“Red Purge”:
The 1946–1947 Strike at Allis-Chalmers

Julian L. Stockley

In 1947, Harold Story, Allis-Chalmers’ labor policy engineer and attorney, addressed a convention of the National Association of Manufacturers in New York. He told his audience that, during the 1946–1947 strike at Allis-Chalmers’ plant at West Allis, Wisconsin, the company had finally been able to expose what he called the Communist leadership of Local 248:

Until recently, public opinion has blindly and wholeheartedly supported unionism and collective bargaining. . . .

. . . During Allis-Chalmers’ last strike, public opinion changed. Only then was Allis-Chalmers in a position to tell its employees . . . [about] the devastating destructiveness of Communist union leadership in the labor movement.1

Story then described how Allis-Chalmers, manufacturers of heavy machinery and farm equipment, had used this shift in public opinion to win the eleven-month strike and break the union. Instead of negotiating the disputed contractual issues that would determine who would control the shop floor and employee loyalty, Allis-Chalmers’ management mounted a press campaign against the alleged Communists among Local 248’s most active membership. In this way, management sidestepped the contractual points of contention and focused public attention on what they labeled the Communist infiltration in Local 248. Until recently the assertion that Local 248 was Communist dominated has been popularly accepted. But a careful study of the evidence indicates that the charges are unproven and that the company only used them to avoid negotiating a legitimate contractual agreement. It was thus that Allis-Chalmers won the strike and broke the union, dismissed over ninety of the local’s most active union members, and forced an unprecedented turnover in Local 248’s leadership.

The company found support for its position in the emerging national anti-labor attitude, reflected in and fostered by the local and national press, and in the development of a postwar Red Scare. Allis-Chalmers was also convinced that it had relinquished too much managerial control to Local 248 in the decade before the 1946–1947 strike. From 1936–1946, while the local was building its membership and hoping to gain union securities comparable to those won by like brotherhoods, relations between Allis-Chalmers and Local 248 were strained. The company viewed the 1946–1947 strike as an opportunity for a final showdown.

In 1946 when Local 248 members walked out in the hope of securing wages comparable to national industrial wage rates, an improved grievance procedure, and union security, Allis-Chalmers’ management was unwilling to address these contractual points or negotiate a compromise. Local 248 not only had to withstand Allis-Chalmers’ managerial pressure, changes in national attitudes, and the press campaign orchestrated by the company, but also had to conduct its strike with reserved support from the leaders of its international, the United Automobile Workers (UAW), and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) of which the UAW was a member.

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After World War II, the UAW underwent an administrative shift. Its rising leader, Walter Reuther, used the public’s perception of a Communist threat to gain the UAW presidency and purge the organization of alleged Communists. The CIO’s president, Philip Murray, also employed the Communist issue to purge the federation’s ranks. At the same time, the American public was following the House Committee on Un-American Activities’ investigations of Communism in labor unions in the United States. It was in this setting that Local 248 attempted to wrest a contract from Allis-Chalmers. After an eleven-month strike, Local 248 was forced to capitulate; employees returned to work without a contract, while the company dismissed Local 248’s most active members.

Local 248 was founded in the late 1930s, amid the growing tide of industrial unionism. Up until this time, Allis-Chalmers’ West Allis plant had remained unorganized except for a modest membership among the company’s selective craft unions, which excluded assembly-line workers. From October 1936 to January 1937, Allis-Chalmers’ Federal Labor Union (FLU) 20136, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was under the leadership of Harold Christophel. During this brief period, members of Allis-Chalmers’ AFL trade and craft unions deserted wholesale to the Federal Labor Union, so that by January 1937 the local’s membership exceeded 2,000 in a plant of approximately 8,000 employees. Because the newly created Federal Labor Union derived its membership from the assembly-line workers as well as the plant’s skilled craftsmen, it came into conflict with the Federated Trade Council in Milwaukee. In March 1937, Allis-Chalmers’ FLU 20136 decided to join the newly chartered CIO to become Local 248 UAW-CIO. As an affiliate of the CIO, Local 248 was no longer required to heed craft-union lines while organizing, which allowed for greater growth and flexibility in its intensive organizational program.

The greatest challenge for the new local was Allis-Chalmers’ traditional anti-labor stance: Allis-Chalmers had a strike in 1906 and another in 1916, both of which “were crushed by the Company and resulted in the total destruction of the unions.” After the implementation of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, the company set up a paternalistic, company-dominated union, the Allis-Chalmers Works Council, which existed from 1933 to 1937 and seated only Allis-Chalmers’ most conservative employees. But the council functioned as a grievance board and never held contractual relations with Allis-Chalmers.

