A Battle for the Neighborhood:
The 1917 Philadelphia Sugar Strike and Food Boycott

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## Table of Contents

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. 4
Abstract .............................................................................................................................. 5
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 6
    Source Overview .......................................................................................................... 9
    Section Overview ........................................................................................................ 12
Immigration, Sugar Refining, and the Social Geography of South Philadelphia .......... 15
    Sugar Refining in Philadelphia ..................................................................................... 22
Wobblies, Space, and Race in the 1917 Sugar Refinery Strike .................................. 31
    The Wobblies take Philadelphia’s Sugar Refineries .................................................... 32
“Buy No Boycotted Food, Sister!”: The 1917 Philadelphia Food Boycott ............... 51
    Police and Protest ....................................................................................................... 56
    Religious Community Policing .................................................................................... 58
A Hybrid Protest: Jewish Women’s Protest Tradition in the United States .......... 61
“Rioting and Anarchy Threaten the Nation”: Philadelphia Newspapers’ Response to the Food Boycott ................................................................. 64
The City’s Response: Progressive-Era Politics and the Philadelphia Food Commission .... 71
    The Food Commission and the Progressive Era ......................................................... 78
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 86
Bibliography ..................................................................................................................... 90
    Primary ......................................................................................................................... 90
    Secondary .................................................................................................................... 95
List of Figures

Figure 1. My map of South Philadelphia ................................................................. 12
Figure 2. Bags of Franklin sugar read, “Standard of Purity.” ...................................... 29
Figure 3. A map of the February 21st refinery riot ................................................... 40
Figure 4. “Boycotting Housewives Shout Their Defiance.” ...................................... 53
Figure 5. “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing.” ............................... 67
Figure 6. “‘Mother’ Munro Again Demonstrates Her Practical Philanthropy.” ............ 69
Abstract

On February 21, 1917, a group of 40 Eastern European housewives marched in protest down to the Franklin sugar refinery in South Philadelphia. Shouting, “We want food!” the women had come to join the picket line where their husbands and sons stood, on strike from the city’s three sugar refineries. Demanding a living wage and shorter hours, thousands of Polish and Lithuanian workers had walked out three weeks prior and joined the ranks of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical socialist union. The spirit of protest soon rippled out into the surrounding neighborhood, when a group of working-class Jewish women announced the start of their own “strike”: a boycott on basic foodstuffs, whose prices had begun to rise since the beginning of World War I. For the following weeks, they rioted in the market streets of their immigrant neighborhood, toppling pushcarts, breaking shop windows, and pouring kerosene over boycotted foods.

This thesis uses the 1917 South Philadelphia sugar strike and food boycott as a lens to understand the theories and techniques of urban immigrant organizing in World War I era Philadelphia. I argue that immigrant sugar strikers and food boycotters based their protest on a broad theory of labor which bridged every realm of life, in which both the domestic and industrial spheres afforded the laborer workplace rights. The protestors practiced a hybrid form of protest which was based in a place-based familiarity with the local geography of their neighborhood, ethnic social networks, and American socialist labor organizing traditions. Central to their community ties was food, which held importance in immigrant culture and the local economy, but also whose production (particularly in the case of sugar refining) was rooted in an extractive relationship between the refineries and their surrounding community. The strike and boycott represented a battle for control of the neighborhood, one combatant fighting for localized economic and social reproduction, and the other for international wartime and Progressive-era capitalist interests.
Introduction

On the afternoon of February 21, 1917, a Polish mother of four named Florence Schalde led a group of 40 Eastern European immigrant housewives in a march to the doors of the Franklin Sugar Refinery in South Philadelphia. Shouting “we want food!” the women – many of them pushing baby carriages and shaking boxes of red pepper to use as weapons – had come to join the picket line where their husbands and sons stood, on strike from Philadelphia’s three sugar refineries. Over 5,000 of the city’s sugar refinery workers had walked out three weeks prior, demanding a five-cent wage increase and time and a half pay for overtime work. The immigrant sugar strikers, most of them Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian immigrants, had quickly enrolled in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical anarcho-socialist labor union which had a strong foothold in Philadelphia’s riverfront industries.\footnote{“Sugar Refiners’ Strike,”}\footnote{Dana Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: The 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests,” Feminist Studies 11, no. 2 (1985): 257.} Simultaneously, food prices were rising nationally due to increased food exportation to war-torn Europe, poor crop yields in 1916, and price speculation.\footnote{Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food.”} By February 21, the IWW’s negotiations with refiners plateaued, and strikers’ families’ economic situation became dire.\footnote{“Guard Refineries After Fatal Riot,” The Evening Bulletin, February 22, 1917; “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 22, 1917; E.F. Doree and Walter Nef, “Murder in Phila. Sugar Strike,” Solidarity, March 3, 1917; “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police,” Public Ledger, February 22, 1917; “Police Slay Mob Chief in Sugar Strike,” Evening Ledger, February 22, 1917.}

Outside the Franklin Refinery, protesters jeered at policemen and harassed the strikebreakers who had been brought in to replace the strikers. The protest soon escalated into an all-out riot, as picketers and policemen clashed in the street, leaving one dead and scores injured.\footnote{“Police Slay Mob Chief in Sugar Strike,” Evening Ledger, February 22, 1917.} Meanwhile, the spirit of protest rippled out to other sections of South Philadelphia, a multiethnic immigrant
neighborhood with a large Eastern European and Italian population. That evening, a group of working-class Jewish women gathered in a synagogue several blocks from the refinery, where they announced the start of their own “strike”: a boycott on now outrageously priced foodstuffs, including chicken, fish, onions, and potatoes.\textsuperscript{5} They had been inspired by a similar boycott in New York City, which would spread to immigrant Jewish communities across the country.\textsuperscript{6} Over the next couple of weeks, Jewish housewives picketed main market streets in the hopes of deterring shoppers from purchasing boycotted goods. Many grew violent, overturning pushcarts, throwing kerosene onto foodstuffs, snatching baskets out of the hands of shoppers, and confronting vendors and policemen alike with aggression.\textsuperscript{7}

This thesis uses the 1917 South Philadelphia sugar strike and food boycott as a lens to understand the theories and techniques of urban immigrant organizing in the United States during World War I. I argue that the action of boycotters and strikers was based on a broad theory of labor that bridged every realm of life. Refinery workers and housewives alike demonstrated that they were equally deserving of workplace rights in their respective fields of labor, and used similar strategies to organize which were based in both socialist and Old-World protest traditions. These strategies were grounded in their place-based knowledge of neighborhood geography, a class-conscious ideology, and ethnic, religious, and gendered social networks. Central to their community ties was food, which held importance in Jewish culture and the local economy, but whose production (particularly in the case of sugar refining) was rooted in an extractive relationship between Philadelphia’s riverside industry and the surrounding community. The strike and boycott represented a battle for control of the neighborhood, one

\textsuperscript{6} Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food,” 264.
\textsuperscript{7} “Clash with Police Over Food Boycott.”
combatant fighting for localized economic and social reproduction, and the other for international wartime and Progressive-era capitalist interests.

Though there is significant scholarship on immigrant and Jewish labor organizing, as well as Jewish women’s consumer protest of the early 20th century, few academics have connected the two in a broad theory of protest. Scholars like Dana Frank and Susan A. Glenn, representative of a wave of scholarship about Jewish women’s protest in the 1980s and 90s, offered useful frameworks to consider these movements separately. In her study of the New York City food boycott of 1917, Frank describes how Jewish housewives, tasked with feeding their families and managing finances, considered their work as consumers in local marketplaces to be a form of labor.8 In turn, Glenn argues that young Jewish women who had arrived in the United States and entered the industrial workforce had pioneered a new sense of selfhood which held tight to Old World traditions of self-sufficiency, religious commitment, and community ties, while broadening the feminine sphere and laying claim to the economic and social rights that they “believed was the birthright of American women.”9 Only in recent years have scholars like Annalise Orleck recognized a connection between labor and domestic organizing, arguing that working-class immigrant women practiced a hybrid form of consumer protest which selectively adapted socialist labor strategies, while staying highly rooted in community connections.10 My thesis expands on this scholarship, showing that boycotting women combined socialist and Old-World organizing techniques with the physical environment of their neighborhood, making

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8 Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food,” 5.
communal laws that were normally reserved for secular authorities and authorizing themselves to enforce them in a way that was usually reserved for the police department.

