

# ORGANIZED LABOR AND THE VIETNAM ANTIWAR MOVEMENT: Early Union Mobilization

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*Within many popular accounts, the American anti-war movement during the Vietnam War is portrayed as entirely youth-led. The involvement of organized labor within this movement is frequently minimized and ignored. Utilizing union newspapers and editorials, this paper shows that the monolithic portrayal of labor unions during the 1960s is untrue; George Meany's leadership of the AFL-CIO was rarely representative of the opinions and values of rank-and-file union membership. Unions had a complicated and multi-faceted relationship to the anti-war movement, and in many respects, unions supported its initial existence. Organized labor was crucial to broadening the anti-war coalition during the Vietnam War.*

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## **1968: Introduction**

Since its inception, organized labor has had a delicate relationship with war. Internationalist interpretations of worker solidarity lend credence to pacifism. Socialist organizations in Britain, for instance, denounced the country's entry into the Great War on the basis that it was pitting workers against one another. Why should workers from Britain go out and slaughter workers from Germany, when their real enemies were capitalists and imperialist governments? This critique quickly fell out of favor, however, as labor organizations and their members began to realize the economic benefits of a wartime economy.<sup>1</sup>

Similar trends are visible in the United States. In the second World War, a popular anti-war movement was supplanted by economic considerations, a trend intensified by the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> Postwar labor organizations took great strides in again becoming a leading voice for peace. The CIO, formed in 1935, endorsed anti-fascism and supported Roosevelt's foreign policy in the lead up to WW2. A 1947 CIO resolution condemned nuclear development, urged peaceful development, and encouraged a positive relationship with the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> This would begin to change in the Truman administration, as the CIO took a similar path to the AFL and became increasingly close with the U.S. government. Criticism from union leadership was rare, and foreign policy was treated as only tangential to labor issues.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Hochschild, *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918*, (Boston: Mariner Books 2012), 58-59; Eric Dorn Brose, *A History of the Great War: World War One and the International Crisis of the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press 2010), 24, 246-247.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War II*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1980), 51-52.

<sup>3</sup> Philip S. Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, (New York: International Publishers, Co., Inc. 1989), 4.

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The Vietnam War marked a turning point in American labor activism. A split formed between labor leadership and their organizations, with many organizers supporting the American war effort despite little support from members. In 1965, as the anti-war movement began to pick up steam in the United States, union leaders joined in the chorus. They were met with stern opposition from national representatives like George Meany, president of the then recently merged AFL—CIO.<sup>4</sup> This split was impactful—it set the stage for the popular narrative that labor organizations were uninvolved in the struggle for peace, and that student organizations were at the forefront. Additionally, conceptions of the anti-war movement in the mainstream press pushed union rank—and—file away from anti-war mobilization, despite their internal opposition to the war.<sup>5</sup> These narratives discount the cognizable voice of organized labor in opposition to the Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup> Organized labor broadened the anti-war coalition, but media alienation, internal divisions, and institutional meddling marginalized its impact.

Labor organizations are frequently underrepresented in existing literature about the anti-war movement. In Charles Chatfield's "At the Hands of Historians: The Anti War Movement of the Vietnam Era," he details the shifts in perceptions and narratives of the anti-war movement.<sup>7</sup> Chatfield characterizes the body of anti-war literature into eras, in which he documents the major trends of research and scholarship on the subject. Throughout these shifts, little attention is afforded to the role of organized labor in peace demonstrations. Broadly, historians and pop culture alike have categorized early anti-war demonstrations as being a tool of the student dominated New Left. Chatfield recognizes the lack of attention paid to organized labor, but his analysis is limited to a single mention of union activity. Other historians have recognized the impacts of organized labor on the anti-war movement to differing degrees. One is Peter Levy, who has written about the disconnect between organized labor and the New Left in the beginning stages of the war.<sup>8</sup> Levy acknowledges that the rank and file of organized labor was not as hawkish as labor leaders would lead one to believe; Levy still, however, credits the New Left for movements to organize against the war, with organized labor becoming a reluctant participant only later in the conflict. Another historian to focus heavily on labor's role in the anti-war movement is Philip Foner, whose book, *U.S. Labor in the Viet Nam War*, succinctly traces the pacifist currents that existed in organized labor during the war.

Foner's work is primarily a narrative history, drawing upon internal union communication and meeting minutes to establish a timeline of union anti-war activism. It offers a compelling storyline of the anti-war movement and its crescendo

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<sup>4</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> Edward P. Morgan, "From Virtual Community to Virtual History: Mass Media and the American Anti-war Movement of the 1960s," *Radical History Review*, vol. 78, (2000): 104-105.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell K. Hall, "The Vietnam Era Anti-war Movement," *OAH Magazine of History*, vol. 18, 5, (October 2004): 13-17; Doug McAdam and Yang Su, "The War at Home: Anti-war Protests and Congressional Voting, 1965-1973," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 67, 5, (October 2002): 696-721, [accessed May 5, 2021]; Michael Burton, "Elite Disunity and Collective Protest: The Vietnam Case," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, vol. 5, 2, (Fall 1977): 169-183.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Chatfield, "At the Hands of Historians: The Anti War Movement of the Vietnam Era," *Peace and Change*, vol. 29, 3-4, (July 2004): 485-500.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Levy, "The New Left, Labor, and the Vietnam War," *Peace and Change*, vol 15, 1, (January 1990): 46-69.

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into mass mobilization. What Foner largely omits, however, are discussions of outside influence on the labor unions. Internal divisions are but one component of labor's understated action during the Vietnam period.

Equally important is the way that American news media characterized the peace movement as a fringe movement, or the way that institutions like the FBI drove a wedge between activists of differing backgrounds. The rapidly changing social landscape of the U.S. throughout the 1960s—with both racial and gender equality being key targets for change—affected working class responses and viewpoints to the Vietnam War. Viewing these phenomena in context is crucial to developing a complete understanding of the complex roles organized labor and the anti-war movement play with one another.<sup>9</sup>

More commonly, scholarly accounts of labor unions during the Vietnam anti-war movement focus their analysis on labor leadership and its endorsement of American foreign policy. One notable example is Edmund Wehrle's *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War*. Wehrle's analysis differs markedly from the popular coverage discussed below, in that it does not present a monolithic trade union movement. Nevertheless, the doctrine of free trade unionism and the relationship of the AFL-CIO to South Vietnamese labor unions take precedence in Wehrle's analysis.<sup>10</sup> In this respect, Wehrle's analysis represents a middle perspective, bridging the gap between the popular narrative of union non-participation and the narrative advanced in this paper, of labor peace agitation.

