
Introduction

Bill McEntee measured out the streets of Philadelphia in short, steady movements. Sitting behind the wheel of an open-back trash truck, he let the engine idle, listening for the shouts from his two-man crew telling him when to ease up as they finished emptying trash cans house by house along the route. By 1933, the year McEntee turned thirty, he had worked for the Street Cleaning Bureau of the Philadelphia Department of Public Works (DPW) for almost ten years, rising each morning before daylight to begin this noisy, monotonous routine. In the harshness of the route, McEntee often dreamed of travel beyond these streets. More than anyplace, he longed to see Ireland, a land of splendid beauty and his ancestral homeland, which he had heard sung about and spoken of in the heavily Irish neighborhood of North Philadelphia where he had spent his entire life. But like most men who worked these trash routes six days a week, twelve months a year, such dreams of travel seemed unattainable.¹

In tattered work clothes, covered in grime and soot, sanitation workers like Bill McEntee moved across the city silently but for the shouts that punctuated their activities on the streets. By any account, these men had the least enviable jobs in the city—working in filth that exposed them to tuberculosis, rats, and a stench that permeated their skin and clothing. In colder months, along with trash, the men removed tons of coal ash that residents had cleaned out of household furnaces and put out with the weekly rubbish. A cloud of thick dust from the dumped ash darkened the collectors' faces, often making black workers and white workers indistinguishable. The hardships of the job did not end after they finished their shift. Having attained these jobs as patronage from the city's powerful Republican Party organization, sanitation workers were obliged

to perform numerous unpaid political services in the neighborhoods where they lived—attending meetings, getting out the vote on Election Day, and paying dues to mandatory political clubs out of their meager pay. To urban reformers and citizens alike, city workers seemed little more than urban serfs, tied to local lords who controlled their asphalt fiefdoms with iron-clad dominance.

Philadelphia's blue-collar municipal workers, like their industrial counterparts across the United States, sought to transform their economic and social positions in the 1930s. Emboldened by gains made by workers in the city's private firms, Philadelphia's sanitation workers—led by Bill McEntee—formed a union to gain pay increases and basic workplace rights. When the city arbitrarily fired more than 200 workers in September 1938, the sanitation workers went on strike, taking their battle to the streets, where hundreds of family members and supporters joined them to confront police and those who dared to replace them on sanitation routes. During the strike, the men affiliated with a new union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and with its help secured a contract that granted wage increases and job security, limiting the previously unchecked power of Republican political leaders. As the leader of the city workers, Bill McEntee gained further wage increases and benefits while organizing the union into other municipal departments. By the late 1940s, McEntee had become a pivotal leader of a citywide political-reform movement that eventually overthrew the city's corrupt system and established civil service protections for all city workers that would make Philadelphia a model for similar programs across the nation.

In 1952, Bill McEntee realized his lifelong dream of visiting Ireland when he accompanied AFSCME international President Arnold S. Zander on a tour of several European capital cities. As a delegate of the Public Services International, an organization of the world's public-sector trade unions, McEntee met with hundreds of public administrators and unionists, an experience that reinforced his belief in the superiority of American political institutions. Even though European civil service systems were held up as models for American government reformers, the former trash-truck driver found that the social divisions in these nations offered few opportunities for working people to advance beyond the stations into which they were born. When McEntee recalled this trip years later, one moment was most notable for him. At a banquet held in honor of the AFSCME delegation, all stood as a band played the British national anthem, "God Save the Queen." As the assembly sat down, an English man turned to McEntee and said, "Why, I guess you've got everything over in the States but royalty." With the differences between societies already on his mind, McEntee responded gruffly, "I have news for you. Where I come from over there, all our people are royal." McEntee later felt embarrassed by his reaction and told Arnold Zander that perhaps he did not belong at such events. Zander consoled him, saying, "Man, you couldn't have said a bigger, better thing."²

Surely, Bill McEntee's claim for the egalitarianism of United States society in the mid-twentieth century seems deeply mistaken. Millions of Americans

were still denied equal citizenship and the basic freedoms guaranteed to all in the constitution. Only a few years earlier, the American South's rigid racial codes, often enforced by extreme violence, had served as a model for South Africa's brutal apartheid system. In all sections of the United States, extreme social divisions continued to divide those who had little from those who had much. Even in Philadelphia, with its Quaker traditions of tolerance and its proud claim as the birthplace of American democracy, extreme chasms between the rich and poor still had not been eradicated. The city's racially polarized neighborhoods reflected policies that limited black residents' access to job and educational opportunities as well as other basic services. Many of Bill McEntee's own union members continued to face desperate conditions that relegated them as part of the urban working poor. Even after the founding of the union, men who lifted Philadelphia's trash and swept its streets remained among the lowest paid workers in the city, considered social pariahs by much of the broader public whom they served. Although McEntee had left the grime of the morning route behind him, few of his union members could ever hope to do the same.