This thesis also expands greatly on the scholarship about Philadelphia’s immigrant and Jewish communities, which has been minimal. What little there is has tended to focus on prominent community leaders, rather than the working poor. This is particularly true regarding the Jewish community: unlike in the case of New York City, historians have emphasized the social and political importance of the Jewish community by focusing their research on rabbis, philanthropists, businessmen, and politicians. It has been surprisingly difficult to find information about the everyday lives, social networks, and working patterns of poor immigrants between 1880 and 1914. Thus, this thesis seeks to fill that hole in the scholarship, at least partially, by explaining the organizing practices, food cultures, and physical environment of South Philadelphia’s Eastern European working class. This group made up an essential part of the social and economic fabric of Philadelphia during this period and inspired change within the city and beyond.

Source Overview

In my research, I have relied predominantly on contemporary English-language Philadelphia newspapers as a source. These newspapers were the Republican-leaning Philadelphia Inquirer and Evening Bulletin, and the independent Public Ledger and its evening edition, the Evening

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Ledger. Newspaper like these were the first lens through which news was filtered to English-speaking Philadelphians of all classes, and they distilled, organized, and explained events to their readers. They both reflected and shaped the anxieties and prejudices of the city’s English-speaking community, and are a useful tool for understanding how the English-speaking public understood the strike and boycott. With distinct structural techniques, such as an article’s location in the newspaper, or even how its subheadings described its content, newspapers of early 20th century Philadelphia conferred a hierarchy of importance onto the events they described. The continually shifting news cycle, as well as eye-grabbing headlines and photos, were necessary components of an economically competitive publication. At times, this focus on gaining readership came at the expense of journalistic integrity, most often embodied by sensationalist language which tended to be xenophobic and anti-IWW.

While useful for describing the public events of the sugar strike and boycott, newspapers have provided minimal information about the private relationships and emotions that motivated the protests. Produced by and for an American-born, English-speaking audience, no newspapers interviewed immigrant sugar strikers, and very few spoke with IWW leaders or food boycotters. This means that there are almost no firsthand accounts in these sources from the actual participants in the movement. Many did, however, seek out statements from more powerful parties, such as Philadelphia’s mayor Thomas B. Smith, the Philadelphia Retail Grocers’ Association, and middle-class social reformers, all of whom had their own motivations. Thus, it has been necessary to read those statements critically for their biases, and reports of the events in

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South Philadelphia with an eye to moments which reveal the feelings and organizational strategies of strikers and boycotters.

One thing that early 20th century newspapers did was reflect a contemporary obsession with geography as way to organize the city. Articles of the strike and boycott religiously listed the location of every event, as well as the home addresses of every person arrested, injured, or otherwise mentioned. From the locations listed, I have created an interactive map of the strike and boycott, pinning all relevant locations using a desktop app called Google Earth Pro (Figure 1). On top of a modern-day map of Philadelphia, I overlayed insurance maps published in 1917 and 1922 by the Sanborn Insurance Company, which show the name, size, and material of every building in the city with remarkable detail.14 Using this map, I have been able to glean an extraordinary amount of information about the patterns of protestors, including how the strike emanated from the refineries and across the city. Detailed plans of the neighborhood on a block-by-block basis show the living patterns of boycotters, strikers, strikebreakers, and police, as well as how domestic and communal life was organized. This map has been an indispensable resource for making a geographical argument about the deeply localized and place-based strategies of protestors.

Figure 1. My map of South Philadelphia. Pins of different colors and shapes denote different days.

Section Overview

With the help of the map, the first section of this thesis describes the two contradicting ‘worlds’ of South Philadelphia. The first is the vibrant, localized world of Eastern European immigrants, who had come to South Philadelphia from the Pale of Settlement seeking economic opportunity and religious freedom. Here, Jewish and Catholic arrivals alike had settled into ethnic enclaves that were shaped by close living conditions and the built environment of the neighborhood. For women, whose job it was to shop and cook for their families, open-air
marketplaces were the “spines” of the community, centers for social reproduction, and community building.\textsuperscript{15} Many of the immigrants found work in sugar refineries along the Delaware river, which represented the other ‘world’ of the neighborhood. These refineries drew labor from the surrounding community to supply a global wartime demand for sugar, based on an imperialistic and racialized chain of sugar production. Seen as cogs in this industrial machine, laborers navigated a tense balance between these two spheres of production and consumption.

The second section delves into the sugar refinery strike and the participation of the Industrial Workers of the World. In this section, I argue that strikers used their ethnic social networks and knowledge of the local topography of the neighborhood to wage a guerrilla war on the refiners and police. I explain alliances of police in early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Philadelphia, and how they used brutality to gain the upper hand in a battle over the purpose over the neighborhood. Lastly, I investigate black strikebreakers, who were hired by refineries to replace striking workers. In this section, I engage with the work of Peter Cole, who has written about the successful organizing of the IWW’s longshoremen’s Local 8 in Philadelphia, which organized black, white, and immigrant workers together under one union.\textsuperscript{16} The sugar strike complicates Cole’s argument, and I contend that ethnic alliances among strikers, combined with the external pressures of the Great Migration and segregation within refineries fueled this racial violence and prevented sugar strikers from forming an interracial coalition like that in Local 8.

In section three, I explore the food boycott in South Philadelphia, and its expansion across the city. I argue that food rioters practiced a radical form of economic justice, made possible by interpersonal relationships grounded in ethnic, religious, and gendered ties. Gathering in masses,

they practiced community policing to enforce the boycott, demanding control over the neighborhood’s public and social spaces. Jewish food boycotters transgressed the strict hierarchies that governed their community and used their moral authority to demand action from religious leaders. At the same time, newspapers fomented wartime anti-immigrant paranoia and fearfully disparaged rioters as “anarchists.” They then used racialized descriptions of peaceful boycotters and middle-class reformers to celebrate an acceptable version of sanitized, white American feminine protest, discounting the grassroots immigrant movement but garnering widespread outrage over the high cost of living.

Lastly, the fourth section examines the city government’s response to the boycott, and the actions of the municipal Food Commission, which was created to investigate and remediate the food crisis. I explore the politics of Philadelphia’s Republican machine, and its historical connection sugar refineries. In response to the food crisis, Food Commission members used Progressive era rhetorics of care and expanded government regulation to co-opt responsibility for remedying the situation, thus suppressing the boycott. Similarly, businessmen, reformers, and politicians alike diverted blame for the crisis onto food speculators, and even the boycotters themselves, using sexist and racially coded language to discount the uprising. Ultimately, these rhetorics, combined with the deployment of extensive police brutality, quelled the protests and led to little lasting change.
Immigration, Sugar Refining, and the Social Geography of South Philadelphia

In early 1917, South Philadelphia possessed one of the largest ethnic enclaves of Eastern and Southern European immigrants in the United States. Fleeing poverty and religious discrimination, thousands of Russian Jews, as well as Catholic Poles, Lithuanians, and Italians arrived in Philadelphia between 1880 and 1914. They settled in the southern wards, where they formed tight-knit enclaves tied together by shared linguistic, religious, and culinary traditions.17 Much of immigrant life – especially for women – was built around old-world-style street markets, where shopkeepers and pushcart vendors sold basic and traditional foods at reduced prices.18 At the same time, many Polish and Lithuanian men and women found work in one of three large sugar refineries which bordered the Delaware river, processing raw sugar from U.S. protectorates in the Caribbean for sale in Philadelphia and beyond.19 In South Philadelphia, these two food-based economic models maintained an uneasy coexistence, as workers negotiated between selling their labor in a globalized chain of production and participating in the place-based local economy of their neighborhood.