Outside of these academic histories, the Vietnam anti-war movement and the tumultuous 1960s are a frequent focus of popular histories and entertainment programs. Regardless of when they were produced, documentaries tend to detail a divided America. The divisions were primarily among students and the government. Socialists, hippies, feminists, and student dissidents were portrayed as responsible for the strife on American streets. Frequently, average working-class Americans are ignored entirely, or they are portrayed as monolithic supporters of the U.S. government and its foreign policy. For instance, in "The Twentieth Century," a History Channel documentary series hosted by CBS News correspondent Mike Wallace, the anti-war movement is portrayed as entirely student-led until after 1970. The only mention of working Americans prior to this point refers to the infamous 'hard hat' counter-demonstrations in New York.<sup>11</sup> In other documentaries, such as local histories published by PBS affiliate stations, working Americans (and by extension, unionists) are omitted entirely.<sup>12</sup> If one based their perception of the anti-war movement entirely on documentaries such as these, they might conclude that unionists were absent from the demonstrations altogether, or that unions unilaterally supported the war effort. The following analysis reveals, however, that

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the intersection between social trends and anti-war mobilization in the U.S., see: Joshua B. Freeman, "Hardhats: Construction Workers, Manliness, and the 1970 Pro-War Demonstrations," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 26, 4, (Summer 1993): 725-744, [accessed May 5, 2021]; Larry Isaac, Steve McDonald, and Greg Lukasik, "Takin' It from the Streets: How the Sixties Mass Movement Revitalized Unionization," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 112, 1, (July, 2006): 46-96, [accessed May 5, 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Edmund F. Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain: The AFL-CIO and the Vietnam War*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 2005), 1-28, 110-131.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Williams, "The 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Vietnam Protest Movement," YouTube video, 24:49, June 5, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Iowa PBS, "Opposition to the Vietnam War in the United States," YouTube video, 4:45, October 21, 2015.

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the composition of the anti—war movement was far more heterogeneous with union participation from the very start.

This paper draws heavily from newspaper articles and editorials from union and labor papers. These items paint a clear picture of dissent against hawkish union leadership. On—the—ground accounts of anti—war demonstrations reveal the implicit relationships between organized labor and anti—war movements. Protests may have occurred without union *endorsement*, but that does not mean that they were absent union support. Poll data from the period supplements this analysis as well, discrediting the argument that organized labor was a monolithic entity with uniform thoughts. Documents compiled from the American intelligence community are used to demonstrate the institutional response to the anti—war movement and its impact on public perceptions. While alternative and independent union organizations existed during the period, the AFL—CIO was by far the most well—known and influential union conglomerate; thus, this article is focused primarily on the AFL—CIO.

### **1968: The Formation of an Anti—war Movement**

The Vietnam anti—war movement did not form out of thin air. In order to accurately trace its origins, it is important to consider the existing peace movements in the U.S. prior to the outbreak of war in Vietnam. Most notable for an analysis centered on trade unions is the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE). SANE emerged in 1957 in response to the Eisenhower administration’s increasingly lax nuclear policy.<sup>13</sup> Concerned with the effects of nuclear testing, radioactive fallout, and potential nuclear war, SANE was established to build awareness among Americans. Utilizing advertising campaigns in national newspapers, as well as hosting national conferences, SANE quickly amassed an audience. A loose coalition of individuals formed around a central interest—nuclear disarmament. Prominent trade unionists supported SANE from its inception. Walter Reuther, former president of the CIO and then president of the UAW, was a sponsor to the first national SANE conference in 1960.<sup>14</sup> Unions such as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and Local 14—149, Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers, and AFL—CIO were featured as supporters in the commemorative pamphlet distributed at the conference. The members of the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers attached a statement to their contribution, writing “the struggle for Nuclear Sanity is not an easy one but one of absolute necessity. The existence of human—kind depends on the success of people the world over in their efforts to achieve lasting peace through Nuclear Sanity.”<sup>15</sup> This type of strong rhetoric in opposition to nuclear armament was a common thread among progressive and leftwing unions, demonstrative of their preexisting bias toward pacifism and nonaggression prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Vietnam. The SANE national conference, held in Madison Square Garden, was a tremendous success for the peace movement, a movement whose appeal grew apace with nuclear armament.

SANE continued to grow in the 1960s and served as the backbone for a piece of the anti—war movement. SANE occupied the less radical end of the anti—war spectrum—its members were convinced that change could be enacted via the ballot box, and their strategy involved educating the public about the horrors of nuclear war in order to prompt policy change. As the conflict in Vietnam intensified, SANE’s

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<sup>13</sup> “Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE),” History, Peace Action, [accessed April 18, 2021].

<sup>14</sup> National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (U.S.), “Toward a sane nuclear policy,” *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements*, (1960): 217.

<sup>15</sup> National Committee, “Toward a sane nuclear policy.”

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attention pivoted towards it almost entirely. Part of this pivot was motivated by fears that Vietnam would serve as the world's next nuclear battleground, and part of it was motivated simply by the member's philosophical and moral beliefs; pacifism, internationalism, and anti—imperialism were common ideological threads. While this was ongoing, the labor movement remained a visible component of the organization.

Levy, Chatfield, and others are correct in their assessment that the New Left is responsible for the earliest formation of the militant Vietnam anti—war movement. Public opposition of President Johnson's foreign policy began taking off in 1964, with groups such as Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) leading the charge. These groups operated outside the previous mode of union organization, sharing rhetoric that seemed to dispense with the usefulness of labor unions altogether. Initially focused on broader leftwing radicalism and civil rights activism, SNCC and SDS turned their attention almost entirely toward opposition to the Vietnam War in 1964.<sup>16</sup> Their tactics emerged from a decade of experience. The demonstrations these organizers staged for civil rights from the mid—1950s through the 1960s served as a training ground for peace activists.<sup>17</sup> Tactics like sit—ins and civil disobedience were reused and adapted for changing circumstances. The connection is so deep that it is more apt to consider the peace movement an extension of the existing civil rights movement rather than a unique occurrence; without the civil rights movement and its organizers, the radical peace movement never would have begun. Tom Hayden, the founder of the SDS, first entered the public consciousness as a civil rights activist in 1961 and 1962.<sup>18</sup> The actions of the SNCC and SDS would color perceptions of the anti—war movement for decades to come, evidenced both by mass media coverage and histories of the period.<sup>19</sup>

Coverage depicting the New Left as solely a coalition of students, counter—culturists, and left radicals was based in stretched truth. Indeed, the New Left coalition contained all those elements and was led by young idealists bent on overturning the emergent corporate liberalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>20</sup> Seldom mentioned, however, is that the labor movement supported the New Left in its inception despite obvious differences between the two groups. The UAW and Packinghouse union, for instance, both subsidized and publicly supported early SDS activity.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, groups within the burgeoning movement regularly collaborated with one another and alongside existing or “old left” groups, something most evident during the civil rights movement. The anti—war movement was a truly intersectional one, blending the existing threads of labor activism, feminism, anti—racism, and more into a massive constellation of ideals.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, labor was not at the bleeding edge of anti—war activism, and these early instances of labor collaboration with the New Left are an exception, not the rule. Vietnam took a backseat to domestic policy; the intensifying war was low on the list of priorities for most unions. Labor opposition to the war in its early stages

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 117.

