

ABSTRACT

CARVER, MARK DEAN. The Unionization of Erwin's Mill: A History of TWUA Local 250, in Erwin, North Carolina: 1938-1952 (Under the direction of David Zonderman)

The purpose of this study is to document the history of the Textile Workers union of America (TWUA), Local 250, in Erwin, North Carolina, from 1938-1952. Prior to unionization, Erwin's workers suffered unfair labor practices including: heavy workloads, low wages, long hours, and the absence of grievance procedure. The unionization of Erwin's workers provided a grievance procedure, fair workloads, higher wages, and better hours. TWUA Local 250 worked hard to represent its members and assure them a fair and just system. This thesis examines the first fifteen years of unionization and some of the problems that occurred in Erwin's mill. These problems include anti-union sentiment, unfair company policies, an unnecessary strike, and a political power struggle within the national union. Through the examination of primary sources including company, union, government correspondences, newspaper articles, and personal interviews, it becomes evident that Erwin's workers needed a union to ensure a fair and just system. A fair and just system would only be possible through better communication with the company, the national union, and the federal government. The company, national union, and government seemed to care very little for the desperate situations endured by Local 250 during these first fifteen years. This thesis shows the national union's poor judgment, lack of leadership, and most of all, lack of compassion for Local 250. This study provides a view of the national union from the perspective of the local union.

**THE UNIONIZATION OF ERWIN'S MILL: A HISTORY OF TWUA LOCAL
250, IN ERWIN, NORTH CAROLINA: 1938-1952**

By

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DEDICATION

In memory of Ruth Marguerite Rodgers Carver

Dedicated to Lori and Lindsay

BIOGRAPHY

Born July 12, 1958 in Fayetteville, North Carolina, Mark Dean Carver is the son of Ruth Marguerite Rodgers and Samuel Penn Carver. After graduating from Pine Forest High School in 1976, Mark went to work at Kelly-Springfield Tire Company, a subsidiary of Goodyear Tire and Rubber. During his twenty-five years at Kelly-Springfield, Mark held a variety of positions. He worked as a vacation replacement supervisor for the company, as well being a shop steward for the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), Local 959. In 1992, while working at Kelly-Springfield Mark graduated from Methodist College, where he received a Bachelor of Science Degree. In 1995, Mark attended Labor School at the University of North Carolina, at Wilmington and was elected to a three year term as a Division Chairman for Local 959. Mark attended Steelworker training classes in Orlando, Florida in 1996, and served on the contract negotiating committee for Local 959. Mark married Lori Ann Fitzpatrick on June 12, 1983, and they have a daughter, Lindsay Erin who was born in 1986. Mark is a member of Sigma Omega Chi and Phi Alpha Theta. Mark is currently teaching history at Johnston Community College and working as a curatorial assistant at the Heritage Center in Smithfield, North Carolina.

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All that serves labor serves the nation.

All that harms labor is treason.

No line can be drawn between these two.

If a man tells you he loves his country yet hates labor, he is a
liar.

If a man tells you he trusts his country yet fears labor, he is a
fool.

There is no country without labor,
and to fleece one is to rob the other.

Abraham Lincoln

ABBREVIATIONS

AFHW-----AMERICAN FEDERATION OF HOSIERY WORKERS

AFL ----- AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

CIO ----- CONGRESS OF INDUSTRIAL ORGANIZATIONS

FMCS-----FEDERAL MEDIATION AND CONCILIATION SERVICE

NDMB ----- NATIONAL DEFENSE MEDIATION BOARD

NIRA ----- NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL RECOVERY ACT

NLRA ----- NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT

NWLB ----- NATIONAL WAR LABOR BOARD

OPM ----- OFFICE OF PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT

SOC ----- SOUTHERN ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

STB ----- SOUTHERN TEXTILE BULLETIN

TCPR----- TEXTILE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS

TWOC ----- TEXTILE WORKERS ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

TWUA ----- TEXTILE WORKERS UNION OF AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

The historiography of southern textile labor includes numerous monographs, which detail the plight of workers while trying to explain the failure of unions in the south. Most recently, three authors have written about southern textile labor and the role of unions. These authors are Daniel J. Clark, Timothy Minchin, and Clete Daniel.

Written in 1997, Daniel J. Clark's, *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town*, focuses on the textile workers in the Harriet and Henderson mills of Henderson, North Carolina. Most of Clark's research came from company archives and oral histories. Clark argued that during World War II the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA), in Henderson, made the grievance procedure a valuable weapon for the defense of workers. The grievance procedure provided protection from increased workloads as the mill bosses tightened control and discipline during the war.¹ Even though Clark only briefly mentions Erwin's mill, his research and his analysis leads to the conclusion that the union had a positive impact on textile workers; and that the war brought out the worst in mill bosses, especially their attempts to push workers beyond reason in order to gain higher production and profits. This thesis reaches many of the same conclusions as Clark, especially the argument that, during World War II, the mill bosses pushed workers beyond their normal capacity in order to achieve higher production.

Timothy J. Minchin's, *What Do We Need A Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955*, also written in 1997, addresses several key points that contributed to the failure of the TWUA in the south. Minchin explores the disastrous strike of 1951, the bitter

¹ Daniel J. Clark. *Like Night and Day: Unionization in a Southern Mill Town*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 44.

rivalry between Emil Rieve, President of the National TWUA and George Baldanzi, Vice-President of the National TWUA, the national union's need to protect its northern mills from southern competition, and the nonunion mill owners' willingness to pay their workers near union wages. Minchin also asked the crucial question, why would nonunion mill workers fight for unionization when they were already receiving the same wages and benefits as those in unionized mills?² Minchin's book mentions Erwin's mill several times. Both Minchin's book and this thesis agree that the Strike of 1951 was primarily a stage for Rieve and Baldanzi as they fought to gain political power.

The third book, *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States*, written in 2001, by Clete Daniel, is a comprehensive book that covers the rise and fall of the TWUA. Daniel claims that it was not worker resistance to organized labor, but rather the resistance of the mill owners and their reluctance to bargain with unions who made demands and constantly threatened to strike.³ *Culture of Misfortune* also touches on the paternalistic nature of the mill bosses and the subservient nature of some southern workers.⁴ Daniel also came to the same conclusion about the strike of 1951 as Minchin, that the strike was a battleground for Rieve and Baldanzi as they struggled to gain political power. This thesis supports Daniel's view of antiunion behavior by mill management and their reluctance to collectively bargain with unions, and Daniel's conclusions about the strike of 1951.

² Timothy J. Minchin. *What Do We Need A Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 51.

³ Clete Daniel. *Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 47.

⁴ While doing this research the subservient nature of Erwin's workers became evident. Attempting to contact as many former workers as possible for this thesis it became clear that only a few were willing to discuss their days in the mill. Conducting telephone interviews, no less than twelve former Erwin workers all made the same statement "The company was good to me I'm not interested in being interviewed." (February – December, 2003).

Clark, Minchin, and Daniel have all written extraordinary books that detail the history of southern textile workers and their unions. While TWUA Local 250 and Erwin's mill are not the focus of any of these books, they are mentioned and some of the authors' conclusions are supported in this thesis.

This thesis is the first study ever done that focuses on TWUA Local 250. While the time frame for this thesis begins in 1938, the records only go back to 1941. These rich records however, tell a tremendous story about a working class people that come from a unique place and believe in a strong work ethic.

Why should TWUA Local 250 be studied? There are several reasons to study Local 250. The first reason to study Local 250 is because it was the first union organized in Harnett County, a region known for its antiunion beliefs. Another reason is because Local 250 represented textile workers in Erwin's mill for 59 years, in a mill that operated for 95 years. This phenomenal accomplishment may be attributed to both the company and union working together. The third reason to study Local 250 is because these rich union records tell a wonderful story that might never have been told if these records been allowed to continue deteriorating in the old storage building behind the union hall. These rich records include grievances, union correspondences, government agency responses, and personal letters. The final reason for writing this thesis is because the textile industry in North Carolina is rapidly dying as more and more companies move south of the border and overseas. There is a need to preserve North Carolina's rich labor history before records are lost, so that generations to come will have a better understanding of just how difficult and challenging it was to work in the mills.

In February 1938, the workers of Erwin Cotton Mills Company in Erwin, North Carolina voted in favor of union representation. Because of poor cotton crops, 1938 was not an ideal time to vote in favor of union representation, but the workers did so anyhow. Why did Erwin's workers make such a bold move? Erwin's workers voted for union representation because of heavy workloads, low wages, long hours, few benefits, unfavorable working conditions in the mill, and mistreatment by management. Erwin's workers made less money than other textile workers in the nation had no hospitalization or benefits, worked sixty to seventy hours a week, toiled in extreme heat and polluted air, and suffered unjust actions by company overseers. Erwin's workers were convinced they needed a union. The subsequent history of Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA) Local 250 in Erwin, North Carolina, illustrates an array of frustrations and triumphs in the years between 1938 and 1952.

These first fifteen years of Local 250 are the focus of the study for several reasons. Within those first fifteen years, Local 250 survived anti-union sentiment, a world war, and a major strike. Most unionized workers displayed a combination of courage, and loyalty, while some acted subservient with a naïve nature that hurt the union's progress.

It is evident from examining the first fifteen years of unionization that Local 250 struggled externally with the company and internally with the national union. These external and internal struggles almost destroyed Local 250. The external struggle occurred as the company attempted to destroy union loyalty, making local leaders appear weak by not answering the local's grievances until the national union stepped in. While the company's tactic failed, the method affected membership numbers. Local 250's membership never reached 100% due to company tactics and North Carolina's Right to

Work Laws. These Right to Work Laws, passed March 18, 1947, prohibited all employers from requiring membership into any labor organization as a condition of employment.

Chapter One describes the beginning of the cotton industry in North Carolina and the birth of a mill village in Erwin, North Carolina. Chapter Two examines the labor movement in that mill. Chapter Three looks at the events that took place in Erwin's mill during World War II. Chapter Four examines the General Textile Strike of 1951 and what happened to Local 250 and the National TWUA during this strike. Chapter Five examines Local 250's loyalty to the TWUA after the strike of 1951, focusing on the national union's internal struggle that nearly destroyed Local 250.

It is ironic that North Carolina's textile workers, members of one of the most oppressed groups in the south, would become top processors of cotton goods. Many years after unionization, Erwin, North Carolina became known as "The Denim Capital of the World," producing more than one million yards of cloth per week. TWUA Local 250 helped to accomplish this phenomenal feat while battling management and the government for better wages, fair workloads, benefits, and better working conditions.

By studying Textile Workers Union Local 250, it becomes evident that a good work ethic, loyalty, and dedication were not enough to keep the mill open. Through this study, it also becomes evident that although Local 250 improved the lives of those working in the mill, the local union was divided and weak while depending heavily on the national union. Unfortunately, the national union and its leaders cared more about their own personal power and the total number of union members nationwide.

While the "Denim Capital of the World" produced more denim than its competitors for many years, these high levels of production could not save the jobs of Local 250. In

2000, Swift Textiles of Canada closed Erwin's mill in order to relocate to Mexico where labor was cheaper.⁵ The closing of Erwin's mill was the reward Erwin's workers received for being productive and loyal employees.

It is important not to forget TWUA Local 250 and its members. Local 250 helped build the "Denim Capital of the World" while enduring anti-union attitudes, unfair company procedures, little help from the national union, and an unnecessary strike. This research is a tribute to Local 250 for overcoming adversity and establishing a union that was dedicated to the fight for workers' rights.

⁵ Roosevelt Rogers. Personal interview, February 12, 2003.

CHAPTER ONE: BIRTH OF A MILL VILLAGE

In order to understand the need for textile unions in North Carolina historians must first examine the rapid rise of the cotton industry. This chapter is a brief overview of how the cotton industry grew and made North Carolina the largest textile producing state in the nation. The rapid growth of cotton manufacturing, with its technological advances such as the automatic loom, had a tremendous effect on the workers as mill owners raised production in efforts to make more profits. Textile workers were pushed to extremes to produce large quantities of milled cotton, creating unfair workloads and the need for union representation.

Across the South after the Civil War a new attitude emerged that industrialization would build a “New South.” Proponents of this “New South Creed” included Richard Edmunds, of the *Manufacturers Record* published in Baltimore, Francis W. Dawson of the *Charleston News and Courier*, Henry Watterson of the *Louisville Courier Journal*, and Henry W. Grady of the *Atlanta Constitution*. Richard Edmund’s role was especially significant since his weekly journal devoted itself exclusively to reporting the success stories of southern capitalists. Beginning in 1882, the *Manufacturers Record* chronicled the growth of the southern region with reports on construction, engineering firms, machine shops, and transportation facilities.⁶ The growth of the southern region and the positive reports motivated wealthy North Carolina businessmen to look at new opportunities in cotton manufacturing.

⁶ Brent D. Glass. *The Textile Industry in North Carolina: A History*. (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, 1992), 31.

In North Carolina, a subtitle for the New South creed was the “Cotton Mill Campaign.”⁷ This campaign began in the last years of the nineteenth century as country people migrated to the mill villages in order to work for pay in wages rather than commodities. For several generations many of these people had struggled at farming, only to live a hand to mouth existence. The migration from an agrarian lifestyle to the mill village was an opportunity to escape the harshness of the elements while achieving a better way of life.⁸ A better way of life in the mill looked far more attractive than working the crops just to see them destroyed by drought or heavy rains.

Newspapers throughout the state promoted the textile industry, while industrial promoters reminded manufacturers of the advantages of building cotton mills in North Carolina. According to the newspapers, “the proximity of cotton fiber, the power of the Piedmont waterpower sites, the availability of minerals and lumber, the rural countryside with its inhabitants, and the climate, were several attractive reasons to consider North Carolina for new cotton mills.”⁹

Between 1885 and 1915, North Carolina’s textile industry grew from 60 to 318 mills, processing cotton, wool, and knitted fabrics. The amazingly rapid growth of textile mills saw production go from 200,000 spindles and 2,500 looms in 1885, to 3.88 million spindles and 67,228 looms by 1915. The number of people working in the textile industry was also astounding. In 1885, only about 10,000 people worked in North Carolina’s textile mills, about 10 percent of the state’s industrial workforce. By 1915, the number of textile workers in the mills of North Carolina had grown to more than 51,000. These numbers included men, women, and children who worked in the mills. The size of these mills

⁷ Brent D. Glass, 31.