Between 1900 and 1914, Philadelphia’s population grew by nearly one third, as European immigrants flooded into the city. Many of the new immigrants hailed from the Pale of Settlement, a region in the southwest of the Russian Empire which contained parts of modern-day Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. By far the largest group to come

18 Diner, Hungering for America, 196; Harvey A. Levenstein, Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
19 Merleaux, Sugar and Civilization; Cole, Wobblies on the Waterfront.
from the Pale were Jews, whose economic circumstances had been severely worsening since 1880. A national shift in czarist policy had restricted Jews to the region, leading to overpopulation and increased job competition. At the same time, industrialization made traditional Jewish hand trades obsolete, leading to widespread poverty.\textsuperscript{20} The Yiddish word \textit{luftmensch} came to describe this poverty, translated as “people of the air.”\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, anti-Jewish sentiment spread to the Russian poor, and was most famously acted upon in deadly \textit{pogroms} (mob violence against Jews and their property) in 1881 and 1905.\textsuperscript{22} Catholic Poles and Lithuanians were also impacted by poverty, as well as state-sanctioned discrimination which was characterized by a campaign of “Russification”: the propagandistic promotion of Russian ideals and the Russian Orthodoxy, and the suppression of Polish and Lithuanian identity.\textsuperscript{23}

The combination of dire economic circumstance and social repression inspired a mass exodus out of the Pale, as people sought religious freedom and economic possibility. Many of those who first came to the country were young men and women, sent ahead of their families to find well-paying factory jobs with wages that they could send back to Eastern Europe. Soon after, the rest of families followed them.\textsuperscript{24} Over 2 million Jews came to the United States, and between 1905 and 1918, Philadelphia’s Jewish population grew to 200,000, an increase of 100 percent.\textsuperscript{25} Unlike other immigrant groups, Jews intended to stay permanently in the country, and in the end only about 2 to 3 percent of Jews returned home, compared to 25 to 60 percent of other Eastern

\textsuperscript{20} Glenn, \textit{Daughters of the Shtetl}, 30–32.
\textsuperscript{22} Glenn, \textit{Daughters of the Shtetl}, 42.
\textsuperscript{24} Glenn, \textit{Daughters of the Shtetl}.
European immigrants. Though the Polish and Lithuanian population in Philadelphia was comparatively small, they still made up a significant portion of this new wave of immigration.

In 1920, census results showed that South Philadelphia was made up of about 250,000 people of “foreign stock,” meaning that they or their parents were born outside of the United States. The largest foreign population was Italian, closely followed by Russian. Immigrants settled mostly in wards 1, 2, 3, 39, and 26, also called the “river wards.” These wards made up an area about one by two miles in size in the southeast of the city, loosely bounded by South Street to the north, Oregon Avenue to the south, and the Delaware River and 18th Street to the east and west. When they arrived, they were met by a population of mostly first and second-generation western Europeans who had arrived in the mid-19th century, including Irish, Scots-Irish, and German Jews. Some of the old stock, generally more acculturated and slightly wealthier, fled the poor neighborhoods in response, while others continued to compete with the new arrivals for industrial jobs. The new immigrants settled in loosely-formed ethnic clusters: Italians established a “Little Italy” to the west, while Christian Poles and Lithuanians settled in the east and Russian Jews to the south.

In South Philadelphia, the immigrant experience was shaped by close living quarters. As immigrants flooded into the city, residential housing was adjusted to accommodate them. To make space for the new arrivals, two or three-story rowhomes were subdivided between families, wooden shacks were erected in backyards and alleyways, and tenement and boarding houses

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26 Glenn, Daughters of the Shtetl, 47.
appeared along crowded main thoroughfares. Families rented out rooms or beds to boarders to make ends meet, and new arrivals crowded into the living spaces of those who had arrived before them. In response to overpopulation and increasingly unsanitary living conditions, charitable institutions such as soup kitchens and settlement houses also found their places in the poorest areas of South Philadelphia.

Community was forged in private dwellings as well as public spaces like churches, synagogues, saloons, and community halls. Almost as soon as they arrived, immigrants formed an extensive network of mutual aid groups, social clubs, and voluntary Jewish hometown associations (called landsmanshaftn, or fareins, in Philadelphia). These community associations provided for a neighborhood-wide social network of support and connection. At the same time, life was highly shaped by the local geography of the neighborhood, as residents followed shortcuts, side streets, and alleyways to travel through the neighborhood. By 1917, many had been there for a decade or more, or were second-generation immigrants who had been born and raised in the neighborhood and were fluent in English as well as their parents’ native languages. In the early mornings and evenings, roads that ran west to east toward the industrial district on the Delaware river served as main thoroughfares for commuters walking to and from their jobs at riverside factories. Sights and smells of the neighborhood shaped their walks: in the poor northern part of the neighborhood, workers passed cheap cinemas and boarding houses, while to the south, the streets were mostly residential, lined with rowhomes and small shops. On the blocks that bordered the factories, the air was laced with the smells of sugar, vinegar, wood,

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33 Insurance Maps Vol. 5; Diner, Hungering for America, 186.
34 Rakhmiel Peltz, “125 Years of Building Jewish Immigrant Communities in Philadelphia,” 35–36.
and chemicals from nearby factories. Near to the refineries, saloons and restaurants catered to laborers leaving their evening shifts and served as spaces for workers to organize.\textsuperscript{35}

Perhaps South Philadelphia’s most important community institutions were open-air markets which catered to the poor immigrant working class. Immigrant grocers, butchers, shopkeepers, and pushcart vendors clustered on main streets to sell affordable food, clothing, and other household necessities to poor consumers seeking cheap deals. Married women formed the backbone of this consumer economy, as they considered it their responsibility to manage family finances and feed their families economically.\textsuperscript{36} Carrying large woven baskets, women haggled with vendors in their own languages – Yiddish, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Italian – for the staples that made up their diet, such as potatoes, onions, and chicken.\textsuperscript{37} Often strapped for cash, women developed laborious money-saving strategies which they fell back on in times of need.\textsuperscript{38}

These marketplaces were particularly important in Jewish areas, where women’s buying habits were shaped by religious law. Many of the Jewish immigrants abided by the holy laws of \textit{kashrut}, which strictly governed how meat must be slaughtered, which foods could be eaten together, and what utensils and dishware could be used to consume that food. While male rabbis were the ultimate authority on the religious food laws, Jewish wives and mothers bore the brunt of the responsibility of ensuring that their families kept sufficiently kosher.\textsuperscript{39} Due to these religious restrictions, Jewish consumers needed their own markets where they could be guaranteed kosher foods. Along South 7\textsuperscript{th} and South 4\textsuperscript{th} streets, Jewish marketplaces flourished

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Insurance Maps Vol. 5; Insurance Maps Vol. 16.}
\textsuperscript{36} Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food,” 283.
\textsuperscript{38} Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food”; Diner, \textit{Hungering for America}, 186.
\textsuperscript{39} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America}, 148, 152.
as kosher butchers set up shop and other peddlers with mobile wooden pushcarts sold cheap ingredients for traditional meals.

Due to a combination of factors, food prices in Philadelphia increased dramatically in late 1916 and early 1917. Though the United States did not join World War I until April 1917, it supported the Entente’s effort by exporting large amounts of food to Allied countries in Europe, whose normal chains of production had been interrupted by the war. After German U-boats increased their attacks on shipping vessels, the United States tripled wheat and meat exports. Poor crop yields in 1916 also contributed to food shortages, and price manipulation by food wholesalers may have also contributed to high prices. In Philadelphia, food costs grew by approximately 55 percent between 1914 and 1917, but took a dramatic upswing in early 1917. In January alone, the average price of onions increased by 71%, and the price of potatoes by 34%. These were two of the first items placed on the boycotted foods list. Though wages across the board also increased during the war, it was not enough to keep up with the cost of living.

As food prices continued to rise throughout January and February 1917, South Philadelphia women fell back onto community-based economic traditions of buying on credit and seeking cheaper food alternatives. Florence Schalde, a Polish Catholic and the leader of the women’s march to the Franklin refinery on February 21, explained the community’s dependence on credit to the Public Ledger, stating,

41 Frank, “Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food,” 257.
“We would be starving down here now if the butcher and the grocer did not trust us until my husband goes to work. If they stop charging it on the book, we will all go hungry. All the women and their families are just the same.”

Here, Schalde emphasized the importance of long-term, trusting relationships between shoppers and their local vendors to the system of giving and receiving credit. Immigrant women in South Philadelphia who tended to shop for their food daily in small amounts knew shopkeepers and pushcart merchants at least by sight, and likely by name. Their relationship was highly interdependent: poor families “would be starving” without vendors selling at discounted prices, and, in the case of the Jewish community, kosher butchers and merchants were equally dependent on the business of Jewish clientele.