Even in the late 1930s, when other firms were moving to open labor-management communications, Allis-Chalmers’ management pursued a markedly inflexible labor policy. The firm’s executives continued to voice opinions that questioned or rejected labor’s role in areas they considered to be under managerial authority, balked at the idea of a closed shop, and opposed any measure that legitimized union authority on the shop floor. Bert Cochran, author of Labor and Communism, notes a discrepancy between the company’s statements and actions:

The company maintained that it sincerely accepted collective bargaining, and was pledged to a hands-off policy in the union’s internal affairs. Outside observers concluded that it was not the disinterested bystander that it pretended to be. Dr. John Steelman, head of the U.S. Labor Department Conciliation Service, was of the opinion that Max Babb, the company president, was hostile to unions, and in order to keep the CIO off balance, encouraged AFL craft organizations to come into his plants.

It was in this environment that Local 248 attempted to gain recognition as the employees’ contractual bargaining agent.
and won its first nonexclusive contract with the firm in March 1937. After the local won a National Labor Relations Board election in January 1938, Local 248 became the bargaining agent for the employees at the West Allis works.

During the close of the 1930s, the union signed relatively weak contracts compared to the contracts being signed by other UAW locals. Although recognized as the workers' bargaining agent, Local 248 still did not enjoy union security, freedom from management's arbitrariness, or a wage package comparable to those paid by area manufacturers. The contract did not provide a maintenance-of-membership clause to protect the union from membership desertion, nor did the firm dissuade AFL brotherhoods from organizing in the West Allis plant. Allis-Chalmers only agreed to remain "neutral" on the union issue, neither challenging the local directly nor aiding it in securing members. The contracts of the late 1930s also failed to free workers from Allis-Chalmers' arbitrary managerial controls. The company's shop foremen still maintained control over the write-up of employees' grievances, and management retained control over employee dismissals. Nonetheless, this period marked a limited shift in the balance of power on the shop floor at the West Allis works.

The lack of real union security remained a pressing concern for the leadership of Local 248 and was the cause of a seventy-six-day strike in 1941, which was characterized by the national press as a political strike called by the "Communist" leadership of Local 248. However, according to Stephen Meyer, the strike in fact had "all the earmarks of a standard union battle" and was actually called because Allis-Chalmers had been encouraging the AFL to organize in the West Allis works, thus challenging the CIO's Local 248 on the issue of union security. The strike was settled only after the federal government intervened. The issues focused on the labor-management conflict over shop, production, and worker control; yet, more important than this, the 1941 strike introduced the public to and provided the firm with publicized allegations of the Communist Party's influence in Local 248.

During World War II, the labor-management conflict over authority on the shop floor continued as Local 248 attempted to gain recognition as an autonomous power from the company. By using the grievance procedure provided in the contract and taking advantage of the nonpartisan referee assigned to judge these cases, Local 248 was able to modify some contractual boundaries, increase its influence in the shop, and gain a limited amount of managerial authority in the West Allis plant. Had the "Communist" leadership of Local 248 been heeding the advice of such leading Communist figures as Earl Browder, the union would have curtailed its use of the grievance procedure and listened to Browder's urging that "Communists must avoid alienating employers" in order to maximize wartime production. Instead, the local's leadership

... ignored the Party's admonitions to cooperate with management to increase production. Grievances were magnified and, although both union and management had long approved incentive pay, the union stubbornly refused to have it applied to the brass foundry. It also opposed the fifty-six-hour week that the navy had requested to speed up production on navy orders. 5

Local 248 refused to relent in its struggle for union security, recognition as a legitimate shop power, and economic gains on behalf of its membership. The war afforded the union one gain. In 1943, after the National War Labor Board was called in, Allis-Chalmers was forced to put a maintenance-of-membership clause in the new contract. By guaranteeing that
dues-paying members had to maintain paid membership and could not leave the union once they joined. Local 248 was awarded its first contractual clause granting relative union security. The company refused to renew this clause during postwar contractual negotiations.

Wartime relations between Local 248 and Allis-Chalmers were strained, and quite often government agents had to be called in to resolve the contractual disputes of previous years. In the spring of 1946, the local was still negotiating for a contract, which had been under discussion since April 1944 when the previous contract had expired; West Allis employees had been working under the old contract since that time. During the negotiations, Allis-Chalmers ignored the suggested bargaining concessions that the War Labor Board and the Federal Conciliation Service recommended and also ended the referee system that had been used to settle grievances during the war. In an additional show of strength, the company decided to adhere “to its traditional policy which stated that ‘no employee’s job at Allis-Chalmers shall depend on membership in the Union,’” to its stand on tightening grievance procedures, and to its final wage offer, which was five cents below the national pattern.

As labor-management tensions were nearing strike proportions at its West Allis home plant in the spring of 1946, Allis-Chalmers also faced conflicts with seven out of its eight plants nationwide. By 30 April 1946, Allis-Chalmers had four plants on strike: LaPorte, Indiana; Springfield, Illinois; Norwood, Ohio; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Three more of its plants went on strike that day: Boston, Massachusetts; LaCrosse, Wisconsin; and West Allis, Wisconsin. Since late 1945, union representatives from various Allis-Chalmers’ plants had been meeting with the hope of drawing up a master contract that would cover all of the company’s plants. Had Allis-Chalmers accepted the unions’ offer to bargain on this scale, the company would have been recognizing the unions as legitimate, autonomous bargaining partners. But management rejected this idea because it interfered with the company’s belief in a fundamental managerial right—the right to decide the terms of the contract offered. After the strike began and as individual unions were forced to settle, Allis-Chalmers sister unions maintained contact through letters, encouraging the locals still out to hold the strike fronts.

Allis-Chalmers also refused Local 248’s offer of arbitration because, as Ozanne has observed,

the party which feels stronger and is anxious to gain something by its power which it fears it might not get from an arbitrator will, of course, refuse arbitration.7

Allis-Chalmers was ready for a showdown with the unions that challenged its managerial prerogatives, and the company was especially keen on confrontation with Local 248. As has been pointed out, in its home plant of West Allis, the company evaded the main points of contention: wages, grievance procedures, and union security. Instead, Allis-Chalmers launched a propaganda drive aimed at persuading the public and its West Allis employees that the leadership of Local 248 and its strike were actually a “Communist-inspired plot to disrupt American industry” and that Local 248’s “Communist” leadership did not have the workers’ best interest at heart.8

When Allis-Chalmers readied its public relations campaign against Local 248 in 1946, it was addressing a public that had become increasingly concerned about the “Red Bogey” in America, to use David M. Oshinsky’s terminology.9 From the perspective of most American citizens, there seemed to be good reason for alarm over the new “Red menace.” While the
press highlighted news of Stalin’s increasing boldness in Eastern Europe, and of the Canadians exposing a Soviet spy ring, the Truman Administration fueled the nation’s frenetic agitation by gearing up for cold war with the newly emerging Soviet enemy. The American people seemed to conclude that although they could not control threats from the outside, they could at least identify and eliminate the enemy within their own ranks.

In 1946, the nation elected the first Republican Congress in eighteen years. Republicans championed the anti-Communist cause, an issue with voter appeal. Lawrence S. Wittner has suggested that American businessmen were the Republican’s “keenest supporters” and that they were still “smarting from a generation of social criticism by journalists, news commentators, labor leaders, artists, and intellectuals.” In 1946 and 1947, the United States Chamber of Commerce felt the internal Communist threat so keenly that it published the pamphlets “Communist Infiltration in the United States: Its Nature and How to Combat It,” “Communists in the Government, The Facts and a Program,” and “Communists within the Labor Movement, Facts and Countermeasures.” In 1947, the same group put forward the idea that the Justice Department should make public “at least twice a year a certified list of Communist-controlled front organizations and labor unions.” The postwar labor strikes foundered under the suspicious eyes of the American public.

During the postwar period, labor unions, many of which had benefited from the organizational skill and commitment of Communist activists, became targets for press “exposures” and Congressional hearings. Under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s tutelage ten years earlier, the public explored the possibilities of a cooperative marriage between labor and management as one means of curing depression ills. After the war, however, the public was less willing than it had been during the late 1930s to view labor’s courtship in a positive light and often felt as though it had been duped by Communist labor leaders. Sometimes business leaders, organizations, various presses (including the influential Hearst syndicate), and Congressional committees undertook to further their own interests by labeling and exposing the “un-American” elements at the forefront of the American labor movement and by crusading against Communist subversion and subversives. After the 1946-1947 strike at the West Allis plant, Allis-Chalmers’ management took pride in its “battle scar” and victory over the union—with the help of the local and national press and two congressional committees—because the company chose “battle with a Communist-dominated union rather than appeasement.”

Although Walter Geist, Allis-Chalmers’ president, maintained that the “fight was the result of Communist infiltration,” he also admitted that the conflict “was to determine whether the company or the union was to run our shops.” When the negotiations ended in late April of 1946, the Wisconsin CIO News: Local 248 Edition cited ten issues still under contention: discrimination, union security, pay rate, grievance procedure, discipline, layoff, layoff in lieu of transfer, transfers, seniority, and press statements. The three issues that were paramount to the local were the clauses governing union security, grievance procedures, and wages. Each of these was indirectly and directly concerned with shop control. Unable to reach an agreement on any of these issues, and after a strike vote of 8,091 to 251 on 29 April 1946, employees at the West Allis plant walked out.

When the strike began at the West Allis works, both the company and the local, anticipating a final power contest, mo-
bilized their forces and entrenched themselves in their respective positions. The local’s mouthpiece, the Wisconsin CIO News: Local 248 Edition, ran articles and cartoons that satirized the company’s position and outlined the logic of the union’s position. Most of the articles and cartoons called attention to instances in which an individual had suffered discrimination or had been refused a contractual right. For example, the paper cited cases in which a foreman had refused an employee the right to call his shop steward in order to file a grievance. In another instance, the paper satirized the company’s practice of calling in timestudy experts to determine the rate at which a task should be performed. Often the timestudy experts cut the allowable task time. Thus those employees who were paid not only a base rate, but also according to the number of tasks completed, found the company cropping their wages to fit the projection of the timestudy. Again, the issue was one of shop authority, and the union had no voice in the procedure.

Even before the strike had been authorized at the West Allis works, the rhetorical battles had begun. Walter Geist, the company president, began mailing letters to Allis-Chalmers’ employees explaining the company’s position. Geist’s first set of letters offered members of the “Allis-Chalmers family” assurances that none of their rights as workers were being violated and that wage demands would be met as soon as the Wage Stabilization Board reviewed Allis-Chalmers’ wage increase application. The company also sent out a letter to all employees refuting the “claims made in these [Local 248] flyers,” which were “ex-
samples of irresponsibility and untruthfulness which bring discredit upon the Union and its leadership.” The company also claimed Local 248 designed these flyers to “mislead employees into supporting a strike” and that the local was “trying to do this by the propaganda method.” From the beginning of the strike, the company’s rhetoric was inflammatory; as the strike wore on, the intensity of the propaganda increased greatly. 13

In the Wisconsin CIO News: Local 248 Edition, Local 248 printed responses to the Company letters and to the articles published in the local newspapers. Besides appealing to union membership through these rebuttals, Local 248 printed a book of labor poetry entitled The Pavement Trail. The volume came out in June of 1946 and is a good barometer of employee attitudes at the time of the strike. The following example is a satirical profile of Harold “Buck” Story, Allis-Chalmers’ executive attorney and labor policy engineer.

Ode to Buck Story

Buck’s pictures lately
So royal and stately
Have enhanced our newspaper pages.
No use denying
Old Buck keeps trying
To look like the King of the Sages.

Buck’s quite a guy
But there’s more meets the eye
In sizing up this venerable gent.
He’s tried since the beginning
To give the Unions a skinning;
He’s after organized labor hell bent.

Buck’s toothy grin
Is misleading as sin;
He wants the Union forever dissolved.
Don’t let him succeed
’Til brother you’ll bleed
All, or nothing at all, he’s resolved.

His platinum locks
And loud-colored socks

Could easily put you off guard.
But brother, don’t turn
Or your tail-end he’ll burn;
He wants Unionism feathered and tarred.

He’s a right smart dresser
And at tricks a good guesser
To the public he appears ready and willing.
Old Buck would be good
Were he in Hollywood
As a villain he’d get a number one billing. 14

Besides taking jabs at leading Allis-Chalmers’ executives, poems and prose in The Pavement Trail also satirized the company’s anti-union stance, explained their unwillingness to bargain, and served as rousing shows of union solidarity. After the publication of The Pavement Trail, Allis-Chalmers responded with letters to its employees explaining the company’s position on the maintenance-of-membership clause and the modification of grievance procedures. In both cases the company demonstrated its desire to maintain control over its employees and the shop floor without having to contend with Local 248. The company maintained that it should have the final say in the case of dismissals and that employees should feel free to come to their foreman with a production problem before seeking a union steward. From a union perspective, the problem with the foreman’s maintenance of control over the initial step in the grievance procedure was that it did not protect employees from being coerced back to work or prevent the foreman from simply denying workers’ complaints. In September 1946, the letters sent out by Allis-Chalmers changed tone. Instead of continuing to outline the company’s stance on contractual differences, the letters informed employees that other plants were already returning to work after having settled and that some of the West Allis works’ employees were asking, “Can I go back to work?” 15
Kermit Gavigan
Local 248 Steward, Tank and Plate Shop

