



COMMUNIQUE

PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS

HOW THEY CAME TO REPRESENT PRIVATE SECTOR GROUPS

By Evelyn Rodriguez and Ryan Bruckenthal

While the nature of labor unions has remained the same throughout time, the structure of them certainly has changed. Take for example the Communications Workers of America. CWA was founded in 1938 at meetings in Chicago and New Orleans. First known as the National Federation of Telephone Workers, the union became the Communications Workers of America in 1947. CWA got its start in the telephone industry, but today represents workers in all areas of communications, as well as in health care and public service, customer service and many other fields.

As with most large international labor organizations (CWA now represents 700,000 workers in both the private and public sectors), CWA's base of membership has continued to expand. As an increasing number of smaller, independent locals and unaffiliated groups saw the strength of a powerhouse like CWA, they wanted to join forces and have the umbrella of the international over them.

A quick look back at history reveals how these transitions have come about, and how CWA Local 1180 today has come to represent nearly a dozen, small private sector groups — all of which sought out 1180 as a means of obtaining a stronger voice.

"Smaller groups do better at the bargaining table when they walk side by side with larger unions that already have a presence in the labor movement and a reputation for getting members what they need and deserve," said Local 1180 President Arthur Cheliotis.

As Cheliotis explained in a previous issue of the Communique, Local 1180 started off as an independent union known as the Municipal Managers Society. After public sector workers won the right to organize in the 1960s, members of the Municipal Managers voted to join the national CWA, and Local 1180 was born in 1965.

Delving back even further in time, the origins of CWA have been around since 1938 when the National Federation of Telephone Workers was formed, which then regrouped as the Communications Workers of America in 1947. CWA joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a national federation of industrial unions including the United Auto Workers, Steelworkers, and United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers. Although these unions initially organized in the 1930s and 40s along industrial lines, changes in the economy in the upcoming decades would change this, ultimately leading to Local 1180 joining CWA.

Whereas the American economy, especially in the Northeast and Midwest of the U.S., was predominantly based on the production and distribution of tangible goods in the first half of the 20th century, this began to change as production was moved to find cheaper sources of labor. Production was shifted first to the southern U.S. where union density, and therefore wages, was lower, and eventually was outsourced out of the country. Unions fought to keep good-paying jobs in their original locations for their members, but ultimately many huge companies moved, beginning the process of deindustrialization of what was formerly our country's center of industrial production. Rather than admit defeat, however, unions began to strategize how to keep fighting for the rights of working Americans.

As the economy changed, so too did the composition of unions. As the membership of some industrial unions began to decline, new industries began to grow, and new types of workers began to organize. No matter what industry or workplace someone works in, the desire to have a voice and protection on the job is the same. Rather than having to start from scratch like the earlier industrial unions did in the 1930s, workers in these newer industries realized they could use the existing union infrastructure to organize their own workplaces. Looking today at the membership composition of these once exclusively-industrial unions demonstrates the diversity of industries that organized in the past few decades — the UAW represents museum curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Steelworkers represent physicians at hospitals in Minnesota, and the United Electrical Workers represents graduate students in Iowa. In fact, CWA, in addition to still representing workers in the telecommunications industry, also has members in the public sector, news media, the airline industry, education, and healthcare.

The Municipal Managers Society affiliated with CWA in the 1960s, but that didn't stop changes in the economy and the labor movement. Whereas Local 1180 started out representing only workers from a specific industry, this too would change. Around the turn of the millennium, workers from Planned Parenthood reached out to Local 1180 expressing the desire to organize a union. Although they didn't work for the City of New York and their jobs were relatively different from that of the titles already in the union, 1180 moved forward and secured their first contract. That was the start of a new era in Local 1180 whereby today Local 1180 represents 10 different nonprofits, the most recent of which to be organized was the Open Society Foundations (OSF).

The lives of 209 Manhattan workers at OSF changed on July 21 when the group committed to justice, freedom and the rights for all became the largest foundation to organize within and lobby for cultural workplace change. The positive election outcome resulted from OSF members electing to maximize their strength for internal change. This historic vote for representation by Local 1180 means staff members can now collectively negotiate job security, educational opportunities, wages, promotions, healthcare and reap the benefits of having big brother's should to guide them through. "These individuals will now have a seat at the table to bargain with management and have a greater say in organizational decisions that affect their jobs and lives," Cheliotis said in response to the victorious event. "We look forward to having a collaborative relationship with OSF."

OSF staff chose CWA 1180 as their union because of the union's reputation for being democratically run. In addition to offices in New York and Baltimore, the Open Society Foundations has a third office in the U.S. and extended services in locations throughout the world, in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Middle East and Latin America. OSF Program Officer Karina Bentacourt said, "We want to pave the way and uplift this effort in solidarity with other workers organizing across the US and the world." They hope other foundations such as the Rockefeller and Ford foundations will be inspired and organize, too.

Organized labor combined with organized staff can further OSF's mission statement to work to build vibrant and tolerant societies whose governments are accountable and open to the participation of all people. Open Society Foundations joins other non-profits represented by Local 1180, including ASPCA, Books and Rattles, Democracy First, Amnesty International USA and others.

Union organizer Ryan Bruckenthal said that a majority of social media comments made by OSF employees expressed having limited opportunities on the job, which became one of the main reasons for seeking the protection Local 1180 offered. Their first union contract will be subjected to bargaining surveys, grievance procedures, job descriptions and expectations, titles, and levels.

The July issue of Inside Philanthropy quoted OSF President Christopher Stone as saying, "we believe in unions". CWA Local 1180's public agencies and non-profit organizations believe in unions, too.

"We are here as a voice for our members and as a protector of the little guy, to give them a voice where they otherwise might not have one," Cheliotis said. "OSF knew that if we stood by them, their members would reap the benefits. That's why we had success in organizing their members."