Other women sought cheaper food alternatives such as leftovers, lower quality foods, and cuts of meat that were usually disposed of. On February 23, The Inquirer wrote that “even entrails were sold from the pushcarts and, apparently, were regarded by many of the poor as their only hope against starvation.” Along South 7th street, the demand for chicken heads and feet grew so much that their prices increased by several cents overnight. One newspaper stated that sales of coarse hominy, a type of corn which could replace potatoes, had increased by 200% in January 1917. Another reported that many had begun to substitute fruit, crackers, and pickles, and soup for now-unaffordable foods. Poor immigrant women found that what small savings they had stored were being quickly depleted by the high cost of living.

45 “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police”; “Guard Refineries After Fatal Riot.”
46 “Women Destroy Food in Frantic War on Stores,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 23, 1917.
47 “Samp, or Big Hominy, Blow to Living Cost,” Evening Ledger, February 24, 1917.
48 “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen.”
Sugar Refining in Philadelphia

In Philadelphia, Eastern European immigrants found jobs in a variety of industries. Some men made their own way as shopkeepers and merchants, renting or purchasing storefronts where they could sell their wares. Others found street peddling to be an effective career with opportunities for social mobility, in which they could rent pushcarts and buy wholesale food to sell cheaply.49 A large portion of unmarried women worked in the textile industry, while married women tended to labor in the private sphere, doing mending or washing out of their homes, hosting boarders, or helping in their husbands’ shops.50 Simultaneously, they did the essential domestic labor of shopping, cooking, childcare, and managing family finances. Many men and women also found employment in the large factories that bordered the Delaware River, such as chemical manufacturers, iron works, distilleries, lumber yards, and tanneries.51

Sugar refineries were a common destination for Eastern European labor. Along the Delaware waterfront, between South and Morris streets, three large brick complexes sat on the wharves, belching mysterious fumes and looming over the small rowhomes which surrounded them.52 One more lay to the north in Kensington, another multiethnic, working-class riverside neighborhood. Two of the refineries, Pennsylvania and McCahan, were independently owned, while the other two, combined under the Franklin Sugar Refining Company name, were owned by the American

Sugar Refining Company (ASRC), otherwise known as the “Sugar Trust.”

By 1917, the ASRC, based in New Jersey, owned most of the country’s major refineries and dominated the American sugar trade. At various points, the ASCR had attempted to purchase, or at least control, Philadelphia’s other two refineries: W.J. McCahan testified that he had allowed the Trust to mandate his sugar production quotas in 1893, while the ASRC’s predatory lending practices had bankrupted the Pennsylvania Sugar Refining company in 1907, leading to a well-publicized anti-trust suit between the two companies. By that same year, the ASRC was directly or indirectly responsible for 98 percent of the nation’s sugar. The Trust loomed large, and its frequent newspaper advertisements made it the public face of Philadelphia’s sugar refining industry. Its Franklin refinery was also the epicenter of labor unrest among Philadelphia’s sugar workers.

While employment records from 1917 have not survived from any of the sugar companies, national averages and newspaper reports suggest that most laborers in Philadelphia’s sugar refineries were Eastern European immigrants. In 1911, a report made by the Dillingham Immigration Commission found that approximately 85.3% of U.S. sugar refinery workers were foreign-born, the most populous groups being Poles (30.2%), Lithuanians (16.7%) and Germans.

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53 In the 1890s, the ASRC gained control of the Franklin Sugar Refining Company and the Spreckels Sugar Refining Company, which sat adjacent to each other in South Philadelphia. Although the Spreckels refinery name became defunct in 1895, it continued to be known colloquially as “Spreckels” for decades after, because of community memory and to differentiate it from the Franklin refinery. Franklin’s operations were closed for 25 years before it reopened in 1917, meaning that Spreckels was more established, with a more consistent workforce. In sources from 1917, IWW and insurance mappers both used the Spreckels name, while newspapers continued to call it “Franklin.” It was the Spreckels refinery building, at Reed and S. Front St., where strikers first walked out, and major rioting took place. Unless otherwise noted, any mention of “Franklin” refers to the Spreckels refinery building. “Sugar Trust’s Latest Movement,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, n.d.; Insurance Maps Vol. 5; “Sugar Refiners’ Strike”; “Franklin Sugar Refinery to Be Reopened,” The Evening Ledger, March 10, 1916.


56 Jackson et al., “The Encyclopedia of New York City.”

57 Cole, Wobblies on the Waterfront.
(11.9%). The study did not clarify the religions of any of these ethnic groups, so it is unclear what percentage of sugar workers would have been Jewish, Catholic, or some other Christian denomination. Newspapers also characterized sugar workers as Polish and Lithuanian, and later organizing was centered at Lithuanian National Hall on Moyamensing Ave.58

The refineries appeared to have employed virtually no black workers, except on its docks, where black and immigrant longshoremen worked side by side in crews unloading ships of raw sugar.59 Different sources suggest that the refineries employed somewhere between five and fifteen thousand workers, most of which were men, but a minority of which were women.60 The Dillingham study found that most of these immigrant workers had worked as farmers and farm laborers in Eastern Europe, and virtually none had any experience in sugar refining. Due to this lack of experience, as well as race-based discrimination, most of the new immigrants worked as unskilled laborers, while Germans and some Irish likely occupied the more skilled jobs.61

Due to its size and placement on the Delaware River, Philadelphia was a convenient destination for a significant portion of the sugar that arrived from U.S. protectorates in the Caribbean. Every month, ships carrying thousands of pounds of raw cane sugar arrived from Puerto Rico and Cuba, which, though nominally independent, were effectively controlled by the United States.62 On refinery docks, longshoremen unloaded 100-pound bags and barrels of unrefined sugar into long warehouses that stretched out on pilings into the river. Operating industrial-sized boilers, centrifuges, and other machinery, sugar workers then circulated the raw

59 “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen”; Cole, Wobblies on the Waterfront.
60 “Strike Makes Sugar Famine, Plants Close”; “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen”; “Sugar Refiners’ Strike”; “Franklin Sugar Refinery to Be Reopened.”
62 Merleaux, Sugar and Civilization.
sugar through the refining process, removing foreign matter such as wood, jute fibers, and iron, and turning it from “yellowish-brown” lumps into “snow white crystals.” The ASRC produced over 100 different sugar products, which were then funneled back into the neighborhood, through wholesalers, restaurants, and other factories making candy, baked goods, and extracts. Nearby residents readily consumed the sugar which streamed out of the refineries. Historian April Merleaux has asserted that by the turn of the 20th century, sugar had become a staple of both the native-born and immigrant working-class diet in the United States. In her investigation of food conservation in New York during World War I, Merleaux reveals that Jewish immigrants purchased sugar regularly from Jewish grocers. In one case, she even found that a New York rabbi had determined that only white, granulated sugar was kosher. While this concern for the kosher-ness of sugar was not general practice, it does reveal that even sugar was not immune from Jewish consumers’ anxiety about the spiritual laws of consumption. Sugar was such a staple of the Jewish diet that after the U.S. joined the war, Jewish consumers frequently reported grocers for hoarding and selling sugar at heightened prices.

Simultaneously, the infrastructure of the refineries and their transportation shaped the lives of residents, as well as their relationship with space and time. Railroad tracks which carried refined sugar out of the city wove in and out of refinery buildings and demarcated the border between the refineries and the rest of the neighborhood. Along Delaware Avenue, workers coming from the neighborhood had to wait for freight cars to pass before they could cross a four-track railroad which divided their dense, ethnic world from the corporate, industrial environment of the

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64 American Sugar Refining Company, A Century of Sugar Refining, 20; Merleaux, Sugar and Civilization, 17; “Strike Makes Sugar Famine, Plants Close.”
65 Merleaux, Sugar and Civilization, 88.
66 Merleaux, 88–89.
factories. Those who lived in rowhouses overlooking the refineries were plagued by the constant rattling and fumes from the freight cars and refinery machinery, which operated 24 hours a day.67

The growth of sugar refining in Philadelphia was symptomatic of a national addiction to sugar, which had been growing since the early 19th century. This was largely due to U.S. imperial policy in the Caribbean, which led to the expansion of sugar production and an influx of sugar into the United States in the early 20th century. During this period, refiners and nutritionists alike celebrated the health benefits of the substance, marketing it as a “fuel-food” which was “necessary to proper nutrition and crucial for people performing heavy labor.”68 Indeed, sugar was an inexpensive option for energizing workers in industrial settings, allowing laborers to work harder, for longer hours. In a way, workers’ labor was partially fueled by the very product that they produced, stimulating a self-perpetuating cycle of production and exploitation.