⁸ Robert F. Durden. *The Dukes of Durham, 1865-1929*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), p.134.

⁹ Brent D. Glass, 31.

fluctuated. An average textile mill in 1885 contained between 3,000 and 4,000 spindles. By 1915, the average North Carolina cotton mill contained 10,000 spindles.¹⁰

Most of North Carolina's cotton mills were spinning mills, producing a cheap low cost yarn for markets in New York and Philadelphia. The lower costs were due largely to inexpensive equipment and an unskilled rural labor force. Those mills with weaving departments produced heavy woven products such as unbleached cloth, denims, plaids, and canton flannel that were used in industrial fabrics and for making clothing for working class people.¹¹

The rapid growth in North Carolina textile manufacturing was stimulated by a major invention. The Northrup automatic loom, developed in the 1880s, made it possible to transfer filling yarn from the bobbin to the shuttle without stopping the loom. This invention improved productivity and reduced the need for skilled labor. It also made North Carolina's manufacturers dependent on northern machinery suppliers. With the Northrup automatic loom, large northern machine shops exerted power and control over the development of North Carolina's textile industry.¹²

The southern textile leaders more than willingly accepted machinery and production standards developed in the shops of the Saco-Lowell Company, George Draper & Sons, Whitin Machine Works, and Crompton and Knowles. These northern shops would control the machinery necessary for cotton production in the south. Many of these northern companies set up regional offices in Charlotte, while working through native southerners such as Daniel A. Thompson and Stuart W. Cramer. Thompson and Cramer exerted a powerful influence on the development of North Carolina's textile industry. North

¹⁰ Brent D. Glass, 35.

¹¹ Brent D. Glass, 35.

¹² Brent D. Glass, 36.

Carolina's textile leaders eagerly embraced the northern machinery and standards with little forethought. They would find that the use of these automatic looms meant mass production of a cheap fabric, which led to a glutted market, which in turn lowered profit margins.¹³

In the early 1890's Daniel A. Thompson planned a strategy to raise capital for manufacturing. His plan was designed to attract small investments from businessmen and other professionals in North Carolina's towns and cities. Under Thompson's plan, a share of stock valued at \$100 would be bought through weekly installments of 50 cents over a four-year period. To start a 5,000-spindle, 120-loom mill required the sale of 1,000 such shares. The \$100,000 capital stock for this mill was typically allocated as follows:

Land.....	\$ 2,000
Mill Building.....	\$14,000
Machinery.....	\$60,000
Houses for Workers.....	\$ 4,000
Working Capital.....	\$ 20,000 ¹⁴

The five figures exemplify the large profits and power the northern machine shops had over southern mill owners. With machinery costs representing 60% of the capital needed to open a mill, only the very wealthy could start cotton production.

In 1892, a group of wealthy financiers, including Washington Duke, and his sons Benjamin Newton Duke, and James Buchanan Duke, started a textile manufacturing

¹³ Brent D. Glass, 36.

¹⁴ Brent D. Glass, 37.

facility in Durham, North Carolina. This enterprise became The Erwin Cotton Mills Company and the Duke family became leaders in the textile industry of North Carolina.

Washington Duke, born on December 20, 1820, was the son of Taylor and Dicey Jones Duke. The eighth of ten children, Washington grew up on the family farm along the banks of the Little River in Orange County, North Carolina.¹⁵ After his service in the Confederate Navy, Washington (or “Wash”, as he was known) went back to the farm and grew a new “bright leaf” tobacco that was especially good for smoking. The smooth tasting leaf was sold from the back of a wagon as Wash traveled the roads of North Carolina making a name for himself in the tobacco industry.¹⁶ Washington Duke built a tobacco empire, W. Duke, Sons and Company, that enabled his sons to explore other industrial interests, including textiles and electrical power.

Wash Duke’s second wife Artelia Roney gave birth to Benjamin Newton Duke, the third Duke son, on April 27, 1855.¹⁷ In order to diversify the family business, Benjamin Duke led the family into the textile industry.¹⁸ Benjamin was an extraordinary businessman. In 1893 his business skills paid off when he hired William A. Erwin, an accomplished industrialist, to manage the Duke family’s new textile manufacturing company in Durham.

In the late 1890s, these wealthy financiers were searching for a new site to build their second cotton mill. They choose an area near the old town of Averagesboro, along the east bank of the Cape Fear River. This site, located approximately 40 miles south of

¹⁵ Robert F. Durden. *The Dukes of Durham, 1865-1929*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1975), 3.

¹⁶ Robert F. Durden, 12.

¹⁷ Robert F. Durden, 4.

¹⁸ Robert F. Durden, 128.

Raleigh, was situated in the midst of vast quantities of cotton and an abundance of cheap labor.

The company took its name in honor of its first president, William A. Erwin, an industrialist from western North Carolina. Erwin, the son of Confederate Colonel Joseph J. and Elvira Holt Erwin, was born on the family plantation near Morganton, North Carolina, on July 15, 1856. Mr. Erwin attended Burke County's Finley High School and completed two years of college at the University of Kentucky. In 1882, he began his career in the cotton industry under the tutelage of L. Banks and Lawrence S. Holt. Mr. Erwin became the secretary and treasurer of the E. M. Holt Plaid Mills in Alamance County.¹⁹

In 1893, shortly after being hired by Benjamin Duke, Erwin moved to Durham, North Carolina and made it the headquarters for The Erwin Cotton Mills Company. Mr. Erwin had previously been president of other mills including Oxford Cotton Mills, Pearl Cotton Mills, Alpine Cotton Mills, and the Locke Cotton Mills Company. Erwin managed The Durham Cotton Manufacturing Company, and Erwin Yarn Agency, both owned by the Duke family. The Erwin Yarn Agency, a selling agency for the Erwin Mills had branches in New York, Philadelphia, and Providence, Rhode Island.²⁰

Erwin was also interested in community infrastructure and in controlling that infrastructure. He built the first graded schools in Davie and Harnett Counties, and for many years contributed to the maintenance of these schools. Erwin also built Good Hope Hospital in the village of Duke, in Harnett County. Good Hope was perhaps the first hospital ever built and supported by an industrial corporation in North Carolina. Erwin, a unique, generous, and paternalistic man, also helped to build many churches in North

¹⁹ The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relation Series. No Author, dated 28 April 1921. Durham, North Carolina. Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

²⁰ The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relation Series. No author, dated 28 April 1921. Perkins Library.

Carolina.²¹ Erwin Cotton Mills Company and its success would become one of Mr. Erwin's greatest achievements.

In the late 1890s, Erwin joined other manufacturers in successfully resisting the National Union of Textile Workers attempts to organize his workers. In Erwin's West Durham mill, after the union had gained some ground, Mr. Erwin gave the Erwin Mills' workers two weeks notice. After receiving their two-week notices, however, some workers quit the union and went back to work, while others went on strike. Although on strike, workers in West Durham received food from the company store under Erwin's instructions. Erwin's decision to give two-week notice to those joining the union, and his humane treatment allowing the company store to sell food to the strikers, hurt the union's cause. Erwin made the union appear weak, while making himself appear powerful, therefore the Durham local disbanded.²²

In the spring of 1903 construction began on plant number two of The Erwin Cotton Mills chain.²³ The mill village, known as Duke, in honor of Benjamin N. Duke, became the site of this plant. In late 1905, production in The Erwin Cotton Mills Company began in Duke. By this time, the mill village of Duke consisted of three-hundred mill houses and the railroad. The railroad made its way through the village to accommodate shipping from the mill.²⁴

In 1923, as North Carolina overtook Massachusetts as the leading textile producing state in America, Benjamin Duke turned a large portion of his attention and capital to the

²¹ The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relation Series. No author, dated 28 April 1921. Perkins Library.

²² Robert F. Durden, 136.

²³ Mary Alice Hasty, et al. *The Heritage of Harnett County, Volume I*. The Harnett County Heritage Committee. Article written by Sion Harrington III, (Charlotte, North Carolina: Delmar Printing, 1993), 72.

²⁴ Mary Alice Hasty, et al., 72.

textile industry.²⁵ Three years later in 1926, the mill village of Duke changed its name to Erwin when Trinity College in Durham changed its name to Duke University in honor of the Duke family. The Erwin Cotton Mills Company and the mill town now carried the name Erwin in honor of William A Erwin.²⁶ Erwin maintained a chain of mills that would remain free from union activity for three decades.

The business savvy of Benjamin Duke and his hiring of William Erwin to lead Erwin Cotton Mills Company set into motion a company that would become the largest producer of denim in the world. As time passed and production demands increased, we may only assume that the struggle of Erwin's workers continued for many years and unionization was only a dream. There is no evidence of strikes or labor problems in Erwin between the 1910's and 1920's.

By the early 1930's, however, the President of the United States introduced new labor legislation that enabled workers to decide their own future. The dream of a future with higher wages, better benefits, and more rights, was on the way for the workers in Erwin's mill.

²⁵ Brent D. Glass. *The Textile Industry in North Carolina: A History*. (Raleigh, North Carolina: Division of Archives and History: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992), 57.

²⁶ Hasty et al., *Sion Harrington III*, 73.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BEGINNING OF UNIONIZATION

As the nation tried to recover from the “Great Depression” (the crash of the stock market in October 1929) President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted many pieces of new legislation. On June 16, 1933, he signed the National Industrial Recovery Act into law. The purpose of the NIRA was, in his words, “to put people back to work.” The NIRA’s agency, the National Recovery Administration, promoted policies that insured reasonable profits for industry by preventing unfair competition and provided a wage that could sustain the laboring classes and shortened the workweek. President Roosevelt termed the law, “the most important and far-reaching legislation ever enacted by the American Congress.”²⁷

The NIRA gave workers the right to organize and bargain collectively. The law relaxed antitrust laws and permitted industries control over production, prices, wages, and hours. North Carolina mill owners welcomed the NIRA and its governing body, the National Recovery Administration. Workers across the Piedmont believed the New Deal guaranteed them fair treatment as they joined the United Textile Workers in droves. By 1935, however, the aspirations and hopes of textile workers were only dreams, as mill owners manipulated the NRA codes or simply ignored them.²⁸

The National Industrial Recovery Act included Section 7 A. Section 7A was one of the most important labor laws passed in the thirties. It read as follows:

²⁷ Melvyn Dubofsky and Foster Rhea Dulles. *Labor In America: A History. Sixth Edition.* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1999), 251.

²⁸ John A. Salmond. *Gastonia 1929: The Story of the Loray Mill Strike.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 181.

“Section 7 (a) Every code of fair competition, agreement, and license approved, prescribed, or issued under this title shall contain the following conditions: (1) That employees shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection; (2) that no employee and no one seeking employment shall be required as a condition of employment to join any company union or to refrain from joining, organizing, or assisting a labor organization of his own choosing; and (3) that employers shall comply with the maximum hours of labor, minimum rates of pay, and other conditions of employment, approved or prescribed by the President.”

Section 7 A of the NIRA protected workers’ rights and guaranteed the freedom to unionize. This new legislation opened the door for union organizing. In North Carolina, however, union organizing was still several years away. In June 1933, William Green, the President of the American Federation of Labor wrote a letter to Erwin’s workers. He stated:

“The hour has arrived when Labor can be free, free to organize. Congress has established your legal right to organize....In the name of Organized Labor I appeal to all classes of workers to act quickly, to organize immediately, to realize

all the benefits and rights to which you are entitled through organization under the provisions of the National Industrial Recovery Act...²⁹

ATTENTION! WAGE EARNERS AND SALARIED WORKERS
EVERYWHERE. DO YOU WANT HIGHER WAGES, SHORTER HOURS,
AND IMPROVED CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT, AND ARE YOU
WILLING TO ORGANIZE IN ORDER TO SECURE THESE BENEFITS?
THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES HAS ESTABLISHED
YOUR LEGAL RIGHT TO ORGANIZE!

NO EMPLOYER AND NO CORPORATION CAN, WITHOUT VIOLATING
THE LAW, INTERFERE IN THE EXERCISE OF THE WORKERS' RIGHT TO
ORGANIZE AND TO BARGAIN COLLECTIVELY THROUGH
REPRESENTATIVES OF THEIR OWN CHOOSING!

Within a year after workers in Erwin received this letter, and became aware of Section 7 A, the largest industry-wide textile strike in U. S. history occurred. While the NIRA guaranteed fairness, mill owners manipulated the act or simply ignored it. In June 1934, the textile board announced a wage reduction to the already suffering textile workers nationwide. Francis Gorman, vice-president of the United Textile Workers, called for a

²⁹ Union letter from William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor, to all unorganized workers. 17 June 1933.

general strike to begin on September 1.³⁰ The culmination of more than thirty years of southern labor struggle, the strike affected more than 171,000 southern textile workers. The Textile Strike of 1934 brought attention to the plight of textile workers nationwide, including poor living conditions, and poor working conditions.

The strike of 1934 encouraged textile workers throughout North Carolina to attempt organizing campaigns, but the strike also turned some textile workers against the union. Some workers would never again trust a union believing the UTW had misled them with lies. In 1934, Erwin's mill did not have a union. Many workers in the mill, coming from rural areas and farm families, thought unions were nothing but trouble. These anti-union attitudes would change in the coming years as union organizers from larger cities such as Greensboro and Durham explained the benefits of having a union.

The General Textile Strike of 1934 and its resurgence of labor militancy was one factor that helped lead to the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).³¹ In 1937, protected by the NLRA of 1935, the newly formed Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC) launched a major organizing campaign in North Carolina. This campaign would heighten the awareness of unjust treatment suffered by textile workers. Workers in Erwin's mill had particularly been plagued by short workweeks and unfair workloads.

The year 1938 was a very difficult time for textile workers throughout North Carolina. The average textile workers wage in North Carolina was only \$14.45 a week and employment in textile mills was down 9% from the previous year.³² In 1938, due to compulsory government crop controls, poor pricing, heavy boll weevil infestation, and

³⁰ John A. Salmond, 182.