As a man who had worked the Philadelphia sanitation routes for almost twenty years, Bill McEntee undoubtedly recognized the real social divisions that oppressed workers, both on the job and in the neighborhoods where they lived. In his dealings with ward leaders who controlled the municipal workplace, and through his early days as AFSCME shop steward, he was often frustrated by the persistence of the type of social relations described by political scientist J. T. Salter, who observed that in Philadelphia's political boss system "the circumstances and attitude of mind remind one of a feudal system—a system of society where inherent rights do not exist but only favors granted by a beneficent lord."³ Still, the collective actions of the city's municipal workers had begun to assert a new type of relationship within this power grid, and to gain ground in securing more of the basics of life promised by the emerging national consumer society. With continued struggle, McEntee believed, even further improvements could be made. Indeed, by the 1960s, the union's control over most urban services, as well as its effective voter mobilization drives, had given city workers a claim to power few would have believed possible in the first years of the twentieth century.

Bill McEntee's assertion of the basic egalitarian character of American social relations, grounded in his specific experience in the nation's third-largest metropolis, represents more than a moment of nationalist sentimentality. It testifies to his belief in the legitimacy of existing political-party structures and the abilities of ordinary citizen-workers to successfully operate to achieve their goals within them. This belief in the municipal state was consistent with the prevailing sentiments of most of his members, even the humblest street cleaners. Although historians note significant moments when American workers forged organizations that challenged bourgeois political assumptions or sought to abolish the capitalist economic system, oppositional political movements only rarely gained sizable working-class followings. For the most part, U.S.

working-class voters saw their interests addressed within broader, multiclass coalitions grounded in common historical identities and values. By looking at how the union formed by Philadelphia sanitation workers related to these traditions and claimed a position within them, this study demonstrates how, in the words of historian Richard Schneirov, “the more enduring political effect of class formation occurred within the two major parties.”⁴

AFSCME’s emergence as a unique working-class organization from within reform traditions of mainstream American political culture remains a missing piece of U.S. working-class history. Despite AFSCME’s status as one of the nation’s largest and most politically powerful unions at the start of the twenty-first century, its initial history remains largely untold.⁵ Earlier studies of the union usually define AFSCME’s history as having two distinct eras. From 1932 to 1964, these studies argue, a peculiar, predominantly Midwestern association headed by the academic Arnold S. Zander developed as a kind of civil service organization outside the broader narratives of the labor movement, largely failing to transform the status of state and municipal government workers. The second era began with the election of Jerry Wurf, the leader of New York City’s DC 37, as AFSCME international president in 1964. Under Wurf, AFSCME abandoned civil service objectives in favor of more militant, industrial-style trade unionism that merged the goals of an increasingly diversified, cosmopolitan public workforce with broader social movements—primarily the black freedom struggle—to secure AFSCME as a major force in the national political arena. My study challenges the assumptions of this traditional chronology. By focusing on the history of AFSCME’s earliest and most successful urban chapter, I bridge the usually divergent eras in the union’s development, allowing for a more complete understanding of this unique organization’s traditions and impact on American society.

The streets of Philadelphia are the proper location to find an alternative reading of AFSCME’s earliest years. The City of Brotherly Love, with its reputation as the most “corrupt and contented” urban machine in the nation, maintained a vast patronage system that, by 1920, had established the municipal government itself as the largest single employer in the city.⁶ Out of this massive patronage bank, the nation’s largest metropolitan AFSCME section emerged. Following the union’s militant display of power in the 1938 strike, Philadelphia’s Republican leaders formally recognized AFSCME as the exclusive collective-bargaining agent for its blue-collar employees, making Philadelphia the first major city in the United States to do so. With its efforts to gain better living standards for its membership, the union asserted shared class interests and brought black and white public workers together a generation earlier than is usually stated in other accounts. Furthermore, AFSCME’s role in Philadelphia’s urban reform movement (1947–1952) contributed to the institution of a modern personnel system, including a merit system based on civil service regulations and a personnel bureaucracy overseen by professionally trained administrators. Through these early years, Philadelphia’s AFSCME District Council (DC) 33 remained the model for successful labor relations in big cities.