<sup>17</sup> Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> Irving Howe, *The Radical Papers*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1966), 350.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan, “From Virtual Community to Virtual History,” 87, 95-98.

<sup>20</sup> Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 130.

<sup>21</sup> Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> For additional discussion on the latent intersectionality of the anti-war movement, see: Nelson Blackstock, *COINTELPRO: The FBI's Secret Weapon Against Political Freedom* (New York: Monad Press 1975), 158, 167.

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was limited to bands of concerned union members. These individuals were often linked to the anti—war effort through other activist connections they had made in support of leftist causes, civil rights, etc. As discussed further below, direct union resistance to the war was limited to a select few unions in 1964 and 1965.

Poll data collected by Gallup in 1965 offers a possible explanation for why labor was seemingly uninvolved in the anti—war movement at this point. In response to the question “Have you ever felt the urge to organize or join a public demonstration about something?,” only 10% of Americans answered “yes.”<sup>23</sup> Of those respondents, only 10% answered “Vietnam” to the follow—up question about their motivation to demonstrate. Additionally, most of these responses were in favor of the war and of American foreign policy in general, showcasing a level of disdain for the student demonstrators. Predictably, those most likely to demonstrate were in the 21—29 age group.<sup>24</sup> Another 1965 Gallup poll shows that a mere 24% of Americans believed it was a mistake to enter Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> The public was embroiled in an ideological and generational divide, something that moderate labor unions were careful to sidestep.

It is in this backdrop of American ambivalence that the SDS launched the 1965 March on Washington to End the War in Vietnam. The SDS, as well as other organizations, had held public demonstrations in favor of ending the war in the past, but none were on the scale of the 1965 march. The march marks the birth of mass mobilization against the war. On April 17, 1965, 15,000 students and hundreds of supporters joined in the largest protest against the Vietnam War up to that point.<sup>26</sup> The impetus for protest was clearly outlined within a March 1965 edition of the SDS’ *Bulletin*. Paul Booth, Coordinator of the SDS Peace Research Conference (and eventual labor organizer) penned in an article that “the war in Vietnam injures, perhaps irreparably, both Vietnamese and Americans, and must be halted.”<sup>27</sup> By Booth’s account in a later edition of the *Bulletin*, over 20,000 had attended the march.<sup>28</sup> He proceeded to detail the events of the day, the speakers, and the march’s impact on the broader goal of ending the war in Vietnam. Absent from Booth’s commentary is any mention of labor participation in the march. Trade union members were participants of the March on Washington as well as other demonstrations at this time; no official declaration of support was made by any union leadership, however, and this colored perception of labor’s position.<sup>29</sup> Whereas labor had been at the cusp of past social movements in the United States, in this instance, students were behind the wheel.

Independent unions, such as the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), voiced their support for the anti—war movement in 1965, and a loose coalition of unions formed the Trade Unionists for Peace in the fall of that year. Despite this, the character of SDS led protests turned off both rank—and—file members as well as leadership, and union participation in these early stages

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<sup>23</sup> Lydia Saad, “Gallup Vault: The Urge to Demonstrate,” *Gallup Vault* (April 20, 2016) [accessed March 18, 2021].

<sup>24</sup> Saad, “Gallup Vault: The Urge to Demonstrate.”

<sup>25</sup> Lydia Saad, “Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam,” *Gallup Vault* (May 24, 2016) [accessed March 19, 2021].

<sup>26</sup> “15,000 White House Pickets Denounce Vietnam War: STUDENTS PICKET AT WHITE HOUSE,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1965, [accessed on April 26, 2021].

<sup>27</sup> Paul Booth, “Crisis in Vietnam,” *Students for Democratic Society Bulletin*, vol 3, 6, (March 1965).

<sup>28</sup> Paul Booth, “March on Washington,” *Students for Democratic Society Bulletin*, vol 3, 7, (May 1965).

<sup>29</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War*, 16.

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waned.<sup>30</sup> Although an undercurrent of concerned unionists engaged with the anti—war demonstrations, union leadership was decidedly opposed to it.

In a 1965 address to the Ladies Garment Workers' Union Convention, AFL—CIO president George Meany articulated sharply worded attacks against unionists who backed the anti—war protests. Labeling them “appeasers,” he cautioned that appeasement of Vietnamese Communists would assuredly lead to the outbreak of World War III. He urged the delegates to the convention to offer their full—throated support to President Johnson's Vietnam policy objectives and show the country that organized labor was unified against communism anywhere. Sharing in this exercise of Cold War rhetoric was the president of the Ladies Garment Workers' Union, David Dubinsky, who added that trade unions must play a “decisive role” in stopping communism and supporting democracy.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, two sides of the anti—war movement emerged—a new militant coalition of disaffected students and young people, and an old guard committed to maintaining the status quo. Despite the attitudes of leadership, labor rank—and—file fell somewhere in the middle, illustrating the shared values many unionists had with anti—war demonstrators while also showcasing the growing split between the labor movement. This early period was characterized by individuals taking a stand in the face of leadership opposition. Union locals, concerned over the morality, legality, or practicality of a war in Vietnam were persuaded by the arguments made by their New Left contemporaries. Content with the status quo, AFL—CIO executive leadership was firmly opposed to this activism. A fissure between rank and file and leadership had formed and would only grow throughout the anti—war movement's progression.

**1968: Exploiting the Schism: Institutional Meddling in the Peace Movement**

The FBI, in its communications with the White House as well as in its subversive activities through the national news media, contributed to a narrative that the anti—war movement was a fringe political position, despite its increasing popularity. This was purposeful, indicative of the FBI's political bias throughout the J. Edgar Hoover years. Several tactics were used—many of which were illegal—all of them having cumulative effects on both the anti—war movement and broader leftist organizations. The fragmentation that occurred in various New Left groups as a result of the FBI's COINTEL—PRO is well documented, for instance.<sup>32</sup> Less discussed is the impact on perceptions of the anti—war movement and their relationship to organized labor.