Refined sugar was sent across the country and abroad as well, centering Philadelphia in a burgeoning global economy. At no time was this truer than during World War I, when the United States increased its domestic production to provide for Allied and neutral countries in Europe, whose access to agricultural and industrial resources had been devastated by the war. After a brief recession in 1914 and 1915, Philadelphia experienced an economic upswing as its industrial production exploded to account for increased numbers of exports and imports.69 Between 1915 and 1916, the value of exports leaving Philadelphia had almost tripled in value. In 1917, it doubled yet again, with Philadelphia's ports on the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers handling over $600 million in exports and imports that year.70 In turn, sugar refineries increased production to make up for European sugar that was no longer available on the global market. The ASRC

70 Cole, 75.
reopened the Franklin refinery (not Spreckels) in March 1916, after it had been closed for 25 years, creating 8,000 jobs and making sugar refining the city’s fourth-largest manufacturing industry.\textsuperscript{71} By 1917, Philadelphia sugar refineries produced approximately one-sixth of the nation’s sugar.\textsuperscript{72}

As a result, working conditions in the refineries worsened. Handling heavy machinery and massive bags of sugar meant that refinery work was dangerous and sometimes deadly. Fires were frequent, and newspapers from the wartime years are rife with reports of fatal accidents and injuries.\textsuperscript{73} For example, in August 1915, a crane dropped several 100-pound bags of sugar onto a worker, almost certainly killing him.\textsuperscript{74} Six months later, while unloading a ship from Cuba, two black stevedores were “crushed to death” when several tons of bagged raw sugar fell onto them.\textsuperscript{75} Just one month before workers went on strike at the Franklin refinery, a man was knocked off of a raised platform by a vehicle and fell 40 feet to his death.\textsuperscript{76}

Working conditions were poor in other ways as well. In one statement to the \textit{Evening Ledger}, an IWW organizer named Edwin F. Doree described the long work hours and the low wages at the Franklin refinery. Born to Swedish immigrants, Doree had organized IWW members, or “Wobblies,” across the country before coming to Philadelphia in 1916, where he helped organize in Local 8 and sometimes found work as a longshoreman.\textsuperscript{77} To the \textit{Evening Ledger}, he asserted that most employees worked twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, which was a “relic of barbarism.”\textsuperscript{78} He also argued that workers were offered no job stability, and contested

\textsuperscript{71} “Franklin Sugar Refinery to Be Reopened.”
\textsuperscript{72} Cole, Wobblies on the Waterfront, 78.
\textsuperscript{74} “Man Crushed by Sugar May Die,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, August 12, 1915.
\textsuperscript{75} “Two Workmen Killed Under Tons of Sugar,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, February 7, 1916.
\textsuperscript{76} “Workman Killed by Fall,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, January 3, 1917.
\textsuperscript{77} Cole, Wobblies on the Waterfront, 76.
\textsuperscript{78} Doree, “Sugar Strikers Present Demand.”
the refinery’s claims that it paid its unskilled employees 25 cents per hour, stating that wages
didn’t even go as high as 15 cents. Assuming that employees were paid 25 cents per hour,
which would have been on the upper end of the unskilled pay scale in Philadelphia, that still
would not have been enough to keep up with the skyrocketing cost of living precipitated by the
war. Based on inflation statistics for food prices, I calculate that about 90% of this income would
have gone to food, compared to 56% a year prior. Assuming that a refinery employee was the
sole provider for their family, they would barely have been able to feed a family on those wages.

Despite the immense sacrifices of sugar workers, Philadelphia refineries continually sought
to hide their involvement in the refining process. In newspaper advertisements and promotional
materials, refineries placed an emphasis on their high-tech machinery and streamlined
production. One advertisement from February 1917 stated that Franklin sugar was “refinery
packed, untouched by hands until it reaches your pantry.” Similarly, a promotional pamphlet
from the McCahan refinery published in 1930 asserted that “machinery of incredible complexity
and ingenuity, automatically makes, fills and accurately weights Sunny Cane Sugar cartons,
without being touched by the uniformed attendants who supervise the operation of the
machinery.” This type of rhetoric removed the immigrant worker from the refining process
entirely, and instead reframed production around a Progressive-era vision of modernity which
celebrated efficiency and mechanization.

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79 Doree.
80 A study made by the Mayor’s Food Commission estimates that the yearly food expenditures at August 1916
prices for a family would have been about $530, and August 1917, about $850. With a similar yearly income of
about $941 per year (including bonuses in December 1916 and January 1917 listed by the Franklin Sugar
Refining Company), the percentage of income spent on food would have been about 56% in 1916 and 90% in
82 WJ McCahan Sugar Refining & Molasses Co, Sunny Cane Sugar, 17.
83 Lindy Biggs, The Rational Factory: Architecture, Technology, and Work in America’s Age of Mass
Considering the chain of sugar production, this kind of rhetoric had highly racial undertones. In her book, *Sugar and Civilization*, April Merleaux has explored extensively the ways that Caribbean plantation workers were highly racialized, arguing that American sugar refineries symbolically purified sugar from the taint of non-white sugar producers in Caribbean islands.\(^8^5\) U.S. refineries, however, were not necessarily operated by “white” men, by 1917 standards. Rather, ethnic European immigrants, and particularly Jews, according to historian Eric L. Goldstein, were “a racial conundrum, a group that could not be clearly pinned down according to the prevailing racial categories.”\(^8^6\) In Philadelphia, newspapers frequently referred to Jewish sections of South Philadelphia using coded language, referring to them as the “congested sections” and the “ghetto.”\(^8^7\) One even mentions the “high birthrate known to exist in the

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\(^{85}\) Merleaux, *Sugar and Civilization*, 55.


\(^{87}\) “Housewives Plan City Hall March,” *Evening Ledger*, February 24, 1917; “Women Start ‘Food Strike.’”
neighborhood,” deriding the moral looseness of poor immigrant women.88 This perceived racial inferiority of Eastern European immigrants, explains why the Franklin refinery removed the immigrant workers from their public image, emphasizing the “purity and cleanliness” of its product (Figure 2).89 This type of advertising decentered the workers from their product, as it traveled far beyond the city limits.

As the winter of 1916-17 arrived, temperatures dropped, food prices increased exponentially, and workers reached their breaking point. The harvest season in the Caribbean, which had begun in December, also represented an increased strain on worker production. High season, combined with increased wartime production and the high cost of living, no longer made up for workers’ long hours and low wages. As one Industrial Workers of the World organizer wrote to the IWW newspaper Solidarity in February, “human endurance reached its limit… and the only thing happened that could have happened: they struck.”90

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88 “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen.”
89 Franklin Sugar Refining Company, “Franklin Package Sugar Is Guaranteed Full Weight.”
90 “Sugar Refiners’ Strike.”
Wobblies, Space, and Race in the 1917 Sugar Refinery Strike

On February 1, over 1,000 workers walked out of the American Sugar Refining Company’s Franklin refinery. In the following days, workers from McCahan, Pennsylvania, and the nearby molasses factory followed suit, as well as skilled workers from Franklin, including engineers, foremen, machinists, oilers, coopers, and sack-sewers. Across the board, they demanded a 5 cent raise to 30 cents an hour, and time and a half pay for work over 10 hours.\(^{91}\) They joined the Industrial Workers of the World en masse, and soon after, IWW dockworkers also “threw down their tools” in solidarity with the strikers. In the end, the IWW estimated that 5,000 sugar workers, 1,500 longshoremen, and 100 seamen were “out,” comprising a large portion of the sugar refining workforce.\(^{92}\)

Immediately, Philadelphia sugar refining ground to a halt. Ships carrying thousands of bags of raw sugar from Cuba lay stagnant in the port as longshoremen refused to unload them, and already-packaged sugar could not be delivered to its destination.\(^{93}\) Philadelphia candy factories, dependent on refined sugar, soon stopped production as well, and grocers capped sugar sales as locals rushed in to stock up on the product. Wholesale and retail sugar prices grew, and newspapers produced sensationalist reports of a looming “sugar famine.”\(^{94}\)

Meanwhile, sugar workers and their sympathizers – made up of IWW members and strikers’ wives – picketed outside of refineries by the hundreds, protesting the refiners’ abuses. Strikers’ protest was deeply rooted in the social fabric and physical geography of the neighborhood, as community connections and a knowledge of local topography allowed them to

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\(^{91}\) Doree, “Sugar Strikers Present Demand.”
\(^{92}\) “Sugar Refiners’ Strike.”
wage guerrilla war on their employers and the police which guarded the refineries. Simultaneously, their protest was characterized by verbal and physical violence against the black workers (called “strikebreakers”) which had been hired to replace them. In these moments, immigrant men and women not only exhibited defensiveness about their job security, but also expressed an understanding of their own place within the American racial hierarchies which governed their new environment.