In charting AFSCME's "Philadelphia Story," this study addresses three interrelated themes. First, it asserts the centrality of class relations within the twentieth-century urban political "machine." Urban historians and political scientists have tended to see these urban political institutions as ethnically fragmented, with rival groups contesting for control over limited access to services and vying for local seats of power.⁷ In these struggles, the cleavages in the home sphere limited class consciousness among diverse working-class communities. However, if the municipal state's core function as a patronage agency is taken into account, the political machine—as its name suggests—cannot be separated from the broader issues that defined industrial workplaces, including class-based conflict. In Philadelphia and elsewhere, poor wages, working conditions, and a type of broad surveillance that tied workers to political bosses in the municipal workplace and in the wards where patronage was dispensed led to collective strategies whereby workers united against politico-managers. While ethnic and a range of other divisions never disappeared within the workplace organizations public employees formed, these identities were honed against other group needs that leveled powerful social codes. As the benefactors of political patronage, city workers were more than supplicants, and at times spoke out against the power that ward bosses held, a fact that for too long has been overlooked.

This study also explores the ways that class solidarity in the highly diversified municipal workplace broke down predominant racial codes to form a basis for interracial unionism in Philadelphia's public sector. While many studies chronicle times when black workers and white workers transcend social norms to form common workplace institutions to achieve specific improvements, mostly these experiences are noteworthy for the persistence of the color line on the job and within the institutions the workers formed.⁸ Labor historians have avoided idealizations of American workers' ability to clear social racial codes. Still, as historian Daniel Letwin has written, "the corrosive effects of racism upon the relations of black and white workers do not negate the significance of interracial organization where it materialized, but instead render its exploration all the more compelling."⁹ Philadelphia's public workers provide another example of what is a more enduring, if highly complex, case of interracial working-class solidarity.

Finally, the story of Philadelphia's AFSCME also reveals the limits of interracial unionism and presents the struggle over control of the union as an important moment in the development of independent black politics. While Philadelphia's white city workers and their union leaders accepted the necessities of interracial solidarity in the politically determined city power grid, rarely did they forfeit their traditional positions of privilege in the municipal work order. In the years before 1965, AFSCME DC 33 did not represent a form of civil rights unionism that sought complete social equality either on the job or in the communities where its members lived, instead focusing on structural, civil-service-based reforms that would refigure the government sector along merit principles that ideally overlooked racial differences. By the late 1950s, it

was clear that these programs were falling short. Inspired by black activism in the community realm, African American municipal unionists launched a struggle for formal control over the union and its resources, claiming a measure of power through a demonstration of their control over vital city services. In this citywide display of black power, Philadelphia sanitation workers showed the possibilities of collective black political action, and well before the election of Wilson Goode as the city's first African American mayor in 1983, black union leaders were recognized as wielding control over sections of the municipal workplace.

This study is organized chronologically, tracing the history of Philadelphia's blue-collar city workers from the pre-union era of the 1920s to the first years of the twenty-first century. Chapter 1 charts how patronage maintained the city's Republican Party system, binding city workers on the job and in the neighborhoods where they lived. Focusing especially on the city's largest employment bastion, the DPW—which included the Sanitation, Highways, and Water bureaus—this chapter gives a necessary descriptive overview of the tasks performed by these blue-collar laborers. Although the most inclusive workplace in the Delaware Valley, Philadelphia's city government replicated racial hierarchies similar to those that existed in the private sector. Along with presenting documentation of the unspoken racial codes at play in the DPW, the chapter also details the common political culture that bound all city workers within neighborhood organizations and the failed attempts by middle-class reformers to eradicate the spoils system from the American government.

Chapter 2 highlights the emergence of municipal unionism in the Philadelphia Street Cleaning Bureau in 1936 and the eventual formation of AFSCME. Showing how this development was rooted in shifts in the national, state, and local political order, the chapter demonstrates how the decline of the long-dominant Republican Party affected average city employees. Collapse of the patronage system, along with the rise of a revitalized Democratic Party under city chairman John B. Kelly, fostered the emergence of a collective approach in the municipal sanitation yards. I demonstrate that social changes in the city's African American and other ethnic communities that had high proportions of city workers aided in the unionization campaign that began in 1936. The unprecedented rise of a powerful labor movement and its impact on the city's political scene is also examined. The chapter details the sanitation workers' early affiliation with the city's Teamsters union, the emergence of the independent Municipal Workers Union, and the affiliation with AFSCME in 1938. The chapter concludes with an overview of the 1938 strike, which featured the Garbage Riots, the most important event in the union's founding.

Chapter 3 analyzes AFSCME's first six years in Philadelphia, highlighting its peculiar institutional identity as an outgrowth of the city's Republican organization and a charter member of a national union dedicated to the overthrow of the spoils system. After 1938, AFSCME Local 222 sought structural reform geared toward forging a merit-based workplace ensured by a modern civil service administration. The chapter gives the background of the national AFSCME orga-

nization, along with details into Philadelphia's unusual relationship with the Republican Party. Although the union of Sanitation, Highways, and Water Bureau workers contained high numbers of black rank-and-file members, it did not embrace a kind of civil rights unionism that sought a fundamental restructuring of the municipal workplace along explicitly racial lines. The chapter provides an overview of some of the reasons why, while treating the status of black city laborers within the city's political system. The changes experienced within the wartime municipal workplace, conflicts over the scope of municipal unionism, and challenges from more radical public-sector organizations are also addressed. The chapter ends with a treatment of the Great Sanitation Strike of 1944 and the restructuring of the union that led to the forming of DC 33 in May 1944.

Chapter 4 argues that AFSCME DC 33 played a major role in shaping the Philadelphia reform movement that transformed the city's political structures between 1947 and 1952. Beginning with the post-1945 organizing drives that expanded AFSCME to departments beyond the DPW, the chapter details Bill McEntee's ascendance as a respected leader within the local labor movement and the national AFSCME organization, the position of the union's African American workers, and the unique culture that continued to link the union within neighborhood political-power systems. Ultimately, the organic relationship developed between union and ward powers proved ineffective, and AFSCME sought other solutions to gaining better wages and rights for their members on the job. Asserting the reform tradition it inherited from its links to the national union, DC 33 articulated the needs of city employees in the 1951 Home Rule Charter, which established a merit-based civil service system free of political manipulation. The reasons for the developing reform coalition, the role played by AFSCME and other labor organizations, and the political election of 1951 are covered in detail.

Chapter 5 covers the period between 1952 and 1961, a time referred to as the Reform Era. With the establishment of a municipal bureaucracy free of ward control, the municipal workplace was utterly transformed. The chapter details this new employment system and the role the union played in its oversight, addressing various changes that resulted, such as the growing numbers of women workers within the local government services, the impact of civil service on the African American worker, and the limitations of the liberal bureaucracy to overcome long-standing racial norms. Close attention is given to dissent within DC 33, especially the 1953 sanitation wildcat strike and management's response, the role played by Local 427 in the sanitation yards, and the experience of black workers in a metropolis that was more and more racially polarized. Social tensions between the city's increasingly African American labor force and the white-dominated Police Department is explained, especially in relation to DC 33's failed attempts to gain wage boosts after 1953. An understanding of the growing resentments among black workers in this section of the union provides necessary background for explanations of the breakdown of labor-management relations in the 1960s.

Chapter 6 details the upsurge in municipal unionism in Philadelphia in the 1960s. Led primarily by black dissidents in the Streets Department locals, Philadelphia's AFSCME experienced a return to the street-level job actions and militant rhetoric that marked the union's first fifteen years. For the first time, black rank-and-file members and their leaders combined these actions with racial consciousness in an attempt to curb and ultimately replace the white power system in city administration. The chapter links these local developments to national challenges to the assumptions of liberalism, parallel surges in militancy by school teachers, the impact of Keynesian urban policies under the John F. Kennedy administration, and the impact of AFSCME's reform movement led by Jerry Wurf in Philadelphia. The wage settlements of 1965 and 1966, in which the racial politics of the city are played out more starkly than any other time, are also discussed. The chapter ends with an overview of the political changes in Philadelphia, especially the 1967 mayoral race and the fateful 1968 Memphis sanitation strike.

Chapter 7 frames the period from 1970 to 1986 as "the Stout Era," the union's high-water mark of power in the twentieth century. During these years, sanitation leader Earl Stout emerged as a major power broker in the city, arguably Philadelphia's most formidable black political figure. DC 33's power in the City of Brotherly Love is placed within the context of the national union's organizing successes, particularly the successful drive to bring in 75,000 state employees in Pennsylvania in the early 1970s, and the growing membership base in Philadelphia, especially after the founding of a separate white-collar AFSCME section, DC 47. Earl Stout's pragmatic alliance with Mayor Frank Rizzo is examined, as is the political fallout of the 1975 contract that ceded unprecedented power to the union in the oversight of the city workplace it represented. The chapter also covers the union's strategies in the age of Ronald Reagan, the election of Wilson B. Goode as Philadelphia's first African American mayor in 1983, and the 1986 city workers strike.

In Chapter 8, AFSCME's position in Philadelphia's political scene in the last years of the twentieth century and the opening of the new millennium is outlined. Unprecedented challenges, including the rise of neoliberal economic policies (especially its emphasis on privatization of the government services) and changing local political realities, demanded responses that had not been used in the previous generation. Among the issues covered are the political consequences of the failed 1986 strike, the rise of opposition movements within DC 33 that finally unseated Earl Stout as union president in 1988, and the fateful clash between the city workers' unions and Mayor Ed Rendell in 1992. The union's internal politics after 1995 are highlighted, as well as the range of issues surrounding contract negotiations during the John F. Street administration and a brief discussion of the future of the union.