The schism between the old left and the new left emerged from myriad factors, as illustrated most poignantly by Levy. Through their disruptive activities, the FBI attempted to exploit this schism and marginalize the emergent New Left, alienating the various facets of American protest movements from one another. FBI memoranda, made public via the 1976 Senate Select Committee Report on Intelligence Activities and the Rights of Americans, detail a strategy to ridicule the

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<sup>30</sup> Levy, “The New Left,” 49.

<sup>31</sup> “Meany Blasts Critics of Johnson Policies,” *AFL-CIO News*, (Washington D.C.), May 15, 1965 [accessed May 5, 2021].

<sup>32</sup> One major use of COINTEL-PRO against leftist causes was the FBI's covert campaign against the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. See Dia Kayyali, “The History of Surveillance and the Black Community,” *Electronic Frontier Foundation* (February 13, 2014), [accessed April 26, 2021]; Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations With respect to Intelligence Activities, “Supplementary Detailed Staff Reports on Intelligence Committees and the Rights of Americans” *Senate Report No. 94 755* (Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office 1976).

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New Left via the press and exploit hostilities between the New and Old Left.<sup>33</sup> This strategy was utilized in concurrence with the counterintelligence program. With respect to the New Left, the FBI COINTEL—PRO strategy was intended to disrupt and neutralize the activity of political agitators and “rabble—rousers.”<sup>34</sup> The FBI sought to embarrass and stifle activists in any way possible, while simultaneously showcasing the apparent moral degradation of American youth at the hands of the New Left.<sup>35</sup>

The FBI’s effort to portray new activists as degenerate demagogues was part of a purposeful effort to alienate organized labor and other existing activist groups from anti—war protests during the Vietnam period.<sup>36</sup> The tactics undertaken by the FBI had a twofold impact. On the one hand, purposefully disingenuous reporting that the FBI commissioned and endorsed affected turnout and participation within mass demonstrations against the war. Sympathetic union members, those who felt the war was morally unjustifiable, may have been wary to join the public protests in fear that they would be viewed as communist agitators.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the characterization of these protests as violent and dangerous led to those who had pacifist opposition to the war in Vietnam to be alienated as well. By engaging in disinformation campaigns, the FBI sowed a seed within the American public consciousness. The common memory elicited by the news coverage of the day meant that Americans believed the movement against the war in the mid—1960s was on the fringes and lacking the support of organized labor or American workers.

An explanation for the FBI’s strategic choice to infiltrate, obstruct, and ostracize the New Left lies in the relative political power of various American social movements. The labor movement in the United States managed to gain considerable power in the post—WW2 era. Though this power was tempered slightly by the mid—1950s, organized labor represented a huge cross—section of the American working classes. As a collective, labor unions could both apply pressure to American institutions as well as sway public opinion, at least temporarily. The emergent New Left was considerably less powerful. Collectively less experienced in organizing, New Leftists were more susceptible to attempts by the FBI to frustrate and marginalize their nascent movement. It is natural, then, that the FBI and CIA spent considerable energy building a relationship with the executive council of the AFL—CIO and spent countless hours trying to marginalize the newer face on the organizational block.

### 1968: Early Labor Dissent

In Chatfield’s brief discussion of union anti—war activism, he claims that organized labor visibly joined into the chorus of anti—war voices in 1968. This year is a turning point in his analysis, the year when anti—war demonstrations became

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<sup>33</sup> Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations With Respect to Intelligence Activities, *Book II: Intelligence Activities and the Rights of American*, (Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office 1976), [accessed April 26, 2021] 86.

<sup>34</sup> Senate Select Committee, *Book II*, 88-90; Rabble Rouser would eventually be supplanted by the word agitator in FBI communications. In both instances, the FBI maintained a running index of individuals deemed to be agitators and used this index in accordance with its *Key Activist* program.

<sup>35</sup> Senate Select Committee, *Book II*, 88-90.

<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the FBI targeted all civil rights activists. The FBI’s efforts in this period are far wider than the scope of this paper; see “COINTEL-PRO: Black Extremist” *FBI Records: The Vault* [accessed April 26, 2021].

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion on the FBI’s general strategy of Red-Baiting during this period, see: Blackstock, *COINTELPRO*, 137-180.



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mainstream, and when public sentiment was heavily mobilized against the war.<sup>38</sup> As noted above, however, union voices were a part of the conversation from the very start. Organized labor's participation was mainly at the behest of individual unionists, but official calls for peace began as early as 1964. Take, for instance, Leon Davis, president of Local 1199, Drug and Hospital Employees Union, RWDSU, AFL—CIO. Davis spoke out against the “aggressive and dangerous foreign policy” pursued in Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> A solitary voice in 1964, Davis was joined by more and more unionists within the next year. The first public union opposition to the war is visible in an editorial within a February 1965 edition of *The Dispatcher*. This paper, published by the west coast branch of the ILWU, voiced a tepid concern against American escalation. Later editions of the paper included further anti—war commentary.<sup>40</sup> On February 24, 1965, Davis' union was the first to officially come out against the war. Signed by Davis, William J. Taylor, first vice president; Edward Ayash, treasurer; Moe Foner, executive secretary; and twenty—one other members of the executive council, Local 1199 sent a telegram to President Lyndon B. Johnson urging immediate settlement of the Vietnam conflict.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Davis' union took out an advertisement in the November 23, 1965 edition of the *New York Times*. Short and to the point, the advertisement had three requests of the U.S. government: “stop the bombings; seek an immediate cease—fire; and negotiate an international settlement.”<sup>42</sup>

Aside from union sponsored anti—war activity, some labor leaders acted on their own accord as well. Take Cesar Chavez, for instance. In June 1966, Chavez—president of the National Farm Workers Association—spoke at a Crusade for Justice rally in favor of the anti—war movement.<sup>43</sup> Chavez supported an unsuccessful drive for signatures on a petition to end American involvement in Vietnam.<sup>44</sup> True to his Catholic beliefs, Chavez urged peace throughout the Vietnam War, but he did so as an individual, not necessarily as leader of the National Farm Workers. This mirrors the broader trend of early labor participation in calls for peace without a broader organizational coalition.

With these early voices in mind, it begs the question of how organized labor's voice has become discounted in the memory of the anti—war movement. One answer lies within the broader structure of the labor movement in the United States. Davis' union, among many unions in the U.S., was a member of the AFL—CIO, a confederation of unions under unified national leadership. The idea behind this hierarchical structure was rooted in labor rhetoric of solidarity. By unifying workers across different trades and regions, organized labor had a stronger voice. In the Vietnam period, however, that forced unification had the effect of amplifying the voice of union leadership at the expense of the rank—and—file. Nothing exemplifies this greater than the resolutions adopted at AFL—CIO conventions in the mid—1960s. George Meany, president of the AFL—CIO, had unilaterally dictated the

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<sup>38</sup> Chatfield, “At the Hands of Historians,” 498.