³¹ James R. Green. *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 150.

³² The Fayetteville Observer, Saturday, 12 March 1938. Front page.

unfavorable weather conditions, North Carolina would produce its smallest amount of cotton in nearly fifty years.³³ With no cotton to spin in the mills the textile workers dreams of unionization were dashed, but for only a short time.

Low wages, unfavorable working conditions, and the stretch-out system in the textile industry, including Erwin's mill, motivated workers there to support union representation. The stage was set for a negotiations battle that would continue for years. The long arduous battle began when the TWOC won elections at all three sites of the Erwin Cotton Mills Company in Erwin, Durham, and Cooleemee, North Carolina.³⁴

From February 9-11, 1938, mill workers from Erwin Cotton Mills Company met to vote on joining the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). In Erwin's mills, known as plants number 2 and 5, workers left their spindles and looms and met at the town's bowling alley to cast their votes. When tabulated, the results revealed a very close vote by the workers in Erwin, 958 workers voted in favor of joining the CIO, while 813 voted against the union.³⁵ The attitude of Erwin's workers and the close union vote is good evidence that Erwin's workers were far from being strong pro-union supporters. We must remember that most of Erwin's workers were from rural areas and farms; therefore, they were somewhat unsure of the union and its intentions. Local 250 would start out as a divided union and would remain that way for many years. In Durham, the vote was 1,468 for and 243 against, while workers in Cooleemee voted 1005 in favor of the union and 219 against it. The higher voting tabulations in favor of unionization in Durham and Cooleemee were due to their locations being closer to larger metropolitan areas. After the vote, D. S. Upchurch,

³³ Harnett County News, Saturday, 22 December 1938.

³⁴ Daniel J. Clark, 32.

³⁵ The Records of Erwin Mills Labor Relations 1933-1952, Textile Workers Union of America, Box 48. Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

the CIO organizer from Charlotte said, “I’m tickled to death, the vote cast here today perfects the organization of the CIO in the complete Erwin Cotton Mills system.” The next step, according to Upchurch, “would be to obtain a petition from the government certifying the CIO as the exclusive bargaining agent of the Erwin Mills workers, concerning wages, hours and working conditions.”³⁶ These CIO victories created a front that demonstrated to other North Carolina textile workers the possibility of unionization throughout the textile industry.³⁷ The TWOC, however, would be unable to negotiate contracts with the mill bosses. The mill bosses regarded the TWOC as a menace that only agitated the textile business.³⁸

The Southern Textile Bulletin (STB), a Southern-based industry publication, encouraged mill owners to resist the union victory. According to the STB, “mills were not required to recognize union organizations, ‘as a collective bargaining agencies,’ when employees have so voted. . . there is no requirement that any contract be signed and we always counsel against signing.”³⁹ However, according to laws passed by the Roosevelt administration, collective bargaining agencies could negotiate wages, workloads, and hours. The NLRA forced Erwin Mill’s president Kemp P. Lewis to begin collective bargaining with the TWOC in March 1938, and this negotiating process would take years before the company signed its first contract.

On May 3, 1938, Kemp P. Lewis wrote a letter to S. P. Brewer, the Carolina Coordinator for the TWOC in Charlotte. The letter stated:

Dear Mr. Brewer:

³⁶ The Charlotte Observer. Section page 3, 12 February 1938.

³⁷ Daniel J. Clark, 32.

³⁸ Clete Daniel, 77.

³⁹ Daniel J. Clark, 33. Chapter 2, note 22, *The Southern Textile Bulletin* 57, no. 7. (1 December 1939): 26.

The contract we submitted to you...was prepared by us after a great deal of thought and care, and contains in its principles that we think are necessary to the proper operation of our business in the interest of both our employees and our stockholders. Changes in wording can be made, of course, but the contract as submitted seems to us to be very clear and fair...but we cannot, up until this time, agree to greatly change the contract as submitted to you.

We will be very glad to continue negotiations...but we seem to be rather far apart in reaching an agreement, and it seems to us best to wait before rewriting the whole agreement until we can get closer together in our negotiations.

One of our criticisms of our contract is that it is long and involved.⁴⁰

In response to Lewis' letter, Brewer replied:

Dear Mr. Lewis:

I have your letter of May 3rd containing observations upon our exchange of proposed agreement.

In reply will say that I agree with you that other conferences are necessary in order that we may form some definite

⁴⁰ The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relations Series: 1938-1939, Box 47. Letter from Erwin Cotton Mills President, Kemp P. Lewis to S. P. Brewer, Carolina TWOC Coordinator, 3 May 1938. Duke Universities Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

understanding before we can hope to arrive at an accord acceptable to both parties...⁴¹

It appears from the letters that the company intended to draw out contract negotiations with the union as long as they could, and they did. The company and its owners wanted no part of the union, but they had no choice. Contract negotiations between the Erwin Cotton Mills Company and the TWOC began in March 1938 and lasted for three years. President Lewis and his team of company negotiators could not come to terms with the TWOC and could not agree on a fair collective bargaining agreement.

On June 28, 1938, Lewis wrote again to Brewer.

Dear Mr. Brewer,

We regret that conditions in the textile business, under which our Company has suffered for months, make it necessary for us to make a reduction in pay, applying to all employees of the Company, to take effect beginning July 18, 1938. Prices and general conditions in the textile trade, wage reductions in New England and throughout the South, putting us greatly out of line in our labor costs, have all combined to make this action seem necessary.

We expect to inform our employees promptly, without stating any amount, that a reduction is planned for July 18th, in order to carry

⁴¹ The Records of Erwin Mills: Labor Series, 1938-1939, Box 47. Letter from S. P. Brewer to Kemp P. Lewis. 4 May 1938. Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

out our expressed willingness to give two weeks notice before any pay decrease.⁴²

According to N. A. Gregory, an Erwin Mills official, the CIO turned down contract offers at mills #2 and #5 in Erwin during March, April, and August of 1938.⁴³ In February and April 1939, union negotiators again rejected contracts for the Erwin Mills workers because of key issues including the grievance procedure with binding arbitration, seniority rights, and the dues check-off.⁴⁴

In May 1939, faced with money problems and opposition from many southern mill owners, the Textile Workers' Organizing Committee restructured to form the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA). The Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) helped raise a million dollars for the restructuring of the TWOC. The newly formed TWUA created a larger union giving it more strength in the collective bargaining process. The TWUA now operated under the authority of its own constitution. The strength of the TWUA, however, would be met with resistance from those opposed to unions.⁴⁵

In June 1941, the Dunn Dispatch wrote an article, "*Dunn Citizens Demand Action Against Labor.*" This article stated that Dunn residents were signing petitions demanding the immediate passage of an anti-strike law by Congress, the ousting of Secretary of Labor

⁴² The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relations Series: 1938-1939, Box 47. Letter from Kemp P. Lewis, President of Erwin Cotton Mills Company, to S. P. Brewer, TWOC Carolina Coordinator, 28 June 1938. Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

⁴³ The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relation Series, Box 49. Dairy of N. A. Gregory. Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

⁴⁴ Union Handout.

⁴⁵ Clete Daniel. 126, Note 3: TWOC Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention, 15 May 1939.

Francis Perkins, and the deportation of Harry Bridges, a noted labor agitator.⁴⁶ The anti-union activities near Erwin in 1941 did not intimidate those in the mill who favored unionization. The TWUA and Erwin's workers were not to be denied a union contract.

In August of 1941, after an arduous negotiation, Mr. Kemp Lewis, Erwin Mills chief negotiator, relented to pressure from the National Defense Mediation Board (NDMB), and signed a bargaining agreement on August 22, 1941. This contract, the last one in the chain to be signed, covered the remaining workers in Erwin, North Carolina. All three mills in the Erwin chain had now signed contracts covering 5,500 workers.⁴⁷ Although only fifteen pages in length this first contract gave Erwin's workers hopes in achieving a fair working environment with reasonable workloads, better wages, and union representation.

The contract of 1941 was unique to Erwin's mill and Local 250. Other contracts within the Erwin chain, such as Local 251 in Cooleemee, North Carolina, were not as in-depth and lacked many concise provisions, including binding arbitration. Local 251's contract lacked many protections offered to Local 250 because Local 251 signed a contract much earlier than Local 250. Local 250's contract contained two essential rights for union members in plants #2 and #5: union recognition, and a grievance procedure with binding arbitration. The first right of union recognition came in Section 2 of the agreement and read as follows:

The Company recognizes the Union as the exclusive bargaining agency for all its employees in the Nos. 2 and 5 Mills under the terms of the National Labor Relations Act. The Union will continue to represent all

⁴⁶ The Dunn Dispatch. "*Dunn Citizens Demand Action Against Labor*," June 24, 1941. Front Page.

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Clark, 40.

the employees fairly, and the Company agrees not to interfere with or restrain any employee because of membership in the Union.

Section 2 of Local 250's bargaining agreement continued:

Both parties agree to co-operate to prevent and avoid any kind of friction between employees while on duty and that any employee who willfully neglects his duties or interferes with the production of other employees shall be disciplined by the Company.

While section two of the 1941 contract recognized the union as the bargaining agent for the workers, it also reminded the union and its members that their rights had limitations. The second right, a grievance procedure with binding arbitration came in Section 7 of the 1941 contract. Section 7 protected workers from unjust punitive measures. The contract in the Cooleemee mill contained limited arbitration of workload disputes, and provided arbitration for general grievances such as discharges, or wage adjustments.

Local 250's contract also contained the most powerful clause in any contract, the "management clause." The management clause protected the sole rights and powers of the company. In Section 4, this clause read as follows:

The management of the mills and the direction of the working forces, including the right to hire, suspend, transfer, discharge for just cause, and the right to relieve employees from duty because of lack of work, or for causes other than membership or non-union membership in the Union, is vested exclusively in the Company. If any employee feels that, he or she

has been unjustly dealt with, he or she may handle same as provided for in Section 7.⁴⁸

In other words, if the workers' did not like the way in which they were being treated by management, they should file a grievance. In the meantime workers had to keep working while awaiting an answer from the company. The management clause acted as a reminder to the workers that management, not the union, would oversee the daily operations of the mill. The business of operating the mill remained the sole responsibility of the company. The company could do just about anything it wanted with little or no regard for the workers. The management clause acted as a safety net for the company and its managers. In the coming years the company would enforce the management clause with complete disregard towards the Erwin workers.

On November 14, 1941 TWUA Representative, E. W. Witt wrote a letter to Mr. E. H. Bost, manager of Erwin Cotton Mills Company:

Dear Sir,

It has come to my attention on numerous occasions that Mr. R. A. Hughes, overseer #5 Spinning Room has and does refuse to deal with certain of our Committee people who are under his supervision. Matters of this nature are sometimes the cause for strife, as of today in #5 Card Room. We as well as the company wish to keep the employees satisfied as far as possible. The Union cannot carry out this policy as long as we have to work under

⁴⁸ Contract between Erwin Cotton Mills Company and TWUA Local 250, 22 August 1941.

adverse conditions, such as mentioned above.⁴⁹

Witt's letter clearly indicates that very few overseers agreed with the contract, and many union and company officials argued constantly over its interpretation.

In a letter dated November 21, 1941, TWUA representative, H. D. Lisk wrote to Mr. Carl R. Harris, representative of Erwin Cotton Mills Company in protest of Rule Five of Section Eight of the contract:

Dear Mr. Harris,

The union wishes to advise that we cannot accept your interpretation and application of rule five section eight of working agreement signed by and between the Erwin Cotton Mills Company and the Textile Workers Union of America. Since representatives of the company and the union cannot agree on this matter, the writer asks that it be referred to arbitration.⁵⁰

Rule five of section eight, the rule referred to in Lisk's letter stated:

Rule 5: When any position becomes open permanently, the overseer shall post same. Any employee performing similar work in the same plant and department may bid for the position by filling written notice with the overseer within five (5) days that he wishes to be considered for same. If those applying have demonstrated while in the employment of the Company their ability to successfully perform duties required, the oldest qualified employee in point of service will be assigned...It is distinctly

⁴⁹ E. W. Witt, TWUA Representative. Letter to E. H. Bost, Manager of Erwin Cotton Mill Company. 14 November 1941.

⁵⁰ H. D. Lisk, TWUA Representative. Letter to Carl R. Harris, Erwin Cotton Mills Company Representative. 21 November 1941.

understood that the Company has the right to transfer employees to any position or place where their services are needed....⁵¹

Lisk made the right decision in challenging Section 8: Rule 5 of the 1941 agreement. The overseers in Erwin's mill ignored the bid procedure for workers who wanted new assignments and moved workers whenever and wherever they wanted. For this reason, Lisk objected to the contract language in an attempt to eliminate discrimination and favoritism. Section 8 of the agreement was long, very ambiguous, and leaned heavily in the company's favor. The main problem with Rule 5 of Section 8 was the last sentence that read: "It is distinctly understood that the Company has the right to transfer employees to any position or place where their services are needed." By allowing the mill bosses to direct labor with no regard to fair workloads an enormous strain was put on workers.

Shortly after signing the contract of 1941, TWUA Local 250 contacted the TWUA national leadership for help in stopping unfair labor practices such as "the stretch-out" system. The "stretch-out" cut the number of workers on a job and distributed the work to those remaining. This unfair workload put union leaders in a difficult situation. When local union leaders in the mill could not handle local problems, they appeared weak. By not working with Local 250's leadership to solve problems, the company attempted to manipulate and control the workers and their union. If the local union appeared weak, workers would not want to become dues paying members. This demoralizing tactic gave more power to the mill bosses.

⁵¹ Agreement Between The Erwin Cotton Mills Company (Plants No. 2 and 5) Erwin, North Carolina and Textile Workers Union of America, 22 August 1941.

Erwin's workers needed help, not only in the mill, but with unfair company systems and policies. Labor legislation was needed to strengthen the rights of Erwin's workers as the mill bosses treated them with little or no respect.

While trying to pull the nation out of the Depression through worker friendly legislation, President Roosevelt's National Industrial Recovery Act provided Erwin's workers with important rights. The rights outlined in Section 7A gave Erwin's workers hope for the future and the AFL letter by William Green explained these rights.

