, Box #, Folder #"). See also Rezler, "Labor Organization at Du Pont," 178-83 for the 1940 NLRB mandate.

6. Mitchell quoted in Rezler, "Labor Organization at Du Pont," 187.

7. For the precinct system in general see Harold Brayman, "The Only Way," *Public Relations Journal* 5 (July 1949): 6-7 and Brayman, text of speech before the Public Relations Society of America; "Du Pont Public Relations Department," (1958), located in Hagley Library. For appealing to the public's self interest see Brayman, "The Only Way," and untitled clipping from 7/9/49 *Editor and Publisher* in E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Co, Public Affairs Department collection, Acc. 1410, Box 18. Collection cited hereafter as DP Public Affairs, Box #, Folder # (if any).

8. Brayman, "The Only Way," 5.

9. *Better Living* 1 (May 1947): back cover. See also Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 185-218 for the new importance of affectionate fatherhood and the male role model during the postwar period. Notably Griswold

finds that many working-class fathers contended with financial and time constraints before 1940, while fewer did so after the war.

10. "Why We Eat Better," *Better Living* 5 (November/December 1951): 2-8.

11. FD Evans, Service Department Memorandum, 24 September 1947 in E. I. du Pont de Nemours, Crawford H. Greenewalt Business Papers, Accession 1814, Box 6, hereafter cited CHG papers, Box #, folder # (if any).

12. See memorandum dated 2 May 1946 in Walter S. Carpenter Papers, Accession 500 Series II, Part 2, Box 834, "Service Department" folder, hereafter cited WSC Papers, Box #, folder name.

13. Letter from CV Nichter to Toledo plant management, 22 November 1940 in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 2.

14. "ICWU Company Report: E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Company," March 1963 in UAW President's Collection, Walter P. Reuther, Box 137, Folder 10, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.

15. "Suggested News Release," 30 December 1964 in CHG Business Papers, Box 10.

16. ICWU Records, Box 1 Folder 19, Federation of Independent Unions, Report to Member Unions, 8 April 1966.

17. Letter from Vic Teall to Fellow Union Member, 18 March 1969, in ICWU Records, Box 1 Folder 34. Emphasis in original.

18. Service Department Memorandum, 19 June 1953 in CHG Business Papers, Box 9, "Employee Relations—Federation of Independent Unions."

19. See Letter from Charles Hess to Walter S. Carpenter, 25 August 1947 (forwarded to Crawford H. Greenewalt) for the first such request as well as numerous similar letters from subsequent dates in CHG Business Papers, Box 9, "Employee Relations—Federation of Independent Unions" Folder.

20. Federation of Independent Unions, *Report to Member Unions*, 17 March 1967 in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 19.

21. See Federation of Independent Unions, *Federation Independent*, July 1965, June 1968, and March 1969, in ICWU Records, Box 5, Folder 38.

22. Letter from Vic Teall to Fellow Union Member, 18 March 1969, in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 34.

23. See photograph in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 34.

24. Quotation from text of speech delivered by Toledo delegation at Federation of Independent Unions—Du Pont System Convention on 15 May 1971 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 23.

25. *Ibid.*, (italics in original). See also letters from William C. Rosenberry, Secretary to Union Brothers of Local 16, 17 May 1971 and 28 May 1971 in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 23.

26. See "Special Notice," 20 May 1971 and letter to "Fellow Union Member," 28 May 1971 in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 23.

27. See E. A. Filliben, "Reflections on the 42nd Convention of the Federation of Independent Unions, Du Pont System," May 1971 in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 42.

28. "ICWU DuPont Program—1971," in ICWU Records, Box 6, Folder 19.

29. Letter from Thomas E. Boyle to Members of Du Pont Independent Unions, 1 October 1971, ICWU Records, Box 6, Folder 23.

30. James Phelan and Robert Pozen, *The Company State: Ralph Nader's Study Group Report on Du Pont in Delaware* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), 79.

31. Ken Tucker, "It Got My Back Up," in *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working-Class Organizers*, ed. Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 226

and 232.

32. See "Minutes of the DuPont Conference," Friday April 29, 1977 in ICWU Records, Box 9, Folder 25.

33. ICWU Local 901, flyer headed "Members Only," 16 October 1972, in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 33.