<sup>39</sup> John P. Windmuller, “The Foreign Policy Conflict in American Labor,” *Political Science Quarterly* vol. LXXXII, (June 1967): 232-232, *quoted in* Philip S. Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War* (New York: International Publishers Co. Inc., 1989), 12.

<sup>40</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*.

<sup>43</sup> The National Farm Workers Association eventually rebranded as United Farm Workers.

<sup>44</sup> JPat Brown, B. C. D. Lipton and Michael Morisy, *Activists Under Surveillance: The FBI Files*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2018) 65.

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federation's public stance on the war, silencing dissent from rank and file and issuing staunch support to the Johnson administration.<sup>45</sup>

A declaration of the federation's executive council in October 1965 is illustrative of the schism between leadership and rank and file. Not only did the council declare support for the Johnson administration's foreign policy, they also went out of their way to silence union dissent. Pacifists and critics alike, they argued, would serve their cause best by shunning demonstrations and activists. The council argued for national unity at the expense of one's personal principles, indicative of the hardline stance urged by Meany and his peers in the AFL—CIO's leadership.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the policies of the Executive Council verged on complete censorship of dissenting positions. When student demonstrators had interrupted the AFL—CIO convention from the balcony, calling upon the unions to denounce the war, Meany silenced them and denounced them as "kooks." Explicit in many of the earliest union voices for peace was a direct opposition to the stifling nature of national conventions—individual unions demanded the right to have a voice in the debate.<sup>47</sup>

Institutional opposition aside, labor organizers continued their mission to advocate peace. Davis' Local 1199 was at the forefront of the labor peace initiative, but other unions took part as well. The unions most likely to join in the chorus against the war were those with a pre-existing left-leaning stance, something that highlights the early similarities between the New Left and the old guard of organized labor. These unions had already been an important faction of SANE—a group that would emerge with new importance to unionists in 1966.

On May 3, 1966, the Methodist office of the U.N. was the site of the founding conference of the Trade Union Division of SANE.<sup>48</sup> The trade union division was formed by union members who had become increasingly perturbed by the AFL—CIO Executive Council and its unfailing support of American foreign policy. Following a New York City demonstration on March 26, trade union members in attendance met and organized the trade union division of SANE. The inaugural meeting of the group was sponsored by seventeen different unions, including Leon Davis' Local 1199 and David Livingston's District 65.<sup>49</sup> At the conference, the members unanimously adopted a statement which bestowed a unique expectation upon unions. The members declared that unionists had a "special responsibility" to contribute to the national conversation of peace.<sup>50</sup>

By summer of 1966, the Trade Union division of SANE began publishing a newspaper. In a moderately self-aggrandizing fashion, the first edition of Trade Union Division *Sane World* included a passage declaring that the absent voice of organized labor had finally emerged in the peace movement. The paper also shed light on the fears of reprisal felt by many unionists. For many, the push towards the peace movement was primarily a push for free speech—rank—and—file had been silenced

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<sup>45</sup> Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain*, 109-126.

<sup>46</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 35. This issue resurfaced later, as the relationship between the executive council and member unions became further strained. Even unionists that did not align with the anti-war movement proceeded with trepidation and concern for the executive council's dogmatism.

<sup>48</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 35.

<sup>49</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 37.

<sup>50</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 37-38.

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by Meany's executive council for long enough, causing mounting discontent.<sup>51</sup> The executive council responded to these charges—as well as the formation of the Trade Union Division of SANE in general—in predictable fashion. The council unanimously adopted another hawkish position in August 1966 formally condemning the anti-war activists. Denial of “unstinting support” for the U.S. military was seen as “aiding the communist enemy of [the] country.” The U.S. was bearing the heaviest burden of defending world peace, according to the resolution's text.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the escalating force was the American military was obviously lost on the council.

Paradoxically, a trend began to emerge wherein both labor rank—and—file and executive leadership were absent from visible anti-war activism. In these earliest moments of the anti-war movement, leading into the changes that would take place in 1967 and 1968, the main source of organized labor opposition to the war was constrained to union functionaries, those individuals in the middle between the rank—and—file and the national leadership. The presidents, vice presidents, secretaries, etc., of the various AFL—CIO locals would become the loudest labor voice in opposition to the war until 1968 and Nixon's escalation of the conflict. What drove this divide between the upper echelon, middle tiers, and popular base of the labor movement? Myriad factors, including diversity of ideological bias as well as media perception led to an alienation of rank—and—file beyond the undemocratic nature of the AFL—CIO.

### **1968: The Alienation of Workers in the Protest Movement**

One factor further complicating the relationship between organized labor and the anti-war movement are the divides that formed between the New Left and union rank—and—file. Despite organized labor's violent beginnings, by the 1960s, many union members supported the existing liberal order. No longer did organized labor try reimagining the entire system; instead, unions tried to work within the system and affect change via existing institutions. This contrasts starkly with the utopian idealism so characteristic of the New Left. Figures like David Dellinger believed strongly that increasing militancy of the anti-war movement through 1967 would spur mass action and radical change; in actuality, images of violent confrontation between youth activists and police turned off broad segments of American society from the movement, alienating people who otherwise would have opposed the war.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, this phenomenon was observed astutely by Edward P. Morgan. While focused primarily on the media perception of the anti-war movement and not on organized labor, Morgan's work is still relevant insofar as it outlines the ideological divide between various activists and organizations. Importantly, it draws the implicit connections between the tone of media coverage and the attitudes fostered in response to protests and organizations. The tone of a press report about a protest would have a measurable impact on that protest's reception.

The Vietnam anti-war movement was heterogenous from the start, even before the national zeitgeist shifted to popular opposition of the war. As noted, however, perceptions of the movement shaped attitudes towards it, and this was true among unionists as well. To the unionists who were not already active in anti-war mobilization, there were threads of trepidation. Union rank—and—file were uninterested in participating in violent demonstrations, believing that these were both

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<sup>51</sup> Wehrle, *Between a River and a Mountain*, 109-126.

<sup>52</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 41.

<sup>53</sup> Morgan, “From Virtual Community to Virtual History,” 104; The reality of these images is debatable, but the point is moot. Regardless of if the violence was drummed up by the intelligence community, the result is the same.

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counterproductive to the goal of ending the war as well as believing that they would undermine their primary objective of supporting labor's interests.