**The Wobblies take Philadelphia’s Sugar Refineries**

When sugar workers walked out of the refineries in the first days of February, over 1,500 paid their $2 initiation fees to join the radical Marxist Industrial Workers of the World, which had a strong presence in Delaware riverside industries. Founded in 1905 as a radical alternative to the AFL, the IWW envisioned a global uprising in which the working classes would unite under “One Big Union” to overthrow capitalism and take over the means of production. The IWW was predicated on the ideal of industrial unionism, and had significant success leading strikes across the country in the years preceding World War I. In Philadelphia, it was particularly powerful among longshoremen, where its Local 8 proudly organized black, white, and immigrant workers together.

In South Philadelphia, the IWW was integrated into the social fabric of the neighborhood, as Eastern European and white Wobblies from docks and refineries alike frequented the same

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riverside saloons, attended the same churches and synagogues, and lived next door to each other. Just like labor, union ties were inseparable from family ties, as family members worked in the same industries, and all paid their union dues. The Local 8 headquarters were even located on Catherine Street, bordering the Franklin Sugar Refinery.99

The IWW had been organizing workers in the Franklin Sugar Refinery for several years before the February 1917 strike. The Wobblies first set their sights on Philadelphia’s sugar workers in May 1913, when a Polish and Lithuanian-speaking organizer named Joseph Schmidt registered over 400 workers with the union. When the refinery began to fire unionized workers, 800 employees walked out in solidarity, followed by 1,500 longshoremen and stevedores.100 The strike eventually fizzled out by mid-June, and it is unclear what the strikers’ demands were, or whether they were met.

While many refinery employees likely continued to wear the IWW button, they did not have their own local until 1916, when the Sugar Refining Workers Industrial Union #496 was founded as an offshoot of Local 8. That June, workers at the Spreckels refinery again went on strike, this time demanding time and a half for night work and double pay on Sundays. There was surprisingly little coverage of this strike in local newspapers, but the fact that workers presented the same demands the following year indicates that they were largely unmet. By this time, the Local 8 held a virtual monopoly over the city’s longshoremen, who worked closely with sugar refinery employees as they unloaded bags of sugar on refinery docks.101

Newspaper reports of the 1913 strike mentioned the participation of “women sympathizers,” who picketed outside the refineries and were involved in violent altercations with

99 Cole, 57, 66, 69.
100 Cole, 40; “Strikers Tighten Hold on Shipping,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, May 18, 1913.
policemen. These women approached the strike with militance: in a major riot, reportedly over 50 women were present, and “used red pepper… as their defense against the revolvers of the police.”

During this period, the use of little boxes of red pepper as a weapon appears to have been fairly common among working class immigrant (particularly Polish) women, and is indicative of how women took advantage of the tools at their disposal – namely, common household items – to wage war in moments of injustice. This can be seen as a type of guerrilla warfare: these little boxes, carried in pockets and handbags, might be otherwise innocuous if found on their person, unlike the guns and bricks utilized by strikers. Similarly, though pepper was a formidable weapon with the power to temporarily blind someone if thrown into their eyes, it could not permanently injure or kill another. Arguably, most reports of red pepper usage – including those in the later food riots in Philadelphia – appeared in the context of self-defense.

Elsewhere in the country, the IWW had a significant female membership, and its newspapers frequently took stances on female issues, such as “marriage and free love, women’s right to work, their role in the home, and birth control.” The most famous female IWW leaders were Mary “Mother” Jones, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, who both organized around women’s workplace issues and child labor rights. In 1912, Flynn had co-led the Lawrence, Massachusetts “Bread and Roses” strike under the auspices of the IWW, which had fought for higher wages for foreign-born female textile workers of all nationalities. Instances like this, where thousands of working-class, ethnic women signed on with the IWW, revealed that the

102 “Strikers Tighten Hold on Shipping.”
union’s Marxist philosophy would hold weight with South Philadelphia’s female population. The *Inquirer* reported that 100 women had walked out of the Franklin refinery along with the male strikers, and an unspecified amount also made up the 900 workers who left the McCahan refinery.\(^{107}\) Though these women made up a small percentage of the striking masses, they were not an insignificant number.\(^{108}\)

The IWW would have been appealing to Polish and Lithuanian sugar workers in Philadelphia because it was far more socially inclusive than its competing unions, the AFL and the CLU. The IWW’s firm stance was that the world was divided into “the working class” and “the employing class,” and all workers, regardless of “creed or color,” must unite under one banner.\(^{109}\) It was founded on the principle of industrial unionism, which “saw industrial unions, direct action on the job, and the climactic general strike as the logical and best ways to enact revolutionary change.”\(^{110}\) Under this philosophy, all workers in a certain industry were organized into a single union, regardless of their craft or level of skill. This stood in contrast with the craft unionism promoted by the A.F.L., which tended to focus on white, American, skilled craftsmen, and largely excluded the many black and immigrant unskilled laborers that populated most American factories.\(^{111}\) By uniting workers under one banner, hierarchies between workers would be eliminated, and unskilled workers would be bolstered in their actions when higher-paid foremen joined them in solidarity. This philosophy of inter-class solidarity would have been appealing to poor, unskilled, immigrant sugar refinery workers.

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107 “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen.”
Nowhere was the IWW’s inclusivity more prominent than in Philadelphia, where the immensely powerful longshoremen’s Local 8 had been proudly and adamantly organizing black, Eastern European, and Irish dockworkers together since 1913. In his seminal study of Local 8 in Philadelphia, Peter Cole argues that the IWW practiced a form of “radical egalitarianism,” and stated that Local 8 was “arguably the most powerful mixed-race union of its era.”

Approximately half of the local’s members were black, and black and immigrant organizers alike rose to the highest ranks in the organization. In Philadelphia, IWW organizers recruited immigrant laborers in their own languages: at the funeral for a Wobbly who was killed during the 1917 sugar refinery strike, IWW leaders gave speeches in Polish, Lithuanian, Italian, and English. The Philadelphia branch also held weekly open meetings in Polish and Lithuanian and distributed copies of the Polish-language IWW newspaper *Solidarnosel* among its members.

In January 1917, the Sugar Refinery Workers’ Industrial Union #496 accelerated its recruiting efforts, and began to hold meetings to sign up new members. When they walked out in February, over 1,000 enrolled in the union, attracted by their recruiting campaigns, organizing expertise, and the fact that they likely knew many members of the union already through neighborhood networks. The strikers elected a 17-person committee to negotiate with the refiners and a mediator sent to Philadelphia by the State Department. Philadelphia IWW leaders E.F. Doree and Walter Nef quickly mobilized a national network of Wobblies by advertising their case in IWW newspapers like *Solidarity* and *Industrial Worker*, and pleading for donations. The IWW was predicated on this type of communal aid, which was familiar for

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112 Cole, 2, 3.
114 “Sugar Refiners’ Strike.”
immigrant workers, whose neighborhood networks were a microcosm of the national support system which the Wobblies sought to create.

As negotiations stalled and the strike stretched into its third week, strikers’ families began to feel the desperate loss of income, exacerbated by the rising wartime food prices. However, the *Public Ledger* reported that what eventually pushed strikers to their breaking point was when “negro strike-breakers were brought into [Philadelphia] to work in the plants. Since that time, the former employes (*sic*) have become discontented and several minor outbreaks have occurred.”

Fearing both that the new workforce would remove any incentive for the refiners to meet their demands, and that they may not be guaranteed their jobs back at the end of the strike, strikers became violent. Newspapers were scattered with descriptions of altercations between strikers and strikebreakers, as black strikebreakers made their way to and from the refineries.

