FEATURED ARTICLE

Labor's Champion: Myra Wolfgang

by Martha Wolfgang and Laura Green

SOMETIMES, headlines referred to her simply as Myra, because a last name wasn't necessary. As Detroiters knew, Myra meant Myra Wolfgang, the fiery labor leader who had devoted her life to the members of the Hotel, Motel and Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union — and, not incidentally, to anyone who benefited from Michigan's wage-and-hour laws, or suffered discrimination at the hands of their employers.

In the 43 years from the day she began working for the union's Local 705 to her death in 1976, she labored for decent pay and benefits and reasonable hours for a pool of workers broad enough to encompass hotel chambermaids and Playboy bunnies, chefs and bartenders at the top, and busboys starting at the bottom.

Myra Wolfgang was one of the nation's – and Detroit's – most beloved labor leaders, organizing hotel and restaurant workers and advocating for the working class throughout her life.

She stood up to public figures when she believed them to be wrong — from a governor and legislators who retreated from minimum wage commitments, to AFL-CIO leaders who refused to condemn the war in Vietnam in which their members' sons were fighting and dying. She captivated local media who relished her quotes, reporting gleefully on union strike tactics that thwarted and embarrassed management. She raised two daughters and soldiered on when her husband, a rock of strength in her crisis-filled environment, died when she was just in her 40s, plunging her into a once unimaginable life without him. And along the way she inspired countless young women to believe they could be more and do more.

Taken in 1953 at the Department of Labor, Myra is pictured with her two daughters, Laura on Myra's right and Martha on the left.

She was our mother; and while she may have been Myra to the world, she was Mom to us.

Some of what has been written about her has focused on her fearlessness, her way with words, her steadfastness, her optimism. One columnist wrote that she was "a woman of such aura, such mental force and conviction that she overwhelms you." The press made her work look easy, but it was demanding and her day was long. Then as now, labor unions had to be creative to organize in the face of better-funded, politically well-connected businesses. Women leaders were rare on either side of the bargaining table. Leaders who captured the public imagination and became a household word were even scarcer.

At the Toot of a Whistle

Myra Wolfgang was born in 1914 into a family of independent thinkers, fervent Zionists and political liberals. Her parents, Abraham and Ida Komaroff, were emigrants from Eastern Europe who believed passionately in the importance of Jewish culture and knowing one's history. Though her family was steeped in Jewish learning, theirs was not a religious household. Her parents, who met in Canada, had been married in Montreal's labor temple, making her, she said, "a union-made union maid."

When she was around two years old, her family moved to Detroit and prospered until the Depression. Wolfgang, an interior design student at what was then called Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, had to drop out and return home. At the suggestion of a friend, she went to Detroit's Local 705 of the Hotel & Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union looking for work. The phones were ringing — they

always were — and she began answering them and taking messages. By the end of the day, Louis Koenig, the union's secretary-treasurer, hired her as his secretary. She had taken the first step toward becoming the woman she was meant to be.

In the mid-1930s, several factors suddenly opened the way to unionizing more hotel and restaurant workers. The Wagner Act, passed in 1935, made it easier for all unions to recruit new members and bargain for wages and benefits. Michigan's Governor Frank Murphy was sympathetic to labor and refused to use police to break up strikes, as was done in other states. The fledgling UAW had taken on the powerful auto industry and wrung union contracts from it, inspiring others.

Wolfgang (right) was as comfortable walking with her workers on a picket line as she was meeting with dignitaries.

Wolfgang quickly rose from secretary to union organizer and contract negotiator. In 1937, Local 705 organized a sit-down strike at the Woolworth's department store at Woodward and Grand River in Detroit. At 23, she walked into the store, blew a whistle in a pre-arranged signal to the women behind the counters, and a pink-collar, sit-down strike began. It lasted eight days and generated nationwide publicity, including a story in Life magazine and newsreel segments. An organizing drive at Detroit's major hotels followed. After sit-down strikes at the Statler and Book Cadillac hotels, the members of the Detroit Hotel Association signed union contracts that brought 7,000 new members into the union local, and gave them better wages and hours and the beginnings of fringe benefits.

That year, it seemed as if all Detroit was on strike. There were sit-down strikes at 15 automobile plants in Detroit, sit-downs in department stores, clothes stores, shoe stores, trucking companies, storage companies, lumber yards, printing plants, meat-packers, bakeries, coal yards and warehouses. Newspapers estimated that perhaps 35,000 took

part in sit-down strikes and about 100,000 walked picket lines. "You couldn't be an observer back in the 1930s," she used to say. "You had to be a participant."

Over the next few years, Wolfgang's local grew in scope and power. By the beginning of World War II, most of the city's best restaurants and hotels were union shops, as were no fewer than 40 Woolworth's stores. Union organizers like Wolfgang could, and did, launch a hotel or restaurant strike at the toot of a whistle — a sound that meant employees would drop what they were doing and walk out. Powerful unions, such as the Teamsters, respected their picket lines, and refused to cross them to make deliveries.

MR. AND MRS. WOLFGANG

In the midst of all this, our mother found the time to meet our father, Moe Wolfgang, a lawyer. They were married on August 31, 1939 (we mention the date because they woke up the morning after their wedding to learn that Germany had invaded Poland and the war had begun. It was a grave and ominous beginning to a very happy life together). Growing up in the '50s, it was a long time before we understood that our parents' marriage was a partnership that was unique for its time. They went off to work together, discussing the day to come on their way downtown, and reviewing the day on the drive home. Our father also was a legal sounding board, providing unofficial and unpaid advice along with the union's official attorney. At home, our father was an equal partner in child raising. And while our parents split the carpools, he reigned as king of the breakfast table.

Moe and Myra were married 24 years. Theirs was a marriage of equals, Moe easily stepping in to care for their daughters if Myra was working.

At dinner, work and politics were always part of the conversation. At his perch at the head of the table, our father held his own against one of the city's best debaters. We were included, but we couldn't just spout off. Family or guest, we all had to defend our points of view. "Growing up, Myra was the only mother who you could get into a knockdown, drag-out debate with about politics and life and learn something," said the Wolfgang family's good friend, Susan Werbe, vice-president for history programming at AETN-TV. "To us she was a woman of the world."

Our parents taught us invaluable life lessons. We learned that girls should have careers so they could support themselves and be independent. We understood that work was important, but being home by 5:30 sharp for dinner with your children was just as important. Above all, we saw that our father was unbelievably proud of our mother, that he supported her in all her work, and that he knew he had married a powerhouse of a woman and loved her all the more deeply for it. Their partnership set an impressive standard.

The Most Important Woman Unionist in the Country

By the time we had absorbed enough to know what a union was and why we should never cross a picket line, our mother had become an international vice-president of her union, and a go-to authority on wages, hours and women in the work force. *The Detroit Free Press* called her "the most important woman unionist in the country." Yet prestige did not make her work easier. Passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which limited actions unions could take in the event of disagreements with management, made it harder for unions to expand. The growth of chain drive-ins, with their transient staffs, presented an insurmountable organizing challenge to her union. But if drive-ins, and their successors, fast food chains, seemed unconquerable, bigger, prouder establishments were not.

In 1955, the national hotel and restaurant union began a long drive to unionize the Miami Beach hotel industry, an enormous challenge in the proudly anti-union South. At the union's request, Wolfgang began commuting back and forth periodically to help. By then, she had considerable experience as a negotiator, strategist, and speechmaker who could rally striking hotel workers to hang in for another week, another month or another year. During the winter, the three of us would join her in Miami for several weeks. The two of us did our homework in the mornings at the motel where we lived — a union motel, of course — while our father supervised us and our mother worked. The strike lasted two years, but finally nearly 50 hotels signed union contracts.

Not long after that, our parents received an invitation to join a group of labor leaders who were going to Israel to dedicate a children's village, which was supported by funds raised by the Teamsters Union's powerful Local 299. It was their only trip to Israel. Although it was a union trip, it was personally significant, too. Her parents were Zionists, and her older sister, Sarah, had lived and worked on a kibbutz near Haifa for several years. On the trip, our mother met Golda Meir, who at the time was the minister of labor. Meir told her, "We need more people like you and Sarah here." She was proud of that, for herself, and for her sister, who had died not long before that trip.

Invited to dedicate a children's village, the Wolfgangs visit Israel sometime around 1954. Wolfgang is pictured here at the children's home she visited with either Israeli labor or orphanage officials.

Over the years, Wolfgang developed many kinds of strike strategies. None were more unusual than in strikes at country clubs in 1962, when targeted clubs were

Meeting with Golda Meir.

picketed on foot, by boat and on horseback. The strike came to the Detroit Boat Club on a night when Woody Herman and his band were hired for a dance. Club members smuggled them onto the club grounds by boat so the famous musician would not be seen crossing a picket line. Not to be outfoxed, Wolfgang got the musicians in the band shell on Belle Isle to play marching music to overwhelm the proper dance tunes from Herman's band. "First I would hear Woody Herman. Then I would hear something from John Philip Sousa," a club member told the *Free Press*. "I didn't know whether to do the two-step or present arms." Later in the strike, the union was tipped off that Sammy Kaye's band was trying to sneak through the woods for an event at the Western Golf and Country Club. Outfoxed by picketers, who ran into the bushes to confront them, they refused to play. "I'll be damned," Wolfgang said when she learned what happened. "Now we've come to 'one if by land and two if by sea.'"