34. Letter from "A Disgruntled Housewife," 14 March 1973, in ICWU Records, Box 1, Folder 33.

35. Alan Wolfe, *America's Impasse: The Rise and Fall of the Politics of Growth* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

36. Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) has recently attacked Wolfe for ignoring the ideological debates within the larger growth regime. He focuses on the contradictions of growth politics. As I have demonstrated, contrary to Collins's argument these contradictions only became manifest in the 1960s. Thus, contrary to Collins's claim, the concept of growth as part of the larger idea of the consumer's democracy did provide a common goal and point toward a cooperative relationship between capital and working-class citizen consumers in the early postwar period.

37. See Jerry Harrington, "The Midwest Agricultural Chemical Association: A Regional Study of an Industry on the Defensive," *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring, 1996): 415-37 for attacks on the manufacture and use of chemical pesticides within the context of growth politics. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, an exposé of the harmful effects of pesticide use, first appeared in 1962 and was followed the next year by a CBS news special of the same name based roughly on the book's findings. *Silent Spring* in both its written and televisual formats marked the beginning of widespread criticism of the fallout of large-scale industrial chemistry; see Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962). See also, Ralph Lutts, "Chemical Fallout: Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Radioactive Fallout, and the Environmental Movement," *Environmental Review* 9 (1985): 210-25.

38. This paragraph owes much to William Lazonick, "Creating and Extracting Value: Corporate Investment Behavior and American Economic Performance," in *Understanding American Economic Decline*, ed. Michael Bernstein and David Adler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 79-113, which offers an outstanding analysis of the transition from long-term growth to short-term profitability. I am particularly indebted to it for the concepts of innovative versus adaptive investment and value creation versus value extraction. For examples of the voluminous literature on the causes and consequences of a short-term business strategy see, Michael T. Jacobs, *Short Term America: The Causes and Cures of our Business Myopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1991); Michael E. Porter, *Capital Choices: Changing the Way American Invests in Industry* (New York: Council on Competitiveness, 1992); Milton Lauenstein, "The Strategic Side of Dividends," *Journal of Business Strategy* 3 (Fall, 1982): 80-83; Eric Johnson and Elliott Kushell, "Company Profitability and Health: A Long Term Perspective," *Advanced Management Journal* 5 (Winter, 1985): 14-16. For a well-known and widely read advocacy of the strategy see Robert M. Tomasko, *Downsizing: Reshaping the Corporation for the Future* (New York: AMACOM, 1987). A great deal of the fixation on the Japanese business model in the 1980s focused on its long-term vision. For example see, Robert Hayes and William Abernathy, "Managing Our Way to Economic Decline," *Harvard Business Review* 58 (July/August, 1980): 66-77; "Eastern and Western Management: Different Worlds," *Training and Development Journal* 36 (August, 1982): 11-12 and Charles Yang, "Demystifying Japanese Management Practices," *Harvard Business Review* 62 (Nov./Dec., 1984): 172+-. Demonstrating the continued salience of the debate over short-term versus long-term growth strategies, the CBS television news magazine *60 Minutes* recently broadcast a piece de-

tailoring the relationship between generous human resource practices and long-term growth strategy at the software design firm SAS, original air date 20 April 2003. Tellingly the editors presented the policies as “innovative,” while ignoring the 100-year history of corporate welfare.

39. See Stephen Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921* (Albany, New York: 1981); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott-Johnson, 1890-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988); and Mary Wingerd, “Rethinking Paternalism: Power and Parochialism in a Southern Mill Village,” *Journal of American History* 83 (December, 1996): 872-902 for the link between working-class organizing and the breach of welfare capitalist promises.

40. For examples of the collective venues of welfare capitalism see discussions of corporate baseball leagues in Douglas Reynolds, “Hardball Paternalism, Hardball Politics,” *Labor’s Heritage* 3 (April, 1991): 25-41; bowling leagues in Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, “Industrial Recreation, the Second World War, and the Revival of Welfare Capitalism, 1934-1960,” *Business History Review* 60 (Summer, 1986): 232-57; citizenship classes in David Nye, *Image Worlds: Corporate Identities at General Electric, 1890-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); tightly-knit plant communities in Wingerd “Rethinking Paternalism,” and Alessandro Portelli, “Patterns of Paternalism in Harlan County,” *Appalachian Journal* 18 (Winter 1990): 140-54.

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