Anthony Todryk
Local 248 Steward, No. 4 Shop, No. 5 Machine Shop, No. 3½ and 4 Galleries

John Kaslow
Sgt. At Arms, Local 248 ... President, Afton-Chambers Mutual Aid Society
on Local 248 tickets ... Local 248 Delegate to 1946 UAW Convention ... Chairman,
Local 248 Election Committee, 1941 ... On Citizens' Committee to Free Earl Browder

James K. Duncan
Member of Local 248
Arrested September 9, 1946 on a charge of interfering with trains

Alfred Ladwig
Financial Secretary of Local 248 ... Member Local 248 "Executive Board"
Local 248 delegate to 1946 UAW-CIO Convention

E. F. Handler
Editor and "Educational" director for Local 248 ... "Welfare Director" Local 248 ...
Address given same as Mr. and Mrs. Harold Chesnutt

William Ostovich
Guide, Local 248 ... Chairman, Local 248 "Educational" Committee
Committee man, Electric Control Plant ... Staff, Local 248 "Daily Picket" ...
Local 248 Representative, 1946 "Win the Peace" Conference (Communist Front ... Organization) ... Local 248 Delegate, 1946 UAW-CIO Convention

Gerald Mayhew
Local 248 Committee man, Hawley Plant ... On Citizen's Committee to Free Earl Browder

George Laich
Staff of Local 248 Daily Picket ... Graduate of Local 248's "Labor Problems" Class ...
Arrested September 9, 1946 on a charge of interfering with trains

John Burja
Committee man, Tank and Plate Shop ... On Citizen's Committee to Free Earl Browder

Owen Lambert
Local 248 Committee man, Electric Control Plant ... Recently removed from ballot for assemblyman because an avowed Communist

The complete flyer may be found in either the Don D. Lescohier Papers or the Harold W. Story Papers.
September 1946 marked the beginning of a more urgent phase in the rhetorical battle of the strike. It was in September that the *Milwaukee Sentinel* began running a fifty-nine-day series of articles examining Communist involvement in the Wisconsin State CIO Council and the Milwaukee County CIO Council. The articles were signed by "John Sentinel," which was "supposedly the pseudonym for a Sentinel reporter," but was actually the pseudonym for an Allis-Chalmers researcher. As the largest CIO union in the state, Local 248 was involved in shaping the policies of both CIO councils. For instance, Local 248's president, Robert Buse, was also president of the Milwaukee County CIO Council. Not only did the state and county CIO organizations come under attack, but so did Local 248's leadership. Using an old offensive tactic, Allis-Chalmers and the municipal police worked closely with the press to construct cases that would incriminate the "Communists" within Local 248 and its leadership.\(^{16}\)

In October, even though picketing workers had told Walter Geist to "save your postage," Allis-Chalmers continued sending letters trying to start a back-to-work movement. One letter claimed that over 2,500 had already returned to work. Despite being on strike for five months, Local 248's membership rallied around the returning Harold Christoffel, Local 248's honorary president and founder, who had just returned from military duty. The strike would continue for another six months.

In the middle of October, the company mailed a pamphlet to its employees; the pamphlet cover stated, "Principle represented: COMMUNIST" and then asked, "Would you sign YOUR name under this?" The pamphlets were a collection of selected gubernatorial nomination papers for Sigmund E. Eisenscher, whose supporters had circulated his nomination papers on the Allis-Chalmers' picket line. Members of Local 248 who had signed the papers had their signatures pinpointed on the nomination papers and, on the facing page, found their full names with a personal sketch outlined in a bold red block. Allis-Chalmers' management accepted this as proof that Local 248's most active members were Communists.\(^{17}\)

In the next issue of the *Wisconsin CIO News*, members of Local 248 explained their signatures:

"I signed because I believe anyone who wants to run for office has a right to..."  
"Since when is it illegal to sign nomination papers? I signed all kinds of nomination papers this year—for Republicans, Democrats and Socialists, and the company didn't single me out for signing them..."  
"I believe in democracy, and that means free elections and the right of people of all political beliefs to run for office. That's why I signed Eisenscher's papers..."\(^{18}\)

These statements were not given the press circulation that the Communist charges received in area and national papers. The Milwaukee area, as well as the nation, was exposed chiefly to media stories that were based on information furnished by Allis-Chalmers. As the company's media campaign picked up, the local's popular support dropped.

In the first issue of November, the *Wisconsin CIO News: Local 248 Edition* carried a cartoon entitled "Time Stands Still," which equated Allis-Chalmers' management with the witch hunters of Salem. Still, the paper's sardonic humor could not counter Allis-Chalmers' public press charges against Local 248's leadership, waning popular support, and dropping strike contributions. It is at this point that the lack of support from Local 248's international became critical. The UAW's newly elected president, Walter Reuther, in order to gain his office had pledged to purge the UAW ranks of Communists—in spite of his own leftist sympathies. Be-
cause of this pledge and, perhaps even more important, because he could not set aside his personal loathing of Local 248's founder and honorary president, Harold Christoffel, or his "machine," Reuther withheld the international's full support. 19

Even the CIO offered Local 248 only halfhearted support. Philip Murray, the CIO's president, had never been able to work with Communist members of the CIO in the same detached manner that former CIO president John L. Lewis had. Lewis used to "wave aside charges that he was harboring Communists with the comment, 'I do not turn my organizers or CIO members upside down and shake them to see what kind of literature falls out of their pockets.'" Murray, being staunchly conservative and a devout Catholic, was repulsed by CIO Communists and their fellow travelers. In fact, Murray and his friends often sneered at "pinkos" like Reuther. Following the war, there was growing pressure on Murray to purge the CIO. 20

As the 1946-1947 strike reached its climax in the final months of 1946, Walter Reuther offered the local the assistance of the UAW's former president and current vice-president, R. J. Thomas, although Reuther himself did not become directly involved. Philip Murray also failed to take an active role in the local's fight and, for the most part, remained aloof from the strike. This lack of wholehearted, visible support from both the UAW and the CIO was another factor contributing to the eventual loss of the strike. It seemed as though the national union leaders viewed Local 248's desperate situation as an opportunity to oust the union's leaders.

At the beginning of November, R. J. Thomas came to West Allis in order to give the public a show of UAW support. November was marked by the most public displays of the local's power and shows of force by the municipal police: large parades were organized, more strikers were placed on picket duty, and the police force became more visible. The UAW and the CIO called on other unions to offer their support to the striking Allis-Chalmers' workers. Members of area locals would often join strikers on the picket line or parade. The UAW's largest local, Local 600 from the Ford plant in Michigan, sent its key union members with their "sound truck" so that Local 248 would get an opportunity to tell its story to the Milwaukee public.

R. J. Thomas also served as a negotiator during the November talks with Allis-Chalmers. Members of the UAW's executive board accused the company of using the Communist charges to sidestep the contractual issues under contention. Even after talks were moved to Chicago for the convenience of the federal negotiators, the company remained "defiant" and in an off-the-record comment said that "they had the strike won; their propaganda barrage had borne fruit and that public opinion was in their favor." The talks ended at the beginning of December; Thomas said that bargaining with the company was like "bargaining with a stone wall." Additional reports from UAW representatives stated that employee wages at Allis-Chalmers were below area industrial wages and, again, stated that the company was avoiding the real issues under contention in favor of the Communist "hype." 21

The strike continued into December with little change. The number of demonstrations picked up and so did police involvement. There were incidents of violence on the picket lines. In December, Allis-Chalmers dismissed Robert Buse, Local 248's president, and Joseph Dombek, Local 248's vice-president, for making statements against the company. Finally, at the end of the month, after a
series of political maneuvers involving charges of rigged elections, state CIO positions were lost by officers sympathetic to Local 248. Letters from other Allis-Chalmers’ locals continued to encourage Local 248 to hold out even though all other striking locals had been forced to sign contracts in order to preserve their unions. Despite the encouragement from other locals, Local 248’s strike power was declining.

By January 1947, Allis-Chalmers refused to bargain with Local 248’s leadership and refused Thomas’ offer to submit the dispute to arbitration. The company waited until an independent union formed and called the Wisconsin Employment Relations Board (WERB) for a representative vote within Local 248. Following this direct challenge to Local 248’s bargaining and plant authority, telegrams were sent and announcements made in support of the local by the UAW’s and the CIO’s two most obvious silent members: Philip Murray and Walter Reuther offered the local encouragement and also told strikers that only a vote for Local 248 would win the strike. After the local won the WERB election by only a narrow margin, some ballots were challenged by the WERB, of which Harold Story, the Company’s attorney, was a member, according to the local’s newspaper. Local 248 was again confronted with the possibility of having to face another election.22

While Local 248 held its officer elections during the last part of February and saw all of its incumbent officers re-elected, Allis-Chalmers, working in conjunction with the editor of the Milwaukee Sentinel, invited the Committee on Un-American Activities and the Committee
on Education and Labor to investigate what the company alleged to be the Communist leadership of Local 248. The hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities began in Washington, D.C. at the end of February and concentrated on interviewing opponents of Local 248 and its leadership. At the beginning of March, hearings began in Milwaukee before the Committee on Education and Labor, which focused on Local 248’s most active members. While investigating Communism in American labor unions, the hearings concluded, based on guilt by association, that certain members of Local 248 were Communists. Both the Milwaukee Sentinel (a member of the Hearst syndicate) and the Milwaukee Journal gave the hearings primary coverage. The final cooperative push by Allis-Chalmers’ management, the Milwaukee Sentinel, and the Congressional committees played a major part in breaking the strike and led to the expulsion of Local 248’s leadership.\textsuperscript{23}

By the beginning of March, there were an estimated 5,000 workers back in the West Allis plant. Local 248 continued the strike, despite the continued attacks from Allis-Chalmers’ management, the local and national press, and Congressional hearings, and despite only halfhearted support from the UAW and the CIO. Moreover, after the state and county CIO conventions elected less sympathetic officers, the strikers faced diminished support from their own area locals. At the end of March, Harold Christoffel was discharged by Allis-Chalmers, and Local 248 sent its officers to meet with UAW-CIO heads in order to discuss proposals to break the stalemate. On 24 March 1947, employees returned to work without a contract.

On the day that the strike ended, Walter Geist sent a letter to all employees announcing “THE STRIKE IS OVER!” and outlining, once again, the company position:

\ldots we will continue to fight with all our strength against those who try to undermine the relations between you and the Company.\textsuperscript{24}

The eleven-month strike had been a contest over the control of employee loyalty and the West Allis plant. Yet, most of the rhetoric surrounding the strike concerned itself with the Communist issue: the company’s accusations and the local’s refutations.

Although the Wisconsin CIO News reported “248 Surprise Move Throws A-C in Panic,” the decision to return to work without a settlement was, in fact, a last effort to save Local 248 before the company called another WERB representative election.\textsuperscript{25} In a letter to Allis-Chalmers’ employees, Walter Geist summed up the strike in this fashion:

As the Company prospers we will prosper with it. By the Company I mean every man and woman on the payroll because you are the Company. You are Allis-Chalmers. Together we are a big family—there are 29,000 of us.

In the lives of nearly every family there comes a time at home when little frictions develop. We recognize these things as a normal part of living together, but we don’t let people on the outside of our own family circle magnify these differences.\ldots

\ldots It is important, however, that all of us keep in mind the motives of those who attempt to magnify our differences in an effort to destroy our friendly relations and to promote an outside selfish interest.\textsuperscript{26}

The letter’s tone indicates that even after the strike Allis-Chalmers’ president still desired to foster a paternalistic company-employee relationship. From Geist’s perspective, Local 248 and its leadership were outsiders who had disrupted the development of an Allis-Chalmers’ employee
family. By mid-April, over ninety of Local 248’s most active members, most of whom were longstanding Allis-Chalmers’ employees, were dismissed by the company in an effort to remove the perceived threat. In a Milwaukee Journal interview, Walter Geist said that it was a “tonic” for him to see the plant running again and did not feel there would be any more difficulties now that the “troublemakers” were gone.1

Because some of the dismissed union members were also those who were elected to bargain with Allis-Chalmers, the company’s management refused to bargain with the selected committee. Walter Reuther, UAW president, came to Milwaukee to discuss an agreement with Allis-Chalmers without notifying Local 248’s leadership, thus undermining any hope of recovery that the local’s leadership had harbored. Shortly after the UAW’s fall convention in 1947, Reuther placed Local 248 under administration.

In November 1947, Pat Greathouse was chosen to serve as Local 248’s administrator. In February 1948, Reuther extended his administration to ensure that the “recalcitrant local” would be brought into his camp. Before his departure in July, Greathouse had scheduled new officer elections, appointed interim stewards, and had filed charges against thirteen former Local 248 officers for misappropriation of funds. Then, in that same year, after new union officers conducted an inquiry, Harold Christoffel and key members of his administration were expelled from Local 248. Public opinion had changed. And Allis-Chalmers had succeeded in forcing the removal of “the devastating destructiveness of Communist union leadership” in Local 248.

Endnotes


11 Peterson, An Industrial Heritage, p. 345.


13 See Walter Geist to All Men and Women of Allis-Chalmers, 17 April 1946; W. C. Van Cleaf to Allis-Chalmers Workers’ Union, 25 April 1946, Box 1, Folder 5, Don D. Lescohier Papers, Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.


15 See W. C. Van Cleaf to All Employees at the West Allis Works, 19 June 1946; 25 July 1946; 20 September 1946, Box 1, Folder 5,
DDL Papers, WSHS, Madison, Wisconsin.


The majority of secondary sources that discuss either the 1941 or 1946–1947 strikes at Allis-Chalmers work under the assumption that officers of Local 248 were Communists. These same sources cite Robert Ozanne’s dissertation as their major source, but also cite newspaper articles, Congressional hearings, or the gubernatorial nomination papers circulated on the Allis-Chalmers’ picket lines during the 1946–1947 strike. In his 1954 dissertation, Ozanne uses all of the sources mentioned as well as anonymous interviews in an attempt to prove that Harold Christoffel and members of his administration were Communists.

Ozanne failed to take into consideration that the area and national press and Congressional committees worked in close association with Allis-Chalmers, which had something to gain by ousting the longstanding leadership of Local 248. Ozanne’s reliance on anonymous interviews which, given the time frame and the fact that they were probably granted by rivals of the Christoffel administration, may be discredited as well. The one piece of evidence that may have proved convincing to Ozanne was the gubernatorial nomination papers that members of Local 248 signed. He did not consider, however, that nomination papers can be signed by any voter of any party affiliation and that they were circulated on the picket lines during the 1946–1947 strike. And as Sigmund G. Eisenscher, the Communist gubernatorial candidate, points out in a letter to R. J. Thomas: “The only persons involved who had in any way pledged themselves to support my candidacy as such were those who circulated the petitions—not the signers.”

* (Sigmund G. Eisenscher to R. J. Thomas, 14 February 1947, Box 1, Folder “Correspondence, 1941–1951,” Fred Basset Blair Papers, WSHS, Madison, Wisconsin.)


21 See *WI CIO: 248*, 8 November 1946, p. 8; *WI CIO News*, 15 November 1946, p. 3; 22 November 1946, pp. 1, 3; 29 November 1946, p. 3.


24 Walter Geist to All Employees at West Allis Works, 24 March 1947, Box 1, Folder 5, DDL Papers, WSHS, Madison, Wisconsin.


26 Walter Geist to All Employees at West Allis Works, 4 April 1947, Box 1, Folder 5, DDL Papers, WSHS, Madison, Wisconsin.


Primary Sources

In order to provide a contrast and complement to secondary sources that examine the 1946–1947 strike at Allis-Chalmers, this paper’s primary sources are *The Wisconsin CIO News* 1945–1948 and *The Wisconsin CIO News: Local 248 Edition* 1945–1947, Local 248’s press. The *Milwaukee Journal* 1946–1947 and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* 1946–1947 were also consulted, but are used thoroughly in Ozanne’s dissertation. Manuscript collections of Fred Basset Blair, Adolph Germer, Don D. Leschier, and Harold W. Story were also consulted. These collections are housed by the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison. The Leschier Papers contain the official letters of Allis-Chalmers that are addressed to its employees and the Local during the strike years; the Story Papers contain the official testimony of Allis-Chalmers’ officials before the Congressional committees in 1947. Government documents consulted were the Congressional hearings before the Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Regarding Communism in Labor Unions in the United States*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 1947, and Congressional hearings before the Committee on Education and Labor, *Amendments to the National Labor Relations Act, Hearings on Bills to Amend and Repeal the National Labor Relations Act, and for Other Purposes*, 80th Cong., 1st sess., 1947.

Secondary Sources

The most thorough accounts of the 1946–1947 strike at Allis-Chalmers are covered in

Published secondary sources that provide peripheral coverage of the strike or more general histories of labor in Wisconsin include Thomas W. Gavett’s Development of the Labor Movement in Milwaukee, Howell John Harris’ The Right to Manage: Industrial Relations Policies of American Business in the 1940s’ Robert W. Ozanne’s The Labor Movement in Wisconsin: A History, and Walter Peterson’s An Industrial Heritage: Allis-Chalmers Corporation, the official history of Allis-Chalmers.

Both Bert Cochran’s Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions and Harvey Levenstein’s Communism, Anticommunism, and the CIO are excellent histories of the growth of American labor unions and leftists’ involvement. Both books also provide insights into the roles of the UAW and the CIO in determining the outcome of the 1946–1947 Allis-Chalmers strike. The books Senator Joseph McCarthy and the American Labor Movement, A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy, both by David M. Oshinsky, and Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate by Lawrence S. Wittner, examine the national climate at the time of the strike. Oshinsky and Wittner provide insights into the roots and causes of America’s second postwar Red Scare and America’s reactions to the perceived Communist threat.