In 1964, when she was trying to bring the Detroit Playboy Club into the union, she sent Martha, who was 17, to apply for a job. She had no qualms about dressing her daughter in a tight skirt, high heels and lots of makeup to play detective during the extensive bunny interview process. Martha always wondered why Keith Hefner, the brother of Hugh, never caught on when she asked detailed questions about wages, hours and benefits. Our mother believed that the image of the Playboy bunny was "a gross perpetuation of the idea that women should be obscene and not heard," but she worked damned hard to get them the respect and wages they deserved. The club settled and became the first of several Playboy Clubs to contract with the union.

An Advocate for the Working Poor

Hard bargaining and strategic strikes won significant benefits for her members. In the '30s, a waitress might earn $6 a week. By 1960, the union pay scale had risen to $66 a week, with such benefits as a pension plan, and health, accident and life insurance (today it ranges from $3 an hour to as much as $12 an hour). She took great pride in

Wolfgang met with politicians regularly. Here she is chatting with Michigan Governor Frank Murphy.

what the union had accomplished. "We represent some darned nice women who have raised children and sent them to college," she once said. "If we have to strike to get them decent wages and working conditions, we strike."

At the time, federal minimum wage laws did not cover many waitresses and waiters, union members or not, so Wolfgang became a tireless advocate for a state minimum wage law. She was outspoken and adamant on behalf of her members, and all low wage earners. "Service workers are still on the bottom of the economic pole," she once explained. "Any little change in the economy, in politics, in legislation affects our members tremendously." As a member of Michigan's Wage Deviation Board and the Wayne County AFL-CIO executive board, she had a bully pulpit to campaign for a higher minimum wage. In doing so, she ruffled a lot of political feathers, but the minimum wage levels were slowly raised. She became, as one newspaper put it, "far and away the most effective leader of the working poor in Michigan."

Over the years, she fought hard for protective legislation limiting the loads women could lift and the hours they worked. That made her an opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment, which she believed would have eliminated sex-based distinctions in the workplace. She argued publicly and forcefully against the amendment. "We don't want equality of mistreatment," she often said. She ultimately dropped her opposition because, she told us, she refused to stay in a fight when her only remaining ally was the arch-conservative Phyllis Schlafly.

Wolfgang was sought after as an authority on women, wages and working conditions,

A tireless advocate for women's rights, Wolfgang had access to many world leaders including Eleanor Roosevelt.

serving on many organizations from Presidential commissions on down. Most were concerned with wages, hours, working women and job training, but she also sat on the board of directors of WDET-FM (originally owned and operated by the UAW for the purpose of public service programming, and in 1952, taken over by Wayne State University) and the Detroit City Theatre Association. She attracted public service awards like a magnet. Her activism went beyond the workplace. She argued for a child care system like those in Europe. She took part in the civil rights march in Selma. She opposed the war in Vietnam and called on other union leaders to oppose it, too.

She was one of the founders of CLUW, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, formed to help women become leaders in their unions and give their issues greater weight during contract talks. She was the presiding officer at CLUW's first conference, which attracted more than 3,000 women from 82 unions. She opened it with a challenge. "We have a message for George Meany," she told the crowd. "We didn't come here to swap recipes." Judy Berek was a young labor organizer from Local 1199, the Drug and Hospital Workers Union who attended that first meeting. She remembers Myra as a "seasoned trade unionist who understood the frustrations of young women whose home unions did not understand their needs," adding that she was one of the best speakers she had ever listened to, one who "inspired the union women to just say things how they are."

Our mother continued full steam ahead until 1976, when she was felled by a brain tumor at 61. She collapsed at home and died three months later. At her memorial service, the speakers were a reflection of her life and work: her friend, Monsignor Clement Kern, the revered Corktown priest and activist; her friend, Jerome Cavanagh, the former mayor and her friend, Ernest Goodman, the progressive lawyer. Her friend Addie Wyatt, the union leader and CLUW founder spoke, as did her friends, the waitress Alberta Van Etta and Audley Grossman, the theater director of the Detroit Institute of Arts. As forceful as they were in describing her, it was, and still is, hard to pin our mother down on paper. Capturing her dedication, her drive, her wit, her steadfastness and her adamant love is like trying to bottle a tornado. In public, she often had the last and best word, so it's fitting that she do so now…"I don't look for trouble," she once said. "But, by God, I don't run away from it."

In a meeting with President Harry S. Truman.

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