The most extreme of these altercations happened on February 21, when Florence Schalde’s women’s march escalated into a riot outside of the Franklin refinery. At a meeting of 200 women in Lithuanian Hall before the march, Schalde had reportedly “urged her hearers to adopt militant methods to drive out the strike-breakers. She insisted that the strike was driving the families of the locked-out men to the verge of starvation and declared that unless their husbands were victors their wives and children would starve.” Schalde, like many women, understood that if the refineries continued to hire strikebreakers, her husband would never get the raise he demanded, and might not get his job back at the end of the strike. Her anger was not directed at the group of untouchable “bosses” (as the IWW labeled them) which ran the refineries, but rather, at hired workers. Strikers and women sympathizers knew that their

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117 “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police.”
118 Doree and Nef, “Murder in Phila. Sugar Strike.”
power lay in the interpersonal: they could not dispose of corporate strikebreaking practices, but could undermine them by attacking hired workers, who were more visible, and accessible.

As the crowd of women marched to the refinery in time for the evening shift change at six o’clock, they reportedly shouted, “We are starving! Down with strikebreakers!” as “imprecations were hurled at police and strikebreakers in foreign tongues.” The crowd grew to nearly 2,000 people, and police reinforcements in trucks and on horses arrived to quell the growing unrest. Different newspapers attribute the beginning of the riot to different parties – the women, the police, or strikers – but what is clear is that the area soon exploded into outright violence. The women put up a fight: they threw pepper into the face of policemen, and according to the Public Ledger, on officer’s “hands were scratched and chewed by some of the infuriated women, causing painful injuries.” When Florence Schalde was arrested, she “screamed and fought madly,” as she held her infant child in her arms. In self-defense, but also motivated by a strong sense of moral authority, the women used the tools they had at their disposal: their bodies.

Anticipating an attack on the refineries that day (having sent an officer to monitor the women’s meeting), the police increased their forces and set up a border of about two blocks from each edge of the Franklin refinery. The Philadelphia police force, notoriously brutal and tied to both city politics and corporate interests, represented the side of the refiners in a battle over the purpose of the neighborhood. According to historian Clem Harris, during this period, police officers paid “political assessments,” a type of “monetary duty… to ward-based political bosses”

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119 “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police.”
120 “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police.”
121 “Police Slay Mob Chief in Sugar Strike.”
in Philadelphia, in exchange for political favors. They were tied to the Philadelphia’s Republican political machine, and they may have protected strikebreakers with an eye to the rising electoral power of the black voting base in Philadelphia, and the ward bosses’ interests in currying the support of that group. More broadly, the police were sent in by the city government to regain control of the neighborhood from immigrant protesters, and protect refiners’ capital.

By stationing themselves so far from the refinery, policemen pushed the battle onto the home turf of the strikers and their sympathizers. The confrontation occurred at the intersection of S. Front and Reed Streets, which bordered two residential blocks that were occupied by immigrant workers and Wobblies (Figure 3). Schalde lived just one block north, and the striker that would be killed by the police lived just two blocks to the south. Despite the fact that most of the police officers present lived next door to the strikers and in the vicinity of the refineries, the force, outnumbered and working as a squad, was unable to keep up with the protestors. Injured policemen also had surnames which suggest English and Scottish origins – Smith, Rogers, McCallister – which meant that they were likely of an Americanized generation and would not have been privy to the ethnic networks that facilitated the movement of strikers and their sympathizers.

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124 Harris, 38.
125 Insurance Maps Vol. 5; “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen”; “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police.”
126 “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen.”
Figure 3. A map of the February 21st refinery riot, at the intersection of S. Front and Reed streets. All individuals listed as present at the riot are pinned under their home address.\textsuperscript{127}

On their home turf, protestors took advantage of their neighborhood social networks and familiarity with the local topography to wage a place-based warfare on the police. Men attacked from all directions, and ambushed police from beneath cars in the Pennsylvania freight yard, which were used to carry the sugar they refined out of the neighborhood. A neighborhood

\textsuperscript{127} Insurance Maps Vol. 5; “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen”; “Guard Refineries After Fatal Riot.”
network of sympathizers emerged, likely both IWW members as well as friends and family who lived in the vicinity of the neighborhood. These sympathizers showered bricks from a nearby abandoned lot down onto police from the tops and windows of buildings, and hid strikers in homes and a nearby saloon as they ran from the police. Once the fight petered out after nearly two hours, strikers “disappeared by means of alleys and small streets,” and the injured were squirreled away into private residences. In the end, newspapers reported that at least four protestors, one bystander, and six policemen were injured. One striker, a Lithuanian Catholic Wobbly named Mercquenias Dekactzc, was shot dead by the police. Dekactzc and others used their place-based understanding of the neighborhood to facilitate their battle and evade the police.

In response to the riot, the police militarized the neighborhood around the refinery. According to the *Evening Ledger*, they placed the district “under martial law,” and a force of 50 policemen carrying riot sticks were soon “swarming the entire sugar refinery district.” Crews of six to seven armed policemen patrolled the streets, breaking up groups of strikers, and guards were even stationed outside of the homes of known strikers and their sympathizers. Under orders of the Director of Public Safety, William H. Wilson, local saloons which had harbored strikers were shut down. The police sought to control protesters’ movement to hinder their ability to gather and further organize. In mobilizing the police force in the neighborhood’s public spaces, the narrative of “public safety” was centered around the protection of property and the means of

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129 “Police Slay Mob Chief in Sugar Strike.”
production. This vision of the city reflected that of the refiners, in which the neighborhood was a source of labor, rather than a vibrant ecosystem of social networks and exchange. Though they sought to control the streets, the police and refiners alike were never able to fully grasp or overcome the multi-dimensionality of the strikers’ place-based social networks, as strikers continued to organize in public halls and private homes.\(^\text{130}\)

**Strikebreaking and the Great Migration**

Despite the growing police presence, attacks against strikebreakers continued. Even before the February 21\(^{st}\) riot, police had placed a guard of eight to ten men outside the refineries at six PM, in time for the evening shift change.\(^\text{131}\) At some point, the threat of violence against strikebreakers became so severe that the police began to transport strikebreakers to and from the refineries in trucks which, according to the *Public Ledger*, “resembled ‘tanks’ in their protected appearance, with the chauffeur enclosed in an ‘armor-plate’ hood, and a police guard at its side.” In the back, “the negroes stood jammed together, and two policemen guarded them from the tailboard of the truck.” The *Ledger’s* focus on the novelty of these vehicles shows how modern they were, as well as the scale of police resources that went toward protecting the strikebreakers. On February 21 and the following days, several of these trucks were attacked by groups of passers-by, who threw bricks and even shot at the vehicles.\(^\text{132}\) Sporadic attacks on black workers riding in trucks or walking through the neighborhood continued for several weeks, and the most severe cases involved the use of guns, blackjacks, and knives.

\(^{130}\) “Police Slay Mob Chief in Sugar Strike”; “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police.”

\(^{131}\) “Woman, Child in Arms, Leads Rioting in Fatal Battle with Police.”

\(^{132}\) “Striker Is Shot as Sugar Workers’ Truck Is Stoned,” *Public Ledger*, February 23, 1917.
While the Bulletin suggests that these new workers had been brought in from New York, it is more likely (the ASRC’s Brooklyn refinery was also on strike at the time) that such vast numbers were sourced from the new population of southern migrants who had been arriving in huge numbers in Philadelphia since the beginning of the war.\(^{133}\) If indeed the workers were “brought in,” this may have been done by hired labor agents, who transported migrant workers around the country to break strikes.\(^{134}\) In an ad published in every Philadelphia newspaper, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal, the Franklin refining company stated that they were “able to secure labor at [their] regular terms” and had employed no “professional strike-breakers.”\(^{135}\) The company’s public insistence on its fair labor practices may have been in response to a widespread support for the strike and disproval of strikebreaking.