Although the area around Erwin was antiunion and the vote to unionize in 1938 was very close, the thought of heavy workloads, unfair wages, and extreme working conditions came to the forefront as Erwin's workers showed their courageous nature while attempting to break away from the mill bosses.

While Kemp P. Lewis managed to slow down the collective bargaining process by not signing the first union contract until 1941, the three arduous years of negotiations with constant disputes about contract interpretation taught Erwin's workers another valuable lesson about the company. The company never gave anything merely out of the goodness of their hearts. The workers learned that they had to fight and struggle for every benefit won from the company.

CHAPTER THREE: THE WAR YEARS

During World War II Erwin's workers would be pushed beyond normal limits. Because of the war, the government made demands and agreements with unions in order to keep production high and costs low. The government demanded that workers take no strike oaths in return for government protection. The government and union both broke their promises to one another. The government seemed to ignore union contracts on wages, workloads, and work hours, while unions revolted because of the no strike pledge.

In 1941, textile workers in Erwin, North Carolina made less than twelve dollars a week. These low wages were considerably less than the average textile workers' wage of three years earlier and more importantly were less than unionized textile workers in North Carolina.⁵² During many years of hard labor and unfair wages in Erwin's Cotton Mill, workers realized during the war that they needed to be more aggressive in attaining higher wages, and in the elimination of the stretch-out and unit systems.

In the wake of Pearl Harbor, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) agreed to a no-strike pledge and participation in the National War Labor Board (NWLB). The NWLB, established on January 12, 1942, acted as the official government contact and mediator between TWUA Local 250 and Erwin Mills. The NWLB had the power to review grievances and to enforce its decisions directly, bypassing the judicial system.⁵³ The NWLB encouraged companies to sign contracts with unions and promoted fairness in the workplace.⁵⁴

⁵² Timothy J. Minchin, 53.

⁵³ Daniel J. Clark, 33.

⁵⁴ Robert H. Zieger. *The CIO 1935-1955*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 144.

During World War II, the NLRB offered union members more protection of their jobs and rights in exchange for the no-strike pledge. A large number of textile workers made the no-strike pledge for the duration of the war the NLRB adopted security provisions that protected production as the standard in wartime contracts.⁵⁵ The no-strike pledge, an attempt to keep workers at their workstations regardless of harsh working conditions, did not succeed because of management's arrogance in trying to force workers beyond normal limits. Some Local 250 members signed a sheet stating they were "willing to carry their part of the burden" in case a strike was necessary during the war.⁵⁶

In Erwin's mill, during the war, workers were pushed far beyond their limitations, especially during 1943 and 1944. With complete disregard for their employees, the managers installed company policies such as the "stretch-out" system, thus prompting the union to question this unfair treatment. The continuous unfair treatment of Erwin's workers motivated Local 250 to call wildcat strikes (unauthorized strikes) during the war. The media called Local 250's wildcat strikes "unpatriotic strikes."

Union activity increased in Erwin and the nation during the war years. Although the CIO had agreed to a no-strike pledge, strikes increased in 1943 and 1944. More than 2 million Americans went on strike in 1943 alone. Strikes, and threats of strikes, was one way to keep the mill bosses wondering what was going to happen next.

On March 30, 1943, Local 250 went on a wildcat (unauthorized) strike in Erwin due to the stretch-out system. This strike lasted less than a week. While this wildcat strike did not receive authorization from the national union, the company, under pressure from the Local 250, showed compassion for the wildcat strikers.

⁵⁵ Timothy J. Minchin, 16.

⁵⁶ Document appears to be notes from union meeting. Fifty workers signed agreement to strike if necessary. 28 February 1944.

The following letter granted full seniority rights back to Erwin's wildcat strikers. It is evidence that the mill was willing to forgive the walkout because the company was making high profits during the war. Dr. Frank T. de Vyver, Erwin Mills' Cotton Company Personnel Director wrote:

“I feel that seniority to a worker is a very important right which should be regarded with a great deal of care by that worker. I think you will agree with me that if there were no extenuating circumstances, these strikers certainly deserved some penalty, and that loss of seniority was not too severe a penalty for so breaking the contract. On the other hand, there apparently were extenuating circumstances, and we are very glad therefore to comply with the request of the general committee.”⁵⁷

The company's willingness to comply with the general committee was due to its eagerness to get back on track in order to continue to make large profits. This letter, however, also indicated the need for workers to think before they act, before they lost their jobs. It sounds like a warning from management. This warning, however, would go unheeded by Erwin's workers. During World War II, the wildcat strike proved to be an effective tool against company mistreatment.

The unstable situation in Erwin's mill is visible in this handwritten letter by Local 250 President William Long, to TWUA National President Emil Rieve. In October of 1943 Long wrote:

This is to advise you and the National Organization of the critical condition of our Local Union because of the position that we have been

⁵⁷ Frank T. de Vyver, Erwin Mills' Cotton Company Personnel Director, letter to Demery Williams, TWUA 250 Local President. 3 September 1943.

put in by officers of the National Union. . . . We had been advised by the National officers that the National Union was for fighting the Unit System with our company, then we were advised by other National officers that we would have to take this extra workload . . . We advise you as President of our National Organization to take a hand in this situation before it is too late. People have taken the position that they will not abide by order of the War Labor Board.⁵⁸

The Unit System (piecework) paid workers for their output in production. To receive full pay workers had to produce a certain amount. The problem with piecework was the company set the rates so high that it was almost impossible to make 100% pay. The workers, therefore, received pay only for the quantity they produced. If a worker, on the unit system, produced more than average amounts of product, they received a bonus incentive. However, in cases of low production, the company would pay only the percentage of products produced and could punish workers for “lack of reasonable effort” (a company term for not working hard enough). The Unit System allowed mill bosses to cut wages for low production and to control production through manipulation and enticement, by threatening punitive actions against those who did not meet company quotas.

Shortly after the October letter to the TWUA National President, Local 250 struck against the installation of the Unit System. When this strike took place, the local media pounced on the strikers. In the November 9, 1943, issue of “*The Dunn Dispatch*,” this

⁵⁸ William Long, TWUA Local 250 President, letter to Emil Rieve, TWUA International President. 29 October 1943.

newspaper referred to Erwin strikers from Local 250, as “unpatriotic and selfish.” The newspaper said, “When we strike on our jobs, we’re not only stopping production, but we’re no longer making money to put into war bonds and stamps. So, employees, lets be called ‘Workers toward Victory’, from now on, instead of ‘Strikers for Defeat.’”⁵⁹ As if this type of rhetoric against Local 250 was not enough, now the national union made requests of the local to help organize nonunion mills.

Local 250 was on strike when George Baldanzi, Vice-President of the National TWUA, requested help from the local in order to organize other textile mills in North Carolina. On November 10, 1943, Mr. Baldanzi wrote a letter to William Long, the President of Local 250. Long was asked to gather information about other mills in the state and to forward it to the national in New York. Baldanzi wrote:

We are making tentative plans to determine the advisability of carrying on an organizing drive on the Burlington chain.

As you know, we have organized several mills of this chain and this company has been carrying on an anti-union campaign. We have received a favorable decision from the War Labor Board affecting three of their dye houses in Burlington and the company closed them down and has not opened them since. We have won several elections in this company’s weaving mills and they merely closed the mills and moved the looms.

It is our opinion that in order to tackle this company it will be necessary to carry on a drive affecting practically all the plants at the same time. In order to undertake this task intelligently it will be necessary to gather as much information as possible.

⁵⁹ The Dunn Dispatch, “*Erwin Strikers.*” 9 November 1943. 6A.

Could you therefore send me, as soon as possible, as much information about the Burlington plants in your community as you can get – number of workers employed, whether as a result of your contacts and knowledge there is any sentiment for the union at the present time, and any other information that you feel will be useful.⁶⁰

In his written response Long worried only about his union members, and seemed to care little about the plans of organizing more mills in North Carolina. Long no longer trusted Baldanzi or the national union because they had failed to help Local 250 with its huge volume of grievances. Long knew that more organized mills in the state would not improve or help the situation of Local 250. More organized mills meant more money for the national, but also meant less time for Local 250 and her problems. The national union had also failed in keeping the “stretch-out” system out of Erwin’s mill. In a scathing letter, dated November 24, 1943, Long responded to Mr. Baldanzi’s request.

“In reply to your recent letter I wish to say that at the present time I find it impossible to get the information for you on the Burlington Mills for the reasons following. We acted on your personal advice and refused to accept the Unit or stretch-out system in Erwin. The National office of which you are a part refused to back us or give us any advice except to tell us to go back to work and take it whether we liked it or not. We called the National President of TWUA and found him with Mr. W. H. Ruffin, treasurer of Erwin Cotton Mills, in his office. Then we wired him and also wrote him a letter about our situation here and all we got was a wire to go

⁶⁰ George Baldanzi, TWUA International Executive Vice-President, letter to William Long, TWUA Local 250 President. 10 November 1943.

back to work and take the unit system, and a letter telling us that there was a war going on. We admit we live in a small village but we had already heard about the war as we have lost approximately 100 members to the armed forces. We do not have gasoline to run up the road to tell people about the union and if we did the first thing they would want to know is why we don't get some of the good things for ourselves. What can we tell them after the national office has let us down like it did in our recent trouble. We have enough to do trying to keep what members we now have and trying to think up something to do that will show them that their Local officers are still trying although their National officers failed in their hour of need. We were supposed to have a man in here from the National office three weeks ago, to make a time study on the cause of our work stoppage, but with only two more days to go on the trial period no one has shown up and although we have spent considerable time trying to find out why we find out nothing. We have a membership that is very sore at the treatment we received over the work stoppage and it will take some time to get them where they will believe anything that comes from the National office.”⁶¹

Long's response to Baldanzi made it evident that Local 250 felt betrayed. The local union wanted no part of the unit system or the stretch-out, but the national union sided with the company by not sending a union engineer to do the time study. The national union felt a sense of responsibility to the company because it had agreed to no strikes or slow downs

⁶¹ William Long, TWUA Local 250 President. Letter to George Baldanzi, TWUA Executive Vice-President. 24 November 1943.

during the war. Therefore, Baldanzi had to take responsibility for promises made to the government. Baldanzi came across as an arrogant northerner who did not explain the national's intentions or actions. Local 250 members had previously listened to Baldanzi's advice and believed the TWUA national would stand behind them, only to find out that the national union had made decisions with the company behind the local's back. The national union said one thing and did another. The national union seemed to talk out of both sides of its mouth, causing a major rift in the relationship between Local 250 and the national union. The relationship between Local 250 and the national union needed repairing as neither trusted the other. The national now had to keep an eye on Local 250 and keep them in the fold.

It appeared that the national union's determination to organize more mills overrode the need to take care of those union members already paying dues. The national union seemed to care little about local issues in Erwin. Therefore, the harsh letter written by Long to Baldanzi seemed justified. The local president stood up for his members and asked tough questions of the national leaders. In response to Long's scathing letter, Baldanzi replied with a response dated, November 30, 1943. Baldanzi wrote:

I feel that there must be some misunderstanding as to the position of the National Union; the difference appears to be one of method and time rather than of principle, because we have never informed the company that we are in agreement with the system that it has inaugurated.⁶²

Baldanzi realized that Long and Local 250 members were upset with national representation, and he needed to do some damage control as he sought to get back into the

⁶² George Baldanzi, TWUA International Executive Vice-President, letter to William Long TWUA Local 250 President, 30 November 1943.

good graces of Local 250, while also getting the local back in line. The request by Baldanzi for information about other mills in North Carolina went unfulfilled. Baldanzi allowed Local 250 and its leaders' time to calm down before he approached them again.

In January of 1944, Local 250 made new wage demands. In a letter to K. P. Lewis, president of Erwin Cotton Mills Company, R. R. Lawrence, Regional Director of the TWUA, wrote:

Dear Mr. Lewis

Enclosed herewith you will find the Union's specific schedule proposing the establishment of an adequate and definite minimum for each classification and/or occupation of work, embracing also the Union's demand for a sixty cent per hour minimum rate of pay.

In February 1944, Erwin Mills' management attempted to change wages, increase workloads, and install the unit system in the mill without NLRB approval. These changes caused an up-roar in the mill. In a letter dated February 4, 1944, Local 250 Vice-President James G. Fann, wrote to Mrs. Pauline W. Horton, Federal Representative, Wage and Hour Public Contracts Divisions, U. S. Department of Labor. Fann asked:

Dear Mrs. Horton . . . Does the company have the right to adjust wages where there has been a change in some other department on workload that has decreased the quality of goods so as to affect the production in weave rooms where weavers are paid on piece basis and where loom fixers are paid an hourly rate with an incentive bonus system? The company put into effect the workload change on warp tenders. They were running two machines before the change at a rate of pay

averaging twenty-two dollars for forty [sic] hours. The new work assignment gave them three machines at a rate of pay approximately from twenty dollars to twenty-three dollars for forty [sic] hours. This change in workload put the effort of the workers to produce the amount of goods fifty percent higher than it was on the old workload. . .Has the company the right to adjust this without approval of the War Labor Board? Does the company have the right to change from a piece rate of pay to an incentive unit system rate of pay which would change the entire rate of pay that has been prevailing for the past twenty years?. . .The weavers in the past twelve years have been operating thirty-two looms. . . The new set up will make the weavers run from thirty-nine to fifty-four looms.⁶³

Fann's letter went unanswered, thus causing a great deal of stress and anxiety within Local 250. On February 28, 1944, newly elected President of Local 250, James L. Odom, filed a notice of strike intention to the NWLB, due to the unit system, pay rate, and the stretch-out at Erwin Mills plants number 2 and 5.⁶⁴ During the stretch-out, mill bosses laid off workers and gave the extra work to those still on the job, without paying them more.

The situation in Erwin Mills motivated President Odom to take drastic measures in an effort to secure the future of Local 250 and its members. While TWUA Local 250 waited for help from the national union, President Odom felt an obligation to his

⁶³ James G. Fann, TWUA Local 250 Vice-president, letter to Mrs. Pauline W. Horton, Federal Representative Wage, and Hour Public Contracts Divisions U. S. Department of Labor.