Favoring more traditional practices of peaceful protest over the increasingly militant student movement kept the "old" and New Left firmly in separate camps. Emil Mazey of the UAW was explicit in his desire to keep things that way, as he expressed that no peace movement comprised of unionists could contain the elements of flag burning, Vietcong praising, or other acts of lunacy. This "lunatic fringe" of the peace movement played into the hands of the administration in his opinion, serving to set back the goals for peace.<sup>54</sup> The New Left and its leaders were undeterred, dispensing away with the labor movement as enemies to progress. Such was explicit in Tom Hayden's writing on the subject. Characterizing the labor movement as elitist, Hayden explained that, in his view, organized labor "treats the rank and file as a mass to be molded; sometimes thrust forward into action, sometimes held back." Continuing, he stated "a self—fulfilling pattern emerges: because the nature of the organization is elitist, many people react to it with disinterest or suspicion, giving the leadership the evidence it needs to call the masses apathetic."<sup>55</sup> In many ways, the events of the 1960s support Hayden's claims. The Meany—led executive council held back the push against American foreign policy for as long as it could, using every strategy in the playbook to silence dissent. As far as the SDS was concerned, the ideology of the New Left and "The Movement" was diametrically opposed to the AFL—CIO's liberalism.

Aside from a battle between militancy and complacency, another factor that separated the New Left from labor was the former's readiness to adopt an internationalist framework. Following the CIO purges in the late 1940s, the American labor movement was quite visibly anti—communist. Despite George Meany's claims to the contrary, the anti—war coalition that emerged in the labor movement was primarily borne from strict anti—communists, individuals who within the previous decade had come out against their affiliated unions for their alleged ties to the USSR.<sup>56</sup> The emergent New Left had a much broader ideological coalition. From as early as 1965, New Left organizers such as Staughton Lynd and Tom Hayden had embarked on trips to Hanoi to meet with Vietnamese activists. In total, hundreds of Americans traveled to Vietnam to meet with members of the National Liberation Front (NLF). International solidarity with leftists was critical to the New Left's ideological makeup.<sup>57</sup>

Internationalism in this sense caused many figures in the liberal left discomfort. By this point, the 'old guard' of the U.S. leftwing movement was as fervently anti—communist as their conservative adversaries on the right. This was the common slant of unionists as well, which complicated the early efforts to organize laborers against the war. This divide was deep enough that the respective left—wing camps essentially wrote each other off—the New Left viewing the old as outdated, reactionary, and visionless; the old left viewing the New as naïve, traitorous, or ignorant.<sup>58</sup>

Importantly, the New Left was not completely unified in this internationalist conception. Factionalism persisted, with separate groups having different positions on

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<sup>54</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 64-65.

<sup>55</sup> Tom Hayden, "The Politics of "The Movement"", in *The Radical Papers* ed. by Irving Howe, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966): 356.

<sup>56</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 5; 17-18.

<sup>57</sup> Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 139-140.

<sup>58</sup> Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 139-140.

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the questions of communist support, such as the NLF and the North Vietnamese. The organizers were likewise not simply demagogues without nuance—Lynd was insistent that the War Crime Tribunal investigate claims of torture from both the U.S. coalition as well as the Communist coalition, for instance.<sup>59</sup> What mattered to the organizational capacity of these groups however was their public perception. There was an underlying assumption among many that the New Left and their peace movements were tainted with communist influence, something that undoubtedly prevented mass mobilization of labor in the early years of the war. In the face of this uphill rhetorical battle, however, organizers within the labor movement continued their mission to bring a union coalition into the peace movement. As the war continued to intensify, they began to succeed in this goal.

### **1968: The Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace**

The year 1967 would come to be a watershed year for the development of a strong union component of the anti—war movement. In the fall of 1967, 500 union members from 38 states founded the Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace (LLAP) in Chicago.<sup>60</sup> The assembly was sponsored publicly by several labor leaders, all of whom shared a common rift with the executive council of the AFL—CIO. Among them were Emil Mazey, United Auto Workers; Pat Gorman, Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen; and Moe Foner, Hospital Workers Local 1199.<sup>61</sup> Emerging from the trade union division of SANE, the LLAP Chicago convention featured two days of speeches and resolutions, including an appearance from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>62</sup> The Assembly’s early activities included establishing a magazine, circulating petitions, and staging anti—war demonstrations.

Ultimately, the LLAP would unravel quite quickly. Many delegates to the Chicago convention struggled to get the support of the executive committees of their unions. Leadership was by and large still supportive of the AFL—CIO executive council’s hardline hawkish stance. Some local offshoots of the LLAP emerged, but their existence was short lived, further demonstrating the disconnect between rank—and—file and union leadership.<sup>63</sup> LLAP was significant however, even if its significance was a flash in the pan. First, the LLAP marked a shift in the balance of power among unions as well as a shift in the structure of American unions in general. In his article tracking the development of peace sentiment in American organized labor, John Bennet Sears contends that LLAP represented a shift away from the red baiting of some unions. Echoing an editorial in *The Nation*, Sears asserts that the collaboration between previously expelled unions and AFL—CIO affiliates exemplified this change.<sup>64</sup> This conclusion is well supported, and it represents more than just a new shift away from red—scare unionism. The LLAP foreshadowed the splintering of the AFL—CIO that would come in the latter half of the Vietnam war era—affiliate unions were beginning to choose sovereignty from George Meany and the Executive Council. The second major impact of the LLAP is observable mainly in retrospect; the anti—war coalition by 1967 was not simply limited to the New Left.

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<sup>59</sup> Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 144.

<sup>60</sup> Albert Vetere Lannon and Marvin Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent: Building the Anti-Vietnam War Movement in the House of Labor,” *Science and Society*, vol. 66, 4, (Winter 2002/2003): 536, [accessed May 5, 2021].

<sup>61</sup> Lannon and Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent,” 536.

<sup>62</sup> Lannon and Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent,” 536; John Bennet Sears, “Peace Work: The Anti-war Tradition in American Labor from the Cold War to the Iraq War,” *Diplomatic History*, vol. 34, 4, (September 2010): 710, [accessed May 5, 2021].

<sup>63</sup> Lannon and Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent,” 536-537.

<sup>64</sup> Sears, “Peace Work,” 710.

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The appearance of high—profile activists like Dr. King illustrates that the LLAP was a turning point in union anti—war activity. The anti—war movement was, in a general sense, becoming increasingly mainstream by 1967, as activists from various stripes began to consolidate their efforts and unite behind the common cause of peace activism. Differences still abounded, mainly concerning tactics or political orientation, but the unifying factor of anti—war activism was stronger every day. The significance of the Assembly was not lost on its attendees; indeed, in his address to the Assembly, Dr. King alludes to its importance in the opening remarks.

Following his synopsis of the anti—war movement, Dr. King stated the following to the delegates:

This conference—a united expression of varied branches of labor—reaffirms that the trade union movement is part of forward—looking America; that no matter what the formal resolutions of higher bodies may state, the troubled conscious of the working people cannot be stilled. This conference speaks for millions. You here today will long be remembered as those who had the courage to speak out and the wisdom to be right.<sup>65</sup>

Dr. King’s remarks following the preceding passage echo the concerns lofted by the attendees of the Assembly and of the unionists responsible for its inception. He speaks of the domestic cost of war—a cost measured in lives, not dollars. This rhetoric is shared in the resolutions passed at the convention. The LLAP urged bringing the war to an end so that the U.S. could focus its energy and its resources on the “struggle against poverty, disease, hunger and bigotry.”<sup>66</sup> The LLAP consensus against the war was based on the following factors: fears of undermining domestic anti—poverty legislation by increasing military spending, fears of accelerating inflation, moral revulsion to a war in which the U.S. had questionable authority, and moral opposition to conscription. Additional factors played a role as well, such as general pacifism or fears of multinational corporations outsourcing jobs, but these were minor compared to the previous four items.<sup>67</sup>

Foner’s discussion of the LLAP is somewhat dismissive, cautioning against an overstatement of its impact. Arguing many of the same sentiments as Sears, he highlights the breakdown of the AFL—CIO Cold War consensus as its primary impact. In retrospect, however, the LLAP is more significant than Foner lets on. It is true that the LLAP itself would be short lived, eventually replaced by other assemblies of unions. It is also true, as discussed below, that the LLAP had negligible impact in the AFL—CIO itself—despite Emil Mazey’s stinging attacks, George Meany and the Executive Committee followed the same hawkish course.<sup>68</sup> The LLAP has immense rhetorical significance, however. It was by far the largest outpouring of unionist anti—war activity to that point in the war. It likewise helped articulate some of the issues facing American workers during this time, issues that were exacerbated by the war in Vietnam. These issues, like inflation, would turn to draw in more anti—war support of otherwise apathetic union members. Additionally, tempered the growing

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<sup>65</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “The Domestic Impact of the War in America,” November 11, 1967, National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace, University of Chicago, transcription, [accessed April 26, 2021].

<sup>66</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 54.

<sup>67</sup> Curiously, Lyndon B. Johnson shared many of these fears early in 1964-1965, citing them as motivation for his choice not to fully mobilize the U.S. See Bruce J. Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: A Brief Biography with Documents*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford Press, 1995), 137-139.

<sup>68</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 54-64.

<sup>69</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 60-62.

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radicalization of the anti—war movement, taking some of the spotlight off the New Left and putting it on the old guard of social protests. The LLAP was indicative of a broadening public shift against the war, and that in and of itself is notable.

Aside from first—hand accounts, the LLAP is seldom mentioned outside of dedicated union histories. A possible explanation to this was George Meany’s swift and effective dismissal of the event, something that fed into the narrative of union supported imperialism. Meany denounced the LLAP in two ways. First, he called into question the actual levels of union support, asserting that the LLAP represented the views of a mere one—six hundredth of the labor movement. Second, Meany relied on the familiar red—baiting tactics of the cold war to draw connections between the assembly in Chicago and Hanoi. He asserted before the AFL—CIO convention—without evidence—that the resolution adopted in Chicago had been pre—written and approved by the Vietnamese communists. These assertions were false, but they nevertheless legitimized the AFL—CIO’s pro—war position in the eyes of many observers and delegates.<sup>69</sup>

### **1968: Anti—war Mobilization in Public Sector Unions**

While the industrial unions of the AFL—CIO were undergoing a tumultuous transformation in the face of reactionary leadership, the public sector unions were experiencing a new swell in participation and interest. Alongside this swell in activity was an increase in anti—war sentiment among public employees, especially educators. Educators in the U.S. have a long history of peace activism, dating back to the Great War. This was true during the Vietnam War as well, with several teachers facing legal penalties for voicing their pacifist sentiments.<sup>70</sup> This was reflected at a 1967 AFL—CIO convention too, as the President of the Federation of Teachers was one of few union executives to stand in opposition to the executive council’s pro—war resolution. To be clear, the counter—proposal advanced by Charles Cogen, President, was quite placid itself, arguing not for American withdrawal of troops but rather that the AFL—CIO ought to take no position. By contrast, the California Federation of Teachers adopted a resolution in autumn of 1967 condemning the war and its brutalization of the minds of American children.<sup>71</sup>

By the end of the decade, membership in public sector unions surged. The organizing efforts of Jerry Wurf, president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), led to a tremendous growth in union membership among public employees. Wurf frequently dissented from the AFL—CIO, aligning himself closer to the UAW, Teamsters, and other unions who had voiced their opposition to the executive council. As a result of the AFL—CIO’s decision not to support the Democratic nomination of George McGovern in 1972, for instance, AFSCME pulled their support for the AFL—CIO’s political organizing arm.<sup>72</sup> Much of the disagreement between public sector unions and the AFL—CIO stemmed from the latter’s refusal to accept the opinions of rank—and—file members. The hardline stance adopted by the executive council of the AFL—CIO went against the democratic traditions of organized labor, and this was rebuked strongly by public sector unions. By 1970, AFSCME locals, such as Local 590 in Philadelphia, were

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<sup>70</sup> Charles F. Howlett & Patricia Howlett, “Undemocratic, Barbaric, and Scholastically Wholly Unwise: Conscientious Educators from the Great War through the Present,” *Peace & Change*, vol. 44, 2, (April 2019): 191.

<sup>71</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Battista, “Political Divisions in Organized Labor, 1968-1988” *Polity*, vol. 24, 2, (Winter, 1991): 179-180, [accessed May 5, 2021].

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petitioning the AFL—CIO to call a nationwide general strike in opposition to the war.<sup>73</sup> Much of the public sector mobilization occurred after 1968, once the anti—war movement had begun to shift into the mainstream public consciousness. The loudest voice of labor at this point, however, was often that of public sector employees, something that deserves to be highlighted.

### **1968 and Beyond: The Mass Adoption of Anti—war Sentiment**

On January 31, 1968, the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive, marking a major turning point in American perceptions about the war. The American public had become fed up with the war, disillusioned to the notion that it would be a quick in—and—out conflict. The escalation that occurred year over year with trivial effects besides wearing down a generation of soldiers had eroded public trust in the American military.<sup>74</sup> This erosion of trust was evident by labor rank and file as well, despite Meany’s continuing support for American foreign policy.