Between 1916 and 1918, nearly 40,000 black southerners arrived in Philadelphia. This was the first wave of the Great Migration, during which about 400,000 black southerners moved to northern urban centers, attracted by economic opportunities which were made possible by the wartime increase in industrial production and the virtual cessation of the arrival of new European immigrant workers. They were also fleeing dire economic conditions in the south, caused by crop failures, low wages, and high unemployment rates, as well as racial discrimination and lynchings.\(^{136}\) Most of the new arrivals were cordoned into pre-existing black neighborhoods, including the 30\(^{th}\) and 7\(^{th}\) wards in South Philadelphia.\(^{137}\) The few home addresses of black strikebreakers listed in newspapers place them mostly in the historic 7\(^{th}\) ward, which lay to the


\(^{135}\) “Statement from the Franklin and American Sugar Refining Companies.”


west of the immigrant settlements. This meant that black workers would have had to walk through the majority immigrant wards to reach their jobs in the Delaware river industrial sector.\(^{138}\)

In Philadelphia, new migrants were met with amplified racism. Before 1910, the city’s small black population had shared a relative peace with the white and immigrant residents that surrounded them. However, some in the white population responded defensively to the arrival of tens of thousands of new migrants (called “refugees” by some scholars), who were poorer and less acculturated to northern urban life than their predecessors. Across the board, white leaders and business owners made a concerted effort to re-segregate the city’s housing, accommodations, education, and religious institutions. Black residents were pushed into overcrowded and overpriced housing, banned from eating establishments, and met sporadically with overt violence.\(^{139}\) It is unclear how frequently anti-black discrimination emanated from the Eastern European immigration population, but historian David Canton tells of several instances of altercations on South Street between Jewish store owners and black customers.\(^{140}\)

Strikers’ aggression against black strikebreakers can be attributed both to a sense of class betrayal and to racism. Strikers felt a natural resentment toward workers whose labor undermined their strike. At the same time, some instances of aggression clearly also had racial motivations. In an interview with the *Public Ledger*, Florence Schalde offered one of the few statements from protestors which explicitly identified strikebreakers by their race:


\(^{139}\) Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression*, 15, 24.

“We want our husbands to get back to work and not let those black men take their places.
The police, they kill us. Look: we have no moneys, so we must get the trust, and we want our husbands to work. That is why we meet, and that is why we say to the black men: ‘you get out, we don’t want you here.’”\textsuperscript{141}

This statement from Schalde is a complex source for understanding how Eastern European strikers understood race. On the one hand, she clearly equated blackness with strikebreaking, describing strikebreakers as “black men” rather than “strikebreakers” or even “workers.” On the other hand, her phrasing suggests that her anger toward them was born out of a sense of her own oppression: by the police, by poverty, and by strikebreakers, who she considered to be a cause of her present condition. Schalde also suggested that women got involved in the strike not because of frustration that a new workforce would prevent the refiners from meeting the strikers’ demands, but rather out of fear that strikebreakers would replace their husbands in the long run.

Schalde may also have been asserting a certain anti-black rhetoric to metaphorically “whiten” the strikers and legitimize their demands. In the early 20th century, European immigrants like Schalde and the sugar strikers occupied an “in-between” spot in the American racial hierarchy, largely discriminated against as non-white, but generally more respected than black Americans.\textsuperscript{142} Coming from antisemitism of the Russian empire, Jews and other Eastern Europeans were already hyperaware of race as a differentiating category, and when they came to the United States, negotiated American racial hierarchies in varied ways. As Barrett and

\textsuperscript{141} “Striker Is Shot as Sugar Workers’ Truck Is Stoned.”
Roediger explain, however, they soon became highly conscious that to be American and to be white were virtually inseparable.\textsuperscript{143} Similarly, as Thaddeus Radziazowski writes, “Poles who had so little going for them (except their white skin…) may have grasped an image of themselves as honest, honorable, non-scabbing workers and stressed the image of the black scab in order to distinguish themselves from… the blacks with whom they shared the bottom of American society.”\textsuperscript{144} Anti-black racism, while certainly not adopted across the board by the immigrant masses, could be used to gain immigrants a step up in the American social order. They knew that to demand American rights – higher wages, shorter hours – meant that they had to prove that they were white enough. Thus, asserting their whiteness through anti-black racism granted their protest a certain legitimacy that may not have been otherwise accessible.

This conflict between immigrant and black workers stood in stark contrast to the successful interracial organizing of the IWW’s longshoremen’s Local 8.\textsuperscript{145} Though most of the same white and immigrant leaders overlapped between the two locals, the majority of the Sugar Refining Workers Industrial Union #496 were new IWW recruits who had been attracted by the prospect of collective action and experienced leadership. These new recruits were not necessarily familiar with or indoctrinated into the racially progressive philosophy that guided the IWW. Though they were new dues-paying members of the union, it seems likely that their greatest loyalties still lay within their ethnic community ties rather than in the sweeping and intangible ideology of a worldwide worker’s union. Simultaneously, the additional pressures of the wartime economy and the high cost of living exacerbated workers’ desperation in a way that differed from Local 8, which had been formed during peacetime.

\textsuperscript{143} Barrett and Roediger, “Inbetween Peoples,” 6.
\textsuperscript{145} Cole, \textit{Wobblies on the Waterfront}. 
Unlike longshoremen, sugar employees were not used to working with black workers because refineries had historically spurned the black population. With all longshoremen signed up with the IWW, there was no one to break their strikes, and their operations came to a halt until their demands were met. However, without a chance to develop trust and respect on the factory floor, immigrant and black workers within the refineries had little incentive to support each other’s concerns. Ironically, the very thing that undermined interracial relations within the sugar strike was exactly what had given strikers their power: black workers did not live in the neighborhood, nor did they share the same ethnic, religious, linguistic cultural traditions that bounded European strikers together. In the case of Local 8, immigrant strikers had been able to overcome these differences by working closely together on the docks, but without that exposure, sugar strikers had no incentive to form a cross-cultural coalition. By keeping the plants segregated, refiners knowingly manipulated race to break the strikers’ organizing potential: as one refinery superintendent stated, hiring black workers was their way to “‘equalize’ foreign laborers.”\footnote{R.H. Leavell et al., “Negro Migration in 1916-17” (New York: U.S. Department of Labor, 1919), 136.} Both before and after the strike, longshoremen on the refinery docks received significantly higher wages than those working in the refineries.\footnote{Leavell et al., 137; Cole, \textit{Wobblies on the Waterfront}.} Due to refiners’ racial manipulation, as well as predisposed ethnic alliances and a desire to assert their own whiteness, sugar workers failed to form an interracial coalition that paralleled that of Local 8.

Unfortunately, there are no sources describing the interpersonal response of IWW leaders or black IWW members to the strikers’ racial violence. However, in public IWW literature, Philadelphia leaders pointedly excluded any mention of the altercations. In an article for \textit{Solidarity} on March 3, IWW organizers E.F. Doree and Walter Nef wrote that “No one has returned to work, and Spreckles (sic) and his allies are finding it a terribly hard job to get the
scabs necessary to their operation of the plants.” While it is still unclear exactly how many strikebreakers the refineries had hired by this point, the number was certainly in the hundreds, and were in fact so high that the superintendent of the Pennsylvania sugar refinery stated on February 19 that the company was back to operating at full capacity. An adjacent article about the funeral of Mercquenias Dekactzc also emphasized that 200 black longshoremen had marched in the funeral parade in support. These articles blamed all violence in the strike on the police, who did “their usual dirty work,” clubbing, bullying, and “breaking the heads of the strikers.” Philadelphia’s IWW leaders put up a front that their strike was in line with the IWW ideal of interethnic and interclass solidarity. Doing so bolstered this social ideal as well as their requests for donations, which were tagged onto the end of every article.

As the strike petered out, it appears that sugar refiners quickly began to replace their black workers. On March 14, the McCahan Sugar Refining Company placed an advertisement in the Inquirer which asked for “strong, able-bodied men, white.” The refinery was offering the job at the now-increased wages of 27 cents per hour. Though “white” is an ambiguous term, the refinery’s hiring history suggests that the term applied to Eastern European applicants. Elsewhere, the black dock foreman referenced earlier “complained bitterly… that although the company had promised to keep all the colored workers, the assistant superintendents, who were southern men, were now replacing them with foreign laborers.” In frustration, he stated that “‘this week they fired 30 Negroes and hired 15 Polacks.’” It is unclear how many workers

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148 Doree and Nef, “Murder in Phila. Sugar Strike.”
150 “Funeral of Sugar Striker.”
153 Leavell et al., “Negro Migration in 1916-17,” 137.
stayed and how many left, but as of August 1917, the Franklin Sugar Refining Company still employed 700 black workers, a number which likely included both dock and refinery workers.154

This backtracking in black employment was normal for strikebreaking companies in the wake of the strike, as strikebreakers were only meant to be temporary employment. It was also indicative of a larger trend, