

# JERRY WURF (1919-1981): A short biography

As national president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Jerry Wurf stood out as the twentieth century's most influential leader in organizing U.S. public employees.

Born in New York on May 18, 1919, the son of immigrants from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Jerry Wurf developed polio at age 4. Later in life he lamented that, when it comes to health, he suffered from more afflictions than Job.<sup>1</sup> Despite these many maladies, Jerry Wurf became a forceful communicator known for a foghorn voice and a steely determination to reshape the labor movement.

## **Transforming the Legal Architecture for Public Service Employees**

While head of AFSCME District Council 37 in New York City, he persuaded Mayor Robert Wagner Jr. to issue Executive Order 49, which in 1958 gave unions the right to organize the city's employees and the ability to serve as exclusive bargaining agents. Wurf prevailed, despite the vociferous opposition of Fred Q. Wendt, president of the Civil Service Forum, who called the order the "Wagner Slave Labor Act," which would "put caviar on the table of money-hungry union leaders."<sup>2</sup>

In January 1962, President John F. Kennedy delivered an Executive Order granting organizing rights to a wide range of federal workers. Modeled on the New York precedent, JFK's Executive Order empowered employees who sought unionization and collective bargaining. Prior to this time, only a puny percentage of public employees belonged to unions.

## **Building the New York Union Local**

In New York, District Council 37 had fewer than 1,000 members when Wurf was hired as an organizer in 1947. It had 38,000 members by 1964.<sup>3</sup> He energized the local, succeeded in winning the checkoff of union dues from the salaries of city employees, and spurned the practices of labor leaders who became dependent on politicians for petty favors. On the last point, Wurf explained how his predecessor at the helm of District Council 37, the city chauffeur Henry Feinstein, had actually convinced the Mayor to hire someone to drive him around in a limousine: "Can you imagine that, a chauffeured chauffeur?" Wurf thought that unions for public employees should have higher aspirations, and he sought to overcome the cramped negotiating posture of public sector labor leaders that he called "collective begging."<sup>4</sup>

## National Labor Leader

Elected national president of AFSCME in 1964, Wurf set out to reap the benefits of the improved legal climate for public employees. AFSCME grew from over 220,000 members in 1964 to nearly 700,000 by the mid-1970s to approximately one million at the time of his death in late 1981.<sup>5</sup> Wurf and AFSCME achieved this dramatic growth during a time when overall union membership in the U.S. plunged significantly.

An ally of Martin Luther King, Wurf led a national union with African Americans holding a quarter of the membership. In the late 1940s, Wurf had helped set up the first New York chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and he recalled fondly his union local:

The body supply for the early Freedom Rides came from District Council 37. When white thugs moved in to beat up blacks who used a chain of hamburger joints in New York, we took out our heaviest and fattest laborers, and legally and properly saw to it that black people had access to this chain. When they needed bodies to picket airlines because they wouldn't hire black staff, our union in New York led this.<sup>6</sup>

As a national labor leader, he remained a stalwart force on civil rights issues. Most notably, Wurf's union represented the sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee during 1968. Though he initially disagreed with the tactical decision of AFSCME Local 1733 in Memphis to call a sanitation strike in the cold winter month of February 1968, Wurf gave the union considerable support in the midst of ferocious opposition from segregationist whites and Mayor Henry Loeb. AFSCME's William Lucy, a Memphis native who emerged as the nation's preeminent African American labor leader, gave Local 1733 on-the-ground reinforcement. In his last year of life, Martin Luther King had turned increasingly to the economic injustices facing low-wage workers in the United States, and he prepared to lead a march on behalf of the striking Memphis workers. King's assassination in Memphis on April 4, 1968 proved to be a turning point that brought international attention to the plight of the sanitation workers and helped them achieve victory: a pay hike and the city's recognition of their union. "Let us never forget," declared Wurf, "that Martin Luther King, on a mission for us, was killed in this city. He helped bring us this victory."<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes at odds with much of the U.S. labor leadership, Wurf pressed them to make progress on racial issues. His sharp criticisms of the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation did not endear him to those demanding loyalty to the White House on matters of foreign policy. "On some issues," he once said, "there is knee-jerk solidarity, and on other issues, there is no solidarity."<sup>8</sup> Wurf took a certain pride that he was placed on the secret "Enemies List" of President Richard M. Nixon.<sup>9</sup> He expressed frustration with U.S. labor leaders for their lack of audacity

in organizing workers, especially in the South: “I don’t know why, if you can develop a trade union in South Africa, you can develop a trade union in Tunisia, you can’t develop a trade union in South Carolina.”<sup>10</sup>

One of Jerry Wurf’s greatest triumphs and bitterest defeats came with the patients rights and deinstitutionalization movements that transformed state hospitals and mental health facilities. Between 1955 and 1985, inpatients in U.S. mental health hospitals dwindled from 550,000 to 110,000. Wurf convinced public employees that release from facilities was the humane solution for many people held under conditions that compromised freedom and basic dignity.