In 1968, large unions began to take a more visible stance in opposition to the war, citing the LLAP in their resolutions. UAW Local 600, home to 45,000 members, adopted the policy statement of the LLAP in January 1968. Included among this was a new resolution entitled “Peace—The Only Alternative to Total Self—Destruction.” Local 600 was not alone; through 1968 and 1969, public sector unions began to reorganize themselves along their shared opposition to the war, culminating in a swath of American Federation of Government Employee (AFGE) locals reaffiliating themselves with the anti—war AFSCME.<sup>75</sup>

This schism between rank and file and George Meany had lasting consequences on the AFL—CIO and the American labor movement more broadly. Member unions began to demand more autonomy from the AFL—CIO, citing leadership’s reactionary politics as a driving force. In a 1969 edition of *Workers World*, an anonymous delegate of District 65, Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union, AFL—CIO detailed the efforts made by their union to rebuke the foreign policy preferences of the federation.<sup>76</sup> The UAW, outraged over the actions of the executive council in the preceding decade, left the AFL—CIO altogether in 1969, choosing instead to align themselves with the Teamsters union and forming the Alliance for Labor Action (ALA). The UAW left for multitudinous reasons, including base differences in the organizational strategies preferred by UAW president Walter Reuther and AFL—CIO president George Meany. Reuther, for his part, envisioned a return to the social unionism of the past, believing that unions can and should take an outspoken role in the advocacy for progressive causes. The war was nevertheless a sticking point, evidenced further by the fact that following their resignation from the AFL—CIO, the UAW took a much stronger position against the war.<sup>77</sup> At the convention for the newly formed ALA in June of 1969, delegates from both the Teamsters and the Auto Workers gave speech after speech in opposition to the war. In his remarks, Frank Fitzsimmons, president of the Teamsters, referred to the war as

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<sup>73</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Vietnam War*, 168.

<sup>74</sup> In 1966, ~25% of polled Americans saw the U.S. intervention in Vietnam as a mistake. By 1968, that percentage had jumped to more than half, peaking around 63% in 1973. See Tom Rosentiel, “Iraq and Vietnam: A crucial difference in opinion,” *Pew Research Center* (March 22, 2007) [accessed April 26, 2021].

<sup>75</sup> Lannon and Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent,” 537-539.

<sup>76</sup> “District 65 Rank and File Push Leaders Toward Break with Racist Pro-War Policy,” *Workers World* (New York, New York), April 3, 1969.

<sup>77</sup> Lannon and Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent,” 539.



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the bane of both political parties in the U.S., something that threatened to tear American society apart at the seams.<sup>78</sup>

The alignment between the UAW and the Teamsters on the cause of peace is quite significant. First, the political background of these two unions differ sharply—the UAW firmly on the progressive side of things, the Teamsters much more conservative. Second, these two unions were two of the largest and most powerful unions in the United States at the time. Their alliance on the issue of peace, despite their differences in other areas of policy, signified a shift in organized labor that took place among New Left organizers in 1965—a total pivot towards anti—war activism at the expense of other causes. It demonstrates that peace in Vietnam had become the central issue to two of the largest unions in the country, totally undermining the strong—armed consensus reached by the AFL—CIO executive council. Rank—and—file mobilization against the AFL—CIO had begun to materialize at this point as well, with individual union locals resigning from their respective internationals to align themselves with the ALA. District 65 is a notable example of such a union.<sup>79</sup>

By 1970, the peace movement was growing rapidly across the United States, both in the halls of organized labor as well as among ordinary citizens. The continued escalation of the war, the invasion of Cambodia, and the return of battered veterans all contributed to a growing public opposition to the conflict. The seeds of discontent had become firmly planted in the AFL—CIO as well, and more and more unions banded together to oppose the war and Meany himself. A crescendo was reached in June 1972. Unionists, sponsored by 14 different AFL—CIO affiliates and 5 independent unions, convened the inaugural meeting of Labor for Peace in St. Louis. 1,000 delegates attended the meeting and formed Labor for Peace, the main peace coalition for organized labor until the end of the war.<sup>80</sup>

Additionally, the splits that had formed and been exploited between the old and New Left began to heal by 1969. In the face of increased escalation, activists began to focus more on their unifying characteristics than their differences. This was exemplified in several arenas, notably by the ALA and its leadership. Recognizing their differences, ALA leadership still commended student demonstrators and implored unionists to find common ground with them, both in the spirit of fighting for peace but also for the sake of the continued health of the labor movement in the long—term. The New Left likewise became friendlier with the labor movement, collaborating alongside them in the continued mass demonstrations of the late 1960s and 1970s.<sup>81</sup>

### 1968: Conclusions

The peace movement of the 1960s was an incredibly complex and multifaceted phenomenon. It was an early proof of intersectional activism, as several activists and their organizations collided and then banded together to advance a common cause, the cause of peace. The peace movement grew rapidly in the years after the 1968 Tet Offensive, morphing into a genuine mass movement against the U.S. government and its foreign policy. Due to movements around the world, 1968 is remembered as a year of revolution and political instability, characterized in the U.S. by the push against the war.

This paper highlights the role of labor organizers and unions in the years leading up to 1968. Absent dedicated labor histories, the literature tends to dismiss

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<sup>78</sup> Foner, *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 69.

<sup>79</sup> Lannon and Rogoff, “We Shall Not Remain Silent,” 541.

<sup>80</sup> Lannon and Rogoff., 543.

<sup>81</sup> *U.S. Labor and the Viet Nam War*, 68-84.

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labor involvement in the formation of the anti—war movement, despite the evidence to the contrary. Labor’s relationship to the anti—war movement was complicated by several factors, including the byzantine structure of the AFL—CIO, the executive council’s aversion to democratic unionism, the American intelligence community’s meddling in the anti—war movement, and the American media perception of the protests. Beneath all of this is clear evidence that the question of union anti—war activism is not so cut and dry. Both the leadership of progressive unions as well as some ordinary rank—and—file were opposed to the war from the start. Organized labor in the United States has never been a monolith, and this was true in 1964—1968 as well.

Equally important is the impact of the war on unions themselves. The hardline stance of the Meany coalition demonstrated a latent flaw of the AFL—CIO and its policies, and the continuation of the war turned the spotlight on this structural deficiency even more. As much as the labor movement influenced the anti—war movement, the anti—war movement influenced organized labor even more. Divisions formed in the course of anti—war activism would persist after the war, significantly hampering the AFL—CIO’s organizing capacity into the 1980s. The Vietnam war led to increased factionalism within the labor movement, indicating again that labor is not monolithic, but also indicating that the war (or opposition to it) was incredibly important to union members. The willingness of unionists to hamper their own organizational power in the pursuit of peace is notable. Giving up decades of collaboration in order to oppose a war showcases the ideological integrity of these unions, especially considering that some came from industries that benefited materially from the war. The American labor movement is and was diverse and complex, but this complexity should not obscure the currents of peace that erupted in 1964.

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