⁶⁴ James L. Odom, TWUA Local 250 President, strike notice given to Erwin Mills' management. 28 October 1944.

membership to do more. In an act of desperation On October 12, 1944, Odom wrote to the President of the United States:

Dear Mr. Roosevelt,

Although realizing you are a very busy man with all your war time duties to perform we hate very much to bother you with our problems here, but being our President of these great United States we feel we should consult with you concerning our problems which is forcing some of our people to leave here and take employment elsewhere in order to make a living, and support their families....All of this has come about as a result of some work changes put into affect [sic] by the company....Which is contrary to a ruling by the Forth (sic) Regional War Labor Board in Atlanta....I would appreciate seeing you for just a few minutes at your earliest convenience.⁶⁵

At the end of October Odom received a letter written on October 23, 1944, by U. S. Army Major General Edwin M. Watson, Secretary to President Roosevelt. Watson wrote:

Dear Mr. Odom,

This will acknowledge your letter of October 12, 1944, addressed to the President, in which you advise that members of your Union have been affected adversely by reason of an alleged violation of a ruling heretofore issued by the Atlanta Regional War Labor Board.

Problems of the type mentioned in your letter are handled initially by an agency of government having jurisdiction over the subject matter in question.

⁶⁵ James L. Odom, TWUA Local 250 President, letter to Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States. 12 October 1944.

Accordingly, I suggest you bring your problem to the attention of the Atlanta Regional War Labor Board. I am sure that the Regional Board will advise you fully or will refer you to the appropriate source of information.⁶⁶

Local 250 President Odom would stop at nothing to help his membership. The letter to President Roosevelt exemplifies an act of desperation. The pressure on President Odom must have been tremendous for him to feel the need to request help directly from the President of the United States. Odom's letter speaks volumes about his leadership qualities and the lack of help he was receiving from the national union. On the other hand, Odom's letter reflects his naïve nature in believing that FDR would step in and help Local 250 with its problems.

On October 13, 1944, still feeling pressure, Odom wrote to Mr. William H. Davis, Chairman of the National War Labor Board:

Mr. Davis. . . We have a serious problem involving several hundred workers in one of our mills. . . . The company has discontinued one shift in one of the mills and may have to discontinue another as several hundred of our workers are only getting three to four days work per week, and this is working a hardship on them because they can hardly live on this work.⁶⁷

Odom's two letters, written only one day apart, reflect the serious tension that existed between the union and company. President Odom, acting out of desperation or courage, wanted to secure help for TWUA Local 250. Without a doubt, Odom faced extreme pressure from the union membership to do something about the unfair labor

⁶⁶ Edwin M. Watson, Secretary to the President of the United States, letter to Local TWUA President James L. Odom. 23 October 1944.

⁶⁷ James L. Odom, TWUA Local 250 President, letter to William H. Davis, Chairman of the National War Labor Board. 13 October 1944.

practices in the mill. On October 19, 1944 in response to Mr. Odom's letter, Bernard Weisman, Chairman of the New Case Committee for the NWLB wrote:

Under the Executive Orders and Statutes establishing this Board, the general requirement was made that the usual processes of collective bargaining and conciliation must be exhausted before a case may be certified to the Board by the U. S. Conciliation Service. . . you should request the assistance of the United States Conciliation Service, Department of Labor, Washington, D. C.⁶⁸

From Weisman's letter to President Odom, it is apparent that Local 250 had not followed proper procedures. Why had Odom not written to the national union asking for help? It was the job of the national union to exhaust the grievance procedure and make the final call on what avenue to take. Odom's distrust of Baldanzi and the national union was probably the reason he tried to circumvent the procedure.

On October 27, 1944, less than two weeks after Mr. Odom received Weisman's letter, R. H. Brazzell, NWLB Regional Labor Representative, wrote to Mr. Odom:

Dear Jimmy. . . I am pleased to advise you that we are now in the process of arranging a joint conference at Erwin to go thoroughly into the matters that you mention. We are hoping to have at this conference representatives of the War Production Board offices in Raleigh, of the District War Manpower Commission, as well as representatives of the Company and Union.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Bernard Weisman, Chairman of the New Case Committee of the National War Labor Board. Letter to James L. Odom, TWUA Local 250 President. 19 October 1944.

⁶⁹ R. H. Brazzell, National War Labor Board Regional Representative. Letter to James L. Odom, TWUA Local 250 President. 27 October 1944.

This conference temporarily helped to calm the tensions between the company and the union by allowing both parties to talk out their differences. In the long term however, the company continued its unfair policies and procedures.

The war years in Erwin's mill were very difficult. Erwin's workers had worked the stretch-out system and the unit system, while suffering wage and work-hour cuts. These hardships, and the lack of national union representation, forced the local union to act in desperation. Local 250 and its leaders would remember the company's policies and the lack of representation by the national union. These memories would have a profound affect on the future relationship with the company and union organizing campaigns in North Carolina.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ In 1946, shortly after World War II, the CIO launched "Operation Dixie" a major organizing campaign that focused on North Carolina. It seems that Erwin's mill would have been perfect as the flagship for this organizing campaign since all three plants in the Erwin chain unionized before most other North Carolina textile mills. However, this was not the case, and the Operation Dixie organizing campaign would become the CIO's greatest failure.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1951

On April 1, 1951, 2,300 Erwin Mill's workers walked off their jobs in support of the TWUA nationwide general strike. The demands of TWUA Local 250 included a 12 percent wage increase, a minimum rate of \$1.19 per hour, a "cost-of-living escalator" based on the rate of inflation, employer paid pensions with a minimum of \$100 a month, a minimum of eight paid holidays per year, and company paid medical insurance for workers and their dependents. Seven southern states supported this strike with more than 42,000 TWUA members walking off the job, while the total number of textile workers on strike nationwide was over 200,000.⁷¹

On March 15, 1951 two weeks before Local 250 went on strike, northern mill owners settled with the union and temporarily avoided a strike on the contingency that one southern union would reach an agreement. The TWUA's national leaders believed a strike would be averted if they could get one contract signed in one southern mill. Past precedent showed that other companies would follow the pattern.⁷² Although the union did not win all its demands, they did secure major concessions including a seven percent wage increase and a cost-of-living clause for northern mills. In the south, however, the TWUA and mill owners were deadlocked in contract negotiations and the strike deadline was extended for two weeks.

As northern mill owners settled with the union, Local 250 accepted a Defense Department plea to extend wage and benefits negotiations for another fifteen days.⁷³ The New England agreement put the TWUA in an awkward situation. As Sol Barkin put it,

⁷¹ The Daily Record, "Union is Set to Strike on Saturday Night." 29 April 1951, Front Page.

⁷² Timothy J. Minchin, *What Do We Need A Union For? The TWUA in the South, 1945-1955*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 105.

⁷³ The Daily Record, "Erwin Textile Workers Call Off Strike" 16 March 1951, Front Page.

“The union was caught in a vice.” The union had successfully concluded a wage agreement in the north but tied it to the union’s success of winning similar wage increases in the south.⁷⁴

J. Thomas West, the business manager of Local 250 said the strike would be postponed until March 31. West said, “the Erwin Corporation is apparently waiting for some other firm to set a wage policy as a pattern for general settlement of union-management differences.” West added: “We have clarified ourselves as far as the government is concerned. We want to cooperate...but I’m reasonably sure the union will not accept any more extensions from any source. Our people can’t understand these extensions with the company’s profits going up every day.”⁷⁵

During the week of March 24, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) intervened in the TWUA’s southern negotiations. While Rieve, National President of the TWUA led the central negotiations in Dan River, a member of the “Big Five,” other negotiations were taking place at the remaining members of the “Big Five.” The Big Five plants also included Marshall Field, Lowenstein, Cone, and the Erwin chain. These were the mills traditionally used by the union to set southern wages. The FMCS reported that talks at these mills stalled because of confusion over a wage and price law put into effect by the government during the ongoing Korean War.

One major stumbling block for the TWUA was that southern workers had received an eight percent wage increase in September of 1950, so the maximum wage increase they could receive under the ten percent formula was two percent. The ten percent formula, enacted by the federal government during the Korean War, was an effort to keep wages and

⁷⁴ Timothy J. Minchin, 105.

⁷⁵ The Daily Record, 16 March 1951, P.6.

prices from increasing.⁷⁶ The formula made a settlement more difficult in the south than in the north. Northern textile workers had not received a wage increase since 1948, therefore, the ten percent formula would not be an issue. Mill owners in the south saw the demand for more wage increases as a violation of the law. On the eve of the general strike, all southern mill owners implemented a two percent wage increase. This two percent would be the only wage increase won by the TWUA in the strike of 1951.⁷⁷

A central problem in the TWUA was how to achieve a substantial wage increase in the south. Southern companies were not willing to set pay scales in unionized mills above those in unorganized southern mills. Organized southern mills were aware of the masses of unorganized southern competitors. Thus, unionized plants feared that they would be forced to assume higher wage costs and the unorganized mills would have no obligation to follow. Many unionized companies claimed that they already paid higher wages than the nonunion mills.⁷⁸

The FMCS reported that Erwin Mills refused to break the deadlock of 1951. Erwin Mills Company officials stated “that with approximately only 20% of the southern textile industry being unionized it could not risk entering into an agreement of this nature since it was exceedingly doubtful that in doing so, it would have the effect of influencing the balance of the southern textile industry, its competition. To follow such a wage pattern the company would be left in an unfavorable competitive position.”⁷⁹ TWUA official and chief negotiator, William Pollock, told the executive council that resistance from the

⁷⁶ Timothy J. Minchin, 106.

⁷⁷ Timothy J. Minchin, 106.

⁷⁸ Timothy Minchin, 106.

⁷⁹ Timothy J. Minchin, 107. Note 20: Erwin Mills File, Report of March 30, 1951, Box 2578, FMCS Executive Council Meeting, 8 April 1951.

southern mills was primarily due to the cost of living clause because of the fear that nonunion employers will not follow them.⁸⁰

With only 20% of southern mills working under a collective bargaining agreement, the TWUA was in a precarious position. The failure of the 1951 negotiations broke a long-standing pattern that disabled past wage mechanisms. In the past, southern mill owners voluntarily followed northern wage increases; especially after the war, when the threat of union organization seemed to be the greatest.⁸¹

The General Strike of 1951 was an attempt by the CIO to gain wage increases for those already under contract. This attempt, formulated by the TWUA's newly formed National Cotton-Rayon Policy Committee, which consisted of delegates from southern locals, was a very bold move. While southern locals supported this strike, the walkout was primarily an attempt by the TWUA to bring southern wages up to the standards of northern manufacturers. Southern textile workers earned thirty-five cents an hour below the average of all manufacturing in the nation. Therefore, the most compelling economic reason to raise southern wages, according to Emil Rieve, "was to establish a genuine union wage scale that would put southern textile workers on a par with workers in northern mass-production industries and end free-riding."⁸²

In New England, where most of the TWUA locals were based, the textile industry was suffering from an ongoing decline in production. The need to increase wages in the south, therefore, was a way to reduce competition and perhaps make some gains in the north. Rieve repeatedly declared war on the North-South textile wage differences. In a

⁸⁰ Timothy J. Minchin, 107.

⁸¹ Timothy J. Minchin, 108. Note 23: *The Daily Record*, 29-31 March 1951.

⁸² Timothy J. Minchin, 101. Note 8: *Durham Morning Herald*, 2 April 1951.

speech given in 1948, Rieve revealed his willingness to strike the south in order to eliminate the textile wage differential.⁸³ He stated:

“Our firm contention is that there should be no such differential...I have a hunch that Southern employers are going to resist and we must be prepared. We are known throughout the country as a peaceful union...but that was only possible because we were prepared for strikes if they had to come.”⁸⁴

In the fall of 1950, the *Textile Labor* magazine informed its readers, “that the wage differential between the North and South...is grossly unfair to southern workers, and is a constant threat to our union.”⁸⁵ The threat came from southern mills that were not unionized. These nonunion mills threatened the existence of organized labor in the north and south.

In the mid-1950’s, Sol Barkin, TWUA Research Director, said, “The strike of 1951 was stimulated, impelled, by the economic interests of the locals in the North...The survival of the union was at stake in this wage battle, and the hope was that we could achieve our economic goals through a strike, and of course we didn’t.” The TWUA’s attempt to increase southern wages in the strike of 1951 was the same reason behind the UTW’s strike of 1934. In both strikes the majority of union members lived in the north, therefore, the protection of their interests remained a top priority.⁸⁶

⁸³ Timothy Minchin, 102.

⁸⁴ Timothy J. Minchin, 102. Note 10: Quote from Rieve at 1948 TWUA Convention, P.7: Report on Southern Strike to Executive Council, 6 June 1951.

⁸⁵ Clete Daniel, 210. Note 22: Fiester Interview, editor of *Textile Labor*. Transcript of Rogin Interview, TWUA-Oral History Project, pp.141-147.

⁸⁶ Timothy J. Minchin, 109. Note 26: Sol Stetin interview, TWUA Oral History Project.

At the annual meeting of the American Cotton Manufacturers Institute (ACMI) in West Virginia, on the eve of the strike deadline, the key topic was the threat of a strike. Speaker after speaker argued that a general strike would not be successful because of the TWUA's weak representation in the south. The majority attending the meeting believed the effect of a general strike would hurt union workers while nonunion workers would continue to earn wartime wages. The ACMI believed a general strike would be unpopular with both workers and the public. According to the ACMI "the public would see it as sabotage of the war effort, while workers would not want to miss the chance to earn the highest wages the industry had ever known." Many southern executives believed the strike would be unpopular because union members would risk losing the consumer goods recently purchased on credit while nonunion workers would continue to make their payments.⁸⁷

On March 30, 1951 Dr. Frank T. de Vyver, Erwin Cotton Mill Company's vice president, urged mill workers not to let themselves be "used by the union as a test case."⁸⁸ Dr. de Vyver pointed out to Erwin's workers that the wage increase being sought could not be granted without the approval of the government's Wage Stabilization Board.⁸⁹ From their own economic perspective, mill owners sensed the inability of individual workers in the South to withstand a strike. The mill owners had little to fear from a strike.⁹⁰ Dr. de Vyver said "the union is using the New England agreement as a test case with the Wage Stabilization Board." While pleading with Local 250, de Vyver pointed out that their wages had increased 93 per cent during the past six years, while the cost of living had increased

⁸⁷ Timothy J. Minchin, 108. Note 23: The Daily Record, 29-31 March 1951.

⁸⁸ The Daily Record, "No Strike Appeal Is Sent To Mill Workers," 30 March 1951, Front Page.

⁸⁹ The Daily Record, 30 March 1951, Front Page.

⁹⁰ Timothy J. Minchin, 109. Note 24: *Textile Bulletin*, April 1951.

only 41 per cent. Dr. de Vyver urged Local 250 to “avoid a strike at Erwin Mills. It would be a strike which would cost everyone...”⁹¹

By the end of March 1951, the government suddenly stopped purchasing cotton goods, due to stockpiling. The public also eased its purchases of cotton goods. These actions by the government and the public played a major role in the collapse of a general strike. Mill owners faced with lower demands, stockpiled their product and accumulated large inventories. Well before the strike the *Textile Bulletin* arrogantly reported, “mills can close their doors and make money selling off their inventories.” It added, “the strike was unfortunate for the workers because we rather suspect that the mills are in better shape to stand a prolonged strike than the workers, most of whom will be behind by the time they have missed one or two pay-days.”⁹² The *Southern Textile News* conducted a survey throughout North Carolina and proclaimed most mills could sell three or four months before their cotton inventories ran out.⁹³

If everyone in the TWUA leadership knew a strike would fail, why call one? Politics, that’s why. The internal power struggle within the TWUA, between President Emil Rieve and Vice-President George Baldanzi, began in 1950 at the national convention. At the TWUA convention in 1950 Baldanzi had narrowly escaped being ousted as Vice-President by Rieve’s staunch supporters. Rieve and Baldanzi were headed into a political battle to see who would lead the TWUA. While neither Rieve or Baldanzi wanted to call a strike, neither could argue for caution in fear of being labeled a nonmilitant. According to Sol Stetin, “It was an unfortunate experience. Neither side wanted to strike, but neither side was going to appear soft.” In hindsight, many others believed the political rivalry

⁹¹ The Daily Record, 30 March 1951, P.7.

⁹² Timothy J. Minchin, 109. Note 24: *Southern Textile News*, 24 February 1951.

⁹³ Timothy J. Minchin, 109. Note 24: *Southern Textile News*, 24 February 1951.

between Rieve and Baldanzi prevented sound judgment from being exercised when calling the strike. Twenty-five years after the strike, TWUA Education Director Larry Rogin said the strike “was a circumstance in which the institutional obligation of all TWUA leaders to exercise prudence was increasingly subordinate to a perceived need to be macho.”⁹⁴

The constant political battle between Rieve and Baldanzi overshadowed the strike. Baldanzi’s experience in southern negotiations and a large southern following within the TWUA caused Rieve to become jealous of Baldanzi’s influence in the south. Rieve’s inexperience in negotiating with southern mill owners fueled his jealousy of Baldanzi’s successes, and motivated him to prove to the southern staff that he could do a better job than Baldanzi.⁹⁵ Rieve was unsuccessful in the southern negotiations because he had always concentrated on the northern mills’ negotiations.

At the very onset of the general strike many mill owners made no attempt to operate their plants. The *Textile Bulletin* explained, “How many mill executives are anxious to run their mills when there is a shortage of orders for yarn or cloth?” It was standard practice for mill owners to shut down for a couple of months in order to weaken the union and hire scabs (strikebreakers).⁹⁶ The union viewed this tactic as an attempt by management to break the strike “by smashing the union in its most important southern locations.”⁹⁷ Baldanzi reported to the panic-stricken executive council that he believed this tactic was a well-planned strategy by mill management at Erwin, Fieldcrest, Cone, and Dan River.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Clete Daniel, 211. Note 28, from transcript of Rogin interview, TWUA-Oral History Project, P. 141.

⁹⁵ Timothy J. Minchin, 110. Note 28: Larry Rogin interview, TWUA Oral History Project.

⁹⁶ Timothy J. Minchin, 110. *Textile Bulletin*, May 1951.

⁹⁷ Timothy J. Minchin, 111. Note 34: Transcript of meeting of southern strike leaders, 16 April 1951, File 1A, Box 20, TWUA.

⁹⁸ Timothy J. Minchin, 111. Note 34: Transcript of meeting of southern strike leaders, 16 April 1951, File 1A, Box 20, TWUA.

Southern textile management across North Carolina chose to fight the strike through “a sophisticated public relations campaign aimed at familiarizing public opinion with their arguments and discrediting the strike.” The Textile Committee on Public Relations (TCPR) handled the press releases during the strike.⁹⁹ While the union tried to sell the strike and its slogan “A Living Wage,” the TCPR tried to discredit this slogan. In an editorial from the *Leaksville News*, Ms. Betty Gentry wrote, “most of the workers have fine automobiles, TV sets, and their own homes. If this fact means that living conditions are low, then it is time to strike.”¹⁰⁰ This public attitude hurt the strike and made the strikers appear to be greedy.

The TCPR and mill management attacked the TWUA strikers as being unpatriotic. Both the TCPR and mill management claimed that striking during the Korean War was an attempt by the union to bully the government into changing its stabilization policies. The strike and its participants were attacked from all corners of the nation. The TWUA was accused of unpatriotic behavior because of the strike, and the critics felt the strike benefited the communists’ during the Cold War.¹⁰¹ These unjustified accusations of union members being unpatriotic fueled the violence that occurred during the strike.

Two days after the strike began, on April 3, 1951, strikers’ at Erwin’s mill blocked the plant’s gates with their cars and shouted at non-union workers going into the mill. These actions prompted civil action by the company on April 12, 1951. The following day Judge Clawson L. Williams, Resident Judge of the Fourth Judicial District of North Carolina, issued a temporary restraining order preventing strikers in Erwin from “crowding

⁹⁹ Timothy J. Minchin, 111. Note 35: C. A. Cannon to Rush S. Dickson, 10 April 1951, Box 25, Cannon Mills Papers, Special Collections Department, Perkins Library, Duke University.

¹⁰⁰ Timothy J. Minchin, 112. Note 36: *Leaksville News*, 19 April 1951

¹⁰¹ Timothy J. Minchin, 112. Note 38: *Lanett Valley Daily Times-News*, 3 April 1951.

the gates and keeping people out who wanted to work.”¹⁰² Those named in the restraining order included Local 250 President Frankie Morrison, Business Manager J. Thomas West, and others. While the restraining order was being submitted, Erwin Mills executives also filed suit for an injunction to prohibit “threats of violence and mass picketing.” Because of violent threats by the strikers, Dr. de Vyver called on W. E. Salmon, the sheriff of Harnett County to provide security for both the strikers and non-union workers. The Sheriff alone could not guarantee the safety of those who wanted to cross the picket lines, therefore the company requested a court injunction restricting the numbers of those picketing.¹⁰³

On April 24, 1951, Judge Williams issued another temporary restraining order against Local 250 and its members. In the case of *Erwin Cotton Mills Company vs. Textile Workers Union of America*, Judge Williams wrote, “Wherein the plaintiff, Erwin Cotton Mills Company, petitioned the Superior Court of Harnett County for injunctive relief against the alleged acts of defendants and others in preventing and impeding plaintiff in the operation of its textile plant at Erwin, North Carolina, by mass picketing, and interference with the free ingress and egress to and from its plant, by the use of threats, abuse, and violence against employees and others seeking ingress and egress to and from its plant.”¹⁰⁴ The restraining order stipulated that all defendants were restrained:

“1. From interfering in any manner with free ingress and egress to
and from plaintiff’s plant.

¹⁰² The Daily Record. “*Restraining Order Is Issued Against Erwin Textile Union*,” 13 April 1951. Front Page.

¹⁰³ The Daily Record, 13 April 1951. P. 7

¹⁰⁴ North Carolina Reports Volume 234. Cases Argued and Determined in the Supreme Court of North Carolina. *Erwin Cotton Mills Company vs. Textile Workers Union of America*. Spring Term, 1951. Reported by John M. Strong. (Raleigh: Bynum Printing Company, Printers to the Supreme Court). Cumberland County Law Library. 321-330.

2. From assaulting, threatening, abusing, or in any manner intimidating persons who work or seek to work in, or lawfully seek to enter the plaintiff's plant.
3. From having more than 25 persons at any one time as peaceful pickets at any gate to the plaintiff's plant provided that no person, including pickets, may approach closer to any gate of plaintiff's plant than 50 feet; and provided further that no person, or persons, shall block driveways leading to gates of said plant or right of way of railroad which enters said plant.”¹⁰⁵

Judge Williams further ruled that the sheriff of Harnett County post copies of the restraining order in the vicinity of the mill and especially at all entrances to the plant.¹⁰⁶

While these court rulings stopped the violence against the nonunion workers who entered the mill the North Carolina Supreme Court heard an appeal on this ruling in the spring of 1951. Violence, however, found its way to the residential areas of Erwin.

Within two weeks of the strike, Local 250 members started to worry about their recently purchased homes and mortgage payments. The union had quoted Dr. de Vyver saying, “the company would not foreclose on the homes you have recently purchased.” Dr. de Vyver quickly denied this quote saying, “I could not possibly have said this because this matter is outside the company's hands. The company has no control...those of you who have had to borrow money to finance the purchase of your homes have borrowed it from First Fidelity Company of Greensboro....we have no control whatever over the actions that

¹⁰⁵ *Erwin Cotton Mills Company vs. Textile Workers Union of America*, Spring Term, 1951. 322.

¹⁰⁶ *Erwin Cotton Mills Company vs. Textile Workers Union of America*, Spring Term, 1951. 323

may be taken.”¹⁰⁷ In the coming weeks the stress began to get the best of the strikers and their supporters. Acts of violence began to break out in Erwin at the mill and the homes of those who crossed the picket line.

In the early morning hours of Friday April 27, 1951, explosive charges were set off in front of the homes of three non-striking Erwin workers. J. Thomas West, Local 250 manager, blamed the acts on outsiders who had been seen around the struck plants and town at night. West said, “I don’t believe its union people doing it...we’re trying to hold that sort of thing down...the union is conducting an investigation and cooperating with Erwin’s chief of police, C. H. Avery.”¹⁰⁸ West stated that he would, “ask the union’s general committee to form a plan to prevent future outbursts of violence.”¹⁰⁹ No one was hurt in the explosions and no one was arrested.

With tensions running high, Local 250 voted on May 7, 1951 to stay on strike, even though Dan River workers voted to end the strike and go back to work.¹¹⁰ The *Daily Record* reported the next day that local negotiations broke down because the company threatened to fire anyone involved in acts of violence against the company. According to J. Thomas West, “The company flatly refused to put anybody back to work who would be convicted in court for any misdemeanor connected with the strike.”¹¹¹ West realized that this opened the door for about two thirds of Erwin’s supervisors to be charged with assault. When West asked Dr. de Vyver if the same thing pertained to supervisors who had acted

¹⁰⁷ The Daily Record, 13 April 1951. P. 7

¹⁰⁸ The Daily Record. “Explosions Rock Erwin Friday As Violence Flares In Strike,” 27 April 1951. Front Page.

¹⁰⁹ The Daily Record, 27 April 1951. P. 3

¹¹⁰ The Daily Record. “Erwin Locals To Vote On Ending Local Walkout,” 7 May 1951. Front Page.

¹¹¹ The Daily Record. “Erwin Workers Stay On Strike As Settlement Attempt Fails,” 8 May 1951. Front Page.

violently against the strikers, de Vyver said, “the company would not fire any of their supervisors if what they had done was in the line of duty.”¹¹²

After being on strike for almost six weeks Local 250 members were starting to feel the pressure of mortgage payments and other bills. On May 10, 1951, Local 250 voted to return to work although the strike issues were not resolved. Local 250, according to J. Thomas West, took the recommendation of the TWUA headquarters and left the issues to a three-man Wage Board. West said, “We are taking chances that the panel will make a satisfactory arrangement.” West pointed out that the union still wanted its wage demands, cost of living clause, pension, and other benefits.¹¹³ On Monday morning, May 14, 1951, Local 250 reported back to work in Erwin’s mill.¹¹⁴

At the end of the strike of 1951, The *Brockton Enterprise and Times*, a New England newspaper wrote sadly that, “Massachusetts mills would have benefited were the strikers to have won the higher pay and other benefits sought by them.” The strike’s failure demonstrated the union’s weakness in the south and explained why so many of New England’s textile mills had moved south.¹¹⁵

The Strike of 1951 was a disaster that occurred because of the power struggle in the national arena between Rieve and Baldanzi. Neither Rieve nor Baldanzi seemed to care about the consequences of the strike. Both men only cared about extending their political power and careers on the national stage. At the local level the strike brought out the worst as strikers had an injunction issued against them for blocking Erwin’s main entrance.

¹¹² The Daily Record, 8 May 1951, P. 6.

¹¹³ The Daily Record. “*Workers Vote To End Erwin Strike*,” 11 May 1951. Front Page.

¹¹⁴ The Daily Record. “*Workers At Erwin Mills Back On Job*,” 17 May 1951. Front Page.

¹¹⁵ Timothy J. Minchin, 112. Note 39: *Brockton Enterprise and Times*, 10 May 1951.

Several people were also sought for exploding dynamite in the mill village of Erwin and in the city of Durham.

During the General Strike of 1951, the TWUA had pulled out all its major southern locals and many smaller ones. As one of the largest and most important textile strikes ever to occur on southern soil, the strike of 1951 nearly destroyed southern unions and northern mills. The failure of the strike devastated the northern mills as their owners recognized the weaknesses of southern unions, thus encouraging more plants to move south. The TWUA power struggle between Baldanzi and Rieve continued after the strike of 1951 and caused a major change in the Erwin chain in 1952. The Erwin chain would be broken and the solidarity of collective bargaining would be only a pleasant memory of the past.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE INTERNAL STRUGGLE

In the aftermath of the failed Textile Strike of 1951, Local 250 faced an internal struggle, forced upon them by the national union. The struggle, a national political battle for control of the TWUA between President Emil Rieve and Vice-President George Baldanzi, nearly destroyed Local 250. The political battle between Rieve and Baldanzi laid the groundwork for dismantling the three TWUA locals in the Erwin chain.

Born in the province of Zyradow in Russian Poland on June 8, 1892, Emil Rieve was the son of a textile machinist. After immigrating to the United States with his parents in 1904 Emil began working in a Pennsylvania hosiery mill. Rieve joined the American Federation of Hosiery Workers (AFHW) in 1907, was elected vice-president of the AFHW in 1914, and became president in 1929. Emil left the AFHW in 1939 to become the first president of the newly organized TWUA.¹¹⁶ Rieve never understood the southerner's paternalistic loyalty to the mill bosses, therefore he gave George Baldanzi the freedom to attempt the TWUA's organization of the south.¹¹⁷

George Baldanzi was the son of a miner. Born in Black Diamond, Pennsylvania, January 23, 1907, Baldanzi began working in the coalmines of Pennsylvania after he completed grammar school. George eventually secured employment as a textile dryer in Paterson, New Jersey. From 1933-1936 Baldanzi organized and became the first president of the Federation of Dryers, Finishers, Printers, and Bleachers of America, a sub-federation of the United Textile Workers of America.¹¹⁸ In 1939 after a faction of the UTW merged

¹¹⁶ Gary M. Fink et al. *Biographical Dictionary of American Labor Leaders*. (West Port, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 306.

¹¹⁷ Clete Daniel, 166.

¹¹⁸ Gary M. Fink, 12.

with the TWOC to form the Textile Workers Union of America Baldanzi would be elected executive vice-president and became the most well-known and popular national official with the rank-and-file.¹¹⁹

After the disastrous strike of 1951 the national leaders of the TWUA began to realize the union's injuries were self inflicted and the inner turmoil of partisan politics was to blame. In the months leading to the national convention the once sincere democratic devotees of Emil Rieve acquiesced as they watched Rieve and his top aids use high-handed undemocratic methods to ensure the demise of Baldanzi at the convention of 1952. Rieve's power of hiring and firing union staffers allowed him to reward loyalty and punish dissent. Rieve shamelessly manipulated the delegate selection process in order to minimize Baldanzi's support.¹²⁰

Emil Rieve and George Baldanzi, both capable leaders with huge egos, challenged each other on April 28, 1952, at Cleveland's Public Auditorium as the TWUA-CIO called its convention to order. When the vote for TWUA president came, the delegates re-elected Rieve by a wide margin. Rieve received 1,223 votes to Baldanzi's 720. Baldanzi and his followers accused Rieve of padding the vote with phony delegates.¹²¹ When the convention adjourned on May 2, the problem of a divided TWUA became a key issue for all members.

A. H. Raskin, a *New York Times* correspondent, referred to the convention as "bordering on the riotous." Rieve had used his superior authority ruthlessly, and when the convention ended, all the delegates knew he was in complete charge. Shortly after Rieve vanquished his opponent, he expressed his feeling on decentralizing the leadership

¹¹⁹ Clete Daniel, 166.

¹²⁰ Clete Daniel, 220.

¹²¹ Clete Daniel, 221. Note 59: Transcript from Rogin Interview, TWUA Oral History Project, P.135-136.

structure. Rieve reiterated his preference for unionism “from the top down.”¹²² Rieve and the Executive Council wanted supreme voting rights to elect the union’s leaders, thus circumventing the voting rights of union members. John Cort, a writer for *The Commonwealth*, wrote, “it doesn’t work because it fails to recognize the fact that the best way to create loyalty in an organization is to give its members a direct stake in that organization, which means, above all, to give them the power to pick their own leaders”.¹²³

Baldanzi and his supporters seethed with contempt during the convention as they challenged and protested the proceedings. Rieve and his overwhelming majority of supporters would not yield the floor to Baldanzi or his supporters. Baldanzi believed the convention was “packed and rigged.” Those who watched the confrontation build in the months before the convention thought that the scene would be “a bitter one” and that the TWUA would suffer because of the proceedings. But, even among those who understood the depth of the struggle between Rieve and Baldanzi, no-one knew exactly how the showdown would affect the union.¹²⁴

Even before the convention was over, Philip Murray, President of the CIO, began talking to Baldanzi’s supporters asking for unity. Rieve himself offered no reprisals against the Baldanzi camp if they agreed “to stop their politicking.” Many Baldanzi supporters began to talk of secession, although most of these supporters were trade unionists who knew secession offered no guarantees of success with another union. The humiliation and mistreatment at the Cleveland convention, however, were too much to deny. Talking about the convention, southern organizer Joe Pedigo, said,

¹²² Clete Daniel, 221. Note 62: TWUA, Minutes from the Executive Council meetings, 21-24 April 1952, box 1, mss 396, TWUA collection.

¹²³ Clete Daniel, 222. Note 63: John C. Cort, “Baldanzi Leaps Over the Wall,” *The Commonwealth*, 13 June 1952, 243-245.

¹²⁴ Clete Daniel, 222.

“A lot of us at that time had never seen a really rigged convention before... We were new at it and I think that’s the one big thing that caused the degree of bitterness. I think that if we had been older hands and seen a few more things, and I have seen them rigged since and I have never got too excited about it. But that was the first one, and the convention before that, there is always a certain amount of rigging, but they had been pretty open and you could have your say up until that convention. Nobody was able to take it in stride... on Baldanzi’s side, they were all just so goddamn mad, they were ready to go anywhere.”¹²⁵

Baldanzi announced on May 15, 1952, that he would be leaving the TWUA and going to the United Textile Workers of the American Federation of Labor. Many of Baldanzi’s supporters were soon to follow. When reporting Baldanzi’s defection, *The New York Times* stated that the total number of losses faced by the TWUA ranged from 25,000 to 75,000. Ten days later, *The New Republic* reported that an unnamed spokesman for Baldanzi predicted that the TWUA “would lose about 100,000 members.”¹²⁶

When Baldanzi parted with the TWUA he took the records of TWUA locals with him to the UTW. Local 250’s records were in the hands of Baldanzi. Three months after Baldanzi went over to the UTW on August 28, 1952, Wayne L. Dernoncourt, Acting State Director of the TWUA wrote a letter to Lewis M. Conn, Acting State Director of the UTW. It read in part:

¹²⁵ Clete Daniel, 223. Note 65: Pedigo Interview, SOHP, P. 57.

¹²⁶ Clete Daniel, 223. Note 67: *New York Times*, 16 May 1952, P. 15; “Revolt in Textiles,” *New Republic*, 26 May 1952, P. 6.

You and your organization...have illegally taken possession of money, books, and records belonging to Local 250, TWUA-CIO...you have been spreading propaganda asking for an election in the interests of the Erwin workers...we are offering an election in the Erwin Mill, Local 250, Erwin, North Carolina...the election to be handled by the National Labor Relations Board...Do you agree to an election or not.¹²⁷

The defection by Baldanzi started a full-scale war at the expense of Local 250 and other textile workers. Local 250, bombarded with union literature, had to decide what union would represent their members. In the months after Baldanzi went to the UTW-AFL, leaflets began being distributed to Local 250 members as they walked through the gates of Erwin's mill. These handouts urged union members to vote in favor of the UTW.

In a leaflet handed out to Erwin workers, by the UTW-AFL, there was a drawing of Emil Rieve with money falling out of his pockets swinging a sledgehammer trying to break the Erwin chain of Erwin, Durham, and Cooleemee. The caricature of Rieve attempted to make him look evil and power hungry (See Appendix 8.1, p. 76). The handout continued to say that Rieve had no chance of winning the election in the Erwin Mills chain, and the only thing Rieve hoped to accomplish was to divide the workers and destroy the bargaining strength of Erwin's workers.¹²⁸

Another UTW handout pictured Local 250 members and gave their responses to the possibility of going over to the UTW-AFL. In one response a loom-fixer said, "We feel that we'd rather take the word of the boys we were raised up with than these New England

¹²⁷ TWUA-CIO Letter written by Wayne L Derroncourt, 28 August 1952.

¹²⁸ UTW-AFL Leaflet distributed to Local 250 members, no date.

organizers who've been spreading their propaganda all over our village.”¹²⁹ Another loom-fixer said “she felt sure that the whole mill is going AF of L. Why do we feel this way? The dirty deal that Rieve and his gang have thrown at us is responsible for the overwhelming majority of us wanting to build a new, and honest union in the UTW-AF of L.”¹³⁰ An inspector in the cloth-room said, “none of us likes the way Rieve squandered our money, then failed so miserably to organize the other textile workers in the South.”¹³¹

In the most powerful UTW leaflet distributed to Local 250 the UTW attacked Rieve and accused the TWUA of being corrupt. The handout, titled “*This Is Why*,” listed four major points against Rieve and the TWUA.

The first point, *Corruption and Dishonesty*, detailed how Rieve spent union dues. *Corruption and Dishonesty* stated that in 1951 for every \$2.00 Rieve and the TWUA collected only .08 went into the TWUA treasury. This AFL handout accused Rieve of spending \$3,300 on meals, \$2,000 on a New York apartment, \$2,800 on a swanky Washington apartment, \$5,400 on unlisted expenses, and \$2,500 for travel. On top of this money *Corruption and Dishonesty* accused Rieve of spending another \$25,000. When asked by the elected trustees what he spent the \$25,000 on, Rieve said, “it was none of their business.”

The second point of *This Is Why, The Workers Don't Count Anymore*, accused Rieve of nepotism. It claimed that the TWUA local in Danville asked to borrow \$5,000 in order to keep their Joint Board going. Rieve and the TWUA refused to loan them the money, but Rieve did loan \$5,000 to Jack Rubenstein, his New York State Director.

¹²⁹ UTW-AFL Leaflet distributed to Local 250 members. Interview with TWUA Local 250: loom-fixer L. E. “Jink” Price, No date.

¹³⁰ UTW-AFL Leaflet distributed to Local 250 members. Interview with loom-fixer M. H. “Mack” Hobbs, No date.

¹³¹ UTW-AFL Leaflet distributed to local 250 members. Interview with inspector Tommy Fann, No date.

This Is Why's third point, *Machine Control-Dictatorship*, suggested that Rieve had now grabbed complete control of the TWUA by:

- (1) Packing the convention with phony delegates
- (2) Packing every convention with his stooges
- (3) Refusing to debate the issues before the delegates in order to hide the true facts
- (4) Physically driving Baldanzi and others from the microphones
- (5) Discharging from the TWUA every staff man who dared to speak out against him-including 17 who helped us build our union in North Carolina and Virginia
- (6) Appointing administrators with orders to take over your funds and property and kick out your elected leaders
- (7) Prohibiting locals from spending any of its money to oppose him or other officers they may not like or want

Point four, titled *Rieve and TWUA Can Never Organize The South*, maintained that Rieve's inability to organize the south would hurt workers' chances of maintaining and improving present wage and working conditions. "Only a clean, honest, and democratic union can organize the South. We can only build a strong union if we believe in it and our leaders believe in us."¹³²

The four points in *This Is Why* made very strong accusations against Rieve and the TWUA. While these accusations may or may not have been completely truthful, this handout grabbed the attention of those who read it and stimulated their thought processes. Perhaps one of the most important features of *This Is Why* was a letter from Robert S.

¹³² UTW-AFL Leaflet distributed to Local 250 members, no date.

Cahoon, a well-known labor attorney from Greensboro. Cahoon represented all the locals who wanted an election between the AFL and CIO. Cahoon reassured TWUA members that they were safe and completely within their rights to hold an election.

The campaign to convert Local 250 by Baldanzi and the AFL was met head on by the CIO. The CIO fought hard in its attempt to keep its members by also distributing propaganda urging Local 250 to stay with the TWUA.

In a CIO leaflet titled “Chains or Charter” the TWUA handout depicts a sweating, gagged worker, chained to a heavy ball with the inscription UTW-AFL (See Appendix 8.2, p. 77). The handout in part said:

Before the TWUA-CIO convention in Cleveland the opposition forces led by George Baldanzi made “democracy” their only slogan. Indeed it was the only issued they raised. When, bitter in defeat, Baldanzi deserted to the UTW-AFL, his slogan remained unchanged...unfortunately for the dual-unionists the UTW-AFL (like the TWUA-CIO) publishes its own constitution. It’s a simple matter to read the basic law of both unions and compare the two.

The leaflet cited parts of Article II Section 1, and Article II Section 5, of the UTW constitution. Article II, Section 1 of the UTW constitution stated:

“The ultimate government of all local unions, councils, departments or any other subordinate body, and the individual members affiliated therein and thereunder (sic) shall be vested in the international union as the supreme head, to which all matters of general importance shall be referred, and whose decision shall be final.”

Article II, Section 5 stated:

“All public activities, including the negotiation and execution of contracts, legal proceedings before courts or government agencies, elections, arbitrations and press releases, etc., involving local unions, councils, departments or any other subordinate body, shall be carried on by the international union...”¹³³

With these articles in place, it appears that it would be very difficult for Local 250 to have any autonomy if they joined the UTW. The following letter was perhaps the most damaging to the UTW efforts in Erwin. Richard Rosinski, President of AFL-UTW Local 753, from New York wrote:

Dear Fellow Textile Workers,

By this time you will no doubt have heard the high praises of “democracy” in the UTW. You will have listened to propaganda of grand promises and tall tales of accomplishment from the followers of the United Textile Workers of America, A. F. of L. Don’t believe a word of it!!

After a long series of heart breaking events, Local 753 overwhelmingly voted to disaffiliate from the UTW, A. F. of L., and affiliate with the TWUA, CIO.

Rosinski’s reference to heartbreaking events included two disturbing episodes. The first episode was a ten-week strike by UTW Local 753, in which the local received no help from the National UTW, monetary or otherwise. The second episode was an arbitration

¹³³ TWUA leaflet handed out at Erwin’s mill, no date.

case in which 94 union members had been discharged for refusing increased workloads. During the arbitration proceedings a high ranking UTW official testified against Local 753's efforts to support the discharged union members.

In his closing remarks Rosinski wrote: "Listen to the UTW as you would a politician and remember that both are full of empty promises and propaganda. For the good of the union movement, stay with your proven leader the TWUA-CIO."¹³⁴ This advice coming from Rosinski, the president of a UTW local, had a tremendous impact on Local 250. How could the UTW national union be trusted? The UTW did not support their own rank and file in arbitration nor did they have the respect or backing of one of their own local presidents?

The leadership of Local 250 learned not to trust Baldanzi because of his lies, arrogance, and the demands he had made of Local 250 during World War II. The time to decide what national union Local 250 would affiliate with came on October 1, 1952. On this date the Erwin chain, consisting of Erwin Local 250, Durham Local 246, and Cooleemee Local 251, voted on whether to stay in the TWUA-CIO, join the UTW-AFL, or have no union.¹³⁵

When the votes were tabulated, Local 250's decision was so close a runoff had to be scheduled. The members of Local 250 voted 717 in favor of the UTW-AFL, 725 in favor of the TWUA-CIO, and 498 in favor of no union. The runoff vote would occur on October 17, 1952.¹³⁶ Meanwhile, TWUA Locals 246 in Durham, and 251 in Cooleemee, voted overwhelmingly in favor of joining Baldanzi and the UTW-AFL. Durham Local 246

¹³⁴ The Records of Erwin Mills, Labor Relation Series: TWUA-CIO vs. UTW-AFL: 1951-1952, Box 50. Richard Rosinski, UTW Local 753 President, letter to TWUA Local 250. No date. Duke University's Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections, Perkins Library.

¹³⁵ Durham Morning Herald. "5,200 To Vote In Erwin Union Elections Today," 1 October 1952. Front Page.

¹³⁶ Durham Morning Herald. "Erwin, N.C., Mill To Hold Runoff Election," 2 October 1952. Front Page.

voted 1,122 in favor of the UTW-AFL, 382 in favor of TWUA-CIO, and 171 in favor of no union. Cooleemee Local 251 voted 792 in favor of the UTW-AFL, 170 in favor of the TWUA-CIO, and 162 in favor of no union.

On October 17, 1952, Local 250 members voted 835 in favor of staying with the TWUA-CIO, while 754 voted in favor of the going to the UTW-AFL.¹³⁷ The vote to stay with the TWUA proved that 250 was a very divided local, with a small majority showing their deep distrust of Baldanzi, despite his popularity in much of the south. The Erwin chain, a chain that had been in existence since 1938, had now been broken.

The battle between the AFL and CIO for the control of textile workers in Erwin's mill had done its damage. Erwin's chain of three TWUA locals, 250, 246, and 251 was broken. Local 250, the only local in the chain that voted to stay with the TWUA, was on their own. The power of Local 250 had now been weakened. Local 250 could no longer rely on help from TWUA Locals 251 or 246.

The General Textile Strike of 1951 was an unjust strike that turned out to be a power struggle between Rieve and Baldanzi. During the TWUA Convention of 1952, in Cleveland, it became evident that Rieve would not give up his power. After Baldanzi was soundly defeated on the floor of the convention he took a drastic measure and went to the UTW-AFL.

The struggle then shifted to control of Local 250 by the TWUA-CIO and the UTW-AFL. The propaganda passed out at the gates of Erwin's mill separated and confused the workers. Rieve and Baldanzi, two powerful union leaders with extremely large egos came very close to destroying the local union. The national TWUA had offered Local 250 and

¹³⁷ Durham Morning Herald. "Erwin, N. C. Workers Vote For CIO In Union Election," 18 October 1952, Front Page.

the other southern unions as leverage in gaining wages and contracts in the north. Rieve had hoped to level the playing field by winning wage increases in the south. Wage increases in the south would have helped the northern mills remain competitive. Rieve's plan failed miserably and brought to the forefront exactly how weak the union was in the south. Realizing the weakness of the TWUA in the south northern mill owners now thought about moving their mills south.

CONCLUSION

When Erwin's mill opened in 1905 workers toiled 60-70 hours per week for low wages and few benefits. No matter how much the wealthy mill owners gave to the community, it must be remembered that the mill bosses worked their employees beyond reasonable limits.

In 1923, North Carolina surpassed Massachusetts as the leading textile producer in the United States. Higher production meant lower cost, and lower cost meant higher profits. While higher profit margins lined the pockets of the wealthy mill owners of Erwin Cotton Mills Company, the workers continued to toil in the miserable working conditions on the shop floor barely making enough money to survive.

From 1905-1938, Erwin's workers endured heavy workloads, long hours, and low wages. In February 1938, in a close election, workers in Erwin's mill voted in favor of union representation, searching for fairness and justice. The vote to unionize Erwin's mill took courage. Located in a state with a reputation of hostility to unions, the vote to unionize is evidence of just how bad it must have been in the mill. Although divided, Erwin's workers were taking a stand for what was fair and just. The TWUA was a beacon of hope, and although it took a while, the TWUA negotiated a contract that improved the lives of Erwin's workers. The union negotiated better hours, fair workloads, more pay, and most importantly a grievance procedure. The contract would, however, be strained during the nation's most difficult times.

The war years were very difficult for Local 250. Local 250 was offered protection by the NWLB in return for a no-strike pledge. The no-strike pledge guaranteed the

company that the union would not strike during the war. The no-strike pledge, however, did not give Erwin's managers the right to impose the "stretch-out" or "unit" systems.

In 1943, Local 250 reneged on the no-strike pledge and called a wildcat strike because of the stretch-out and unit system. The local media portrayed Local 250 as being "unpatriotic." Local 250 had no alternative other than striking. The government and Erwin's managers expected too much, while giving too little. The frustration of Local 250 and its leaders grew even more as the war continued.

In 1944, Local 250's frustration and desperation was at an all time high. Workers in Erwin were losing hours while enduring the stretch-out and unit systems. Without regard to policy set by the NLRB, Erwin's management installed procedures at their discretion with little thought about the law or the workers. The frustration of Local 250 became especially evident when the President of Local 250 wrote a letter to the President of the United States. Yet the difficult war years also made Erwin's workers stronger and more confident. This strength and confidence helped them prepare for the injustices of the near future. It was obvious that Local 250 did not trust, or like, Baldanzi because of his arrogance and the demands he made on the local during World War II. These demands revolved around organizing new members. During the war Local 250 felt that they, as union members, were not being given proper attention by the TWUA national, and now the national wanted them to help organize new union locals.

When Baldanzi left the CIO-TWUA and joined the AFL-UTW, many questions arose in Local 250. The major question would be who to follow now. With the books and records of Local 250 and many other southern locals in his hands, Baldanzi carried the locals with him to the United Textile Workers and set the stage for the NLRB to sanction

an election. The power struggle of 1952 between the UTW and TWUA ended when Local 250 voted to stay with the TWUA. The damage, however, was irreparable. The Erwin chain that included TWUA Locals 250, 246, and 251 was now broken. Erwin's mill was the only one that voted to stay with the TWUA.

Considering all the difficult situations Local 250 endured, such as contract negotiations, strikes, internal power struggles, and public criticism, Local 250 fought for its membership with astounding vigor, while displaying tremendous courage. We must remember Local 250 and the mill workers of Erwin, North Carolina as working class people who struggled to build one of the most successful and productive textile mills in the history of North Carolina. It took a tremendous amount of courage for Local 250's membership to stand up to the company during World War II. Union members, undaunted by the company, demanded fairness as they were persecuted in the press and labeled unpatriotic.

From 1938-1952, Textile Workers Union of America Local 250 dealt with many problems. These problems included strong company opposition, rural workers who at times were subservient, a separated union that was almost evenly split, and a legal climate that heavily favored the company. Regardless of these problems Local 250's members stood up and fought for their right to question company procedures, wages, hours, and benefits. Erwin's workers deserved fair wages, workloads, benefits, and a grievance procedure that protected their rights. However, these rights would never be given out of the goodness of the mill owners' hearts. The workers of Erwin's mill, thanks to the aggressiveness of the TWUA, took up this fight and won. The courage and loyalty of TWUA Local 250 led it to become a union dedicated to fighting for fairness and justice.

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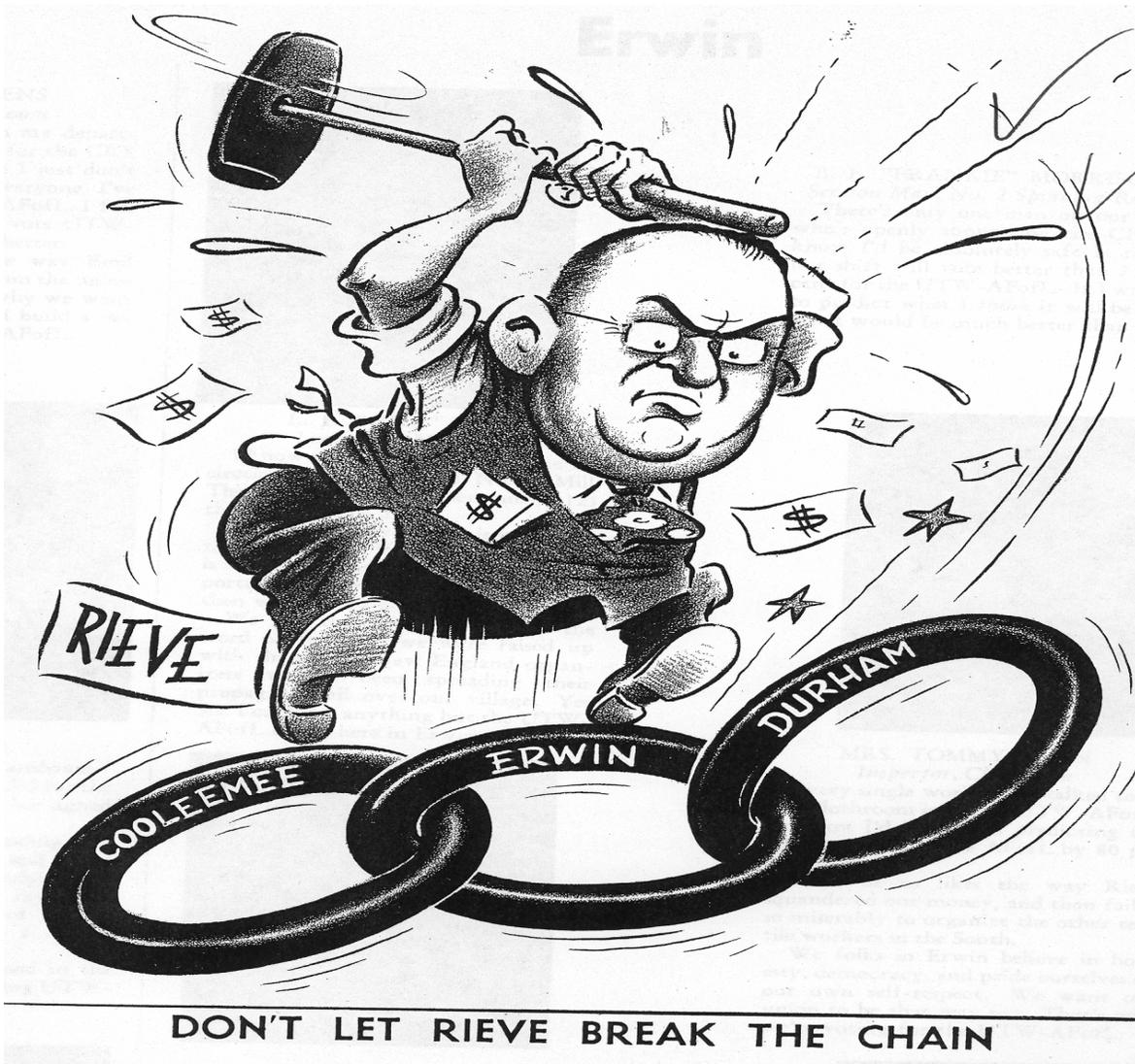
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Appendix 8.1

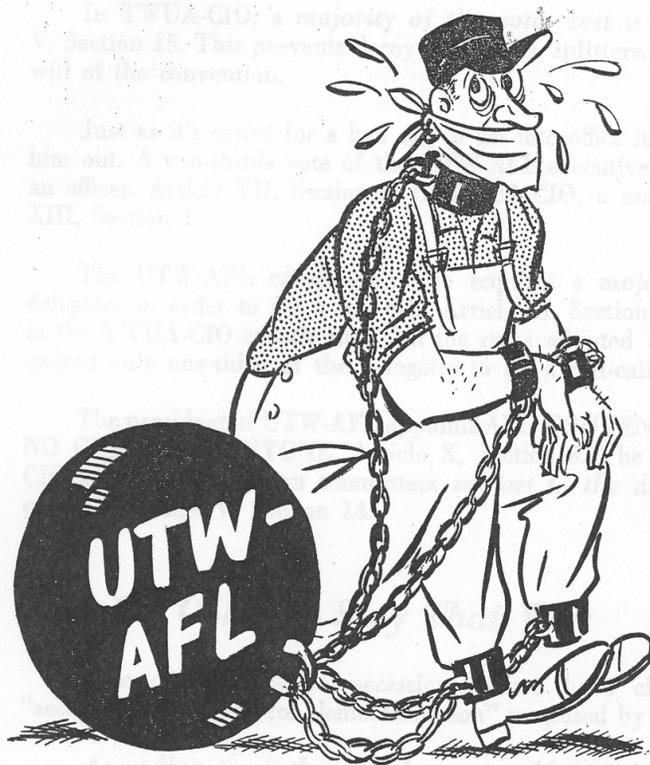


UTW-AFL leaflet handed out at Erwin's mill in 1952.

Appendix 8.2

Your Union Constitution:

Chains or a Charter?



*You and Your
Local Would Be
Helpless
Under UTW-AFL*

• • •

*UTW-AFL Allows
Assessments,
Bars
All Local Liberty*

TWUA-CIO leaflet handed out at Erwin's mill in 1952.