However, in exchange for closing these facilities and sometimes losing jobs, public employees received assurances that there would be an expansion of community services – and more humane ways of addressing the needs of formerly institutionalized peoples. Wurf expressed sorrow that so many politicians betrayed this promise of enhanced community services. When John F. Kennedy signed into law the Community Mental Health Centers (CMHC) Act of 1963, his government anticipated that 1500 centers would be required for nationwide coverage. By 1980, only 700 CMHCs had received funding.<sup>11</sup> Callous cost-cutting in public services contributed to the subsequent growth in homelessness and imprisonment of mentally ill people throughout many zones of the United States.

### **The Wurf Legacy**

Jerry Wurf passed away on December 10,1981. Gerald McEntee, a graduate of the Harvard Trade Union Program, soon succeeded him as national president of AFSCME.

Jerry Wurf’s legacy lives on in struggles for public employees, for low-wage workers, and in campaigns for racial justice. With the tremendous decline of union density in the private sector, there are some activists who believe that it is necessary now more than ever for public sector unions to play a pivotal role in revitalizing the U.S. labor movement. Today the Jerry Wurf Memorial Fund at Harvard University continues to deliver resources for intellectual and educational pursuit of issues central to Wurf’s life mission.

## NOTES

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1. For the afflictions of Job comment, see William Serrin, "A Leader for the Little Guy," *New York Times Book Review*, 12 September 1982, p. BR14.
2. Wendt quoted by A.H. Raskin, "City Workers Get Right to Organize in Union of Choice," *New York Times*, 1 April 1958, pp. 1 and 26. See Jerry Wurf's letter to the *New York Times* (5 February 1958) anticipating the executive order.
3. Union membership figures from Robert D. Mc Fadden, "Jerry Wurf, Leader of Federation of Municipal Workers, Dies at 62," *New York Times*, 11 December 1981, pp. A1 and D19.
4. For some of the controversies over the checkoff of union dues in New York, see Paul Crowell, "Checkoff of Dues by City Advanced: Mayor's Plan is Accepted by Estimate Board Subject to Conformity with Laws," *New York Times*, 13 January 1956, p. 6, and A.H. Raskin, "Dues Check-Off by City Blocked: U.S. Bars Housing Authority Move on Union Deductions," *New York Times*, 5 March 1957, pp. 1 and 26. Wurf quoted on chauffeur episode by DC 37's official historians, as cited by Bob Fitch, "Our Labor Leaders Need French Lessons," *New Politics*, vol. 6, no. 1, Summer 1996.
5. Data on AFSCME membership growth comes from Martin Weil, "Jerry Wurf Dies at 62; State, County, Municipal Workers Union Leader," *Washington Post*, 11 December 1981, pp. A1 and especially A4. The AFSCME website has numbers fairly close to the *Post* estimates for those decades.
6. Wurf quoted by Joseph C. Goulden, *Jerry Wurf: Labor's Last Angry Man* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), p. 56.
7. Wurf quoted by Goulden, p. 181.
8. Wurf quoted by William Serrin, "A Union Chief Muses on Labor and the Controllers," *New York Times*, 1 September, 1981, p. A12.
9. For Wurf's reaction to his selection for the "Enemies List," see Edward Walsh and Philip A. McCombs, "Members of 'Enemies List' Cover Broad Political Spectrum," *Washington Post*, 28 June 1973, p. A11.
10. Wurf quoted by Serrin, "A Union Chief Muses...".
11. For data on the inpatient population in the mental health system and a discussion of the JFK reforms, see David Mechanic and David A. Rochefort, "Deinstitutionalization: An Appraisal of Reform," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 16, 1990, pp. 301-327. The funding of only 700 centers was especially grave because JFK had actually underestimated the pace of deinstitutionalization when he projected a 50 percent reduction of those under custodial care over the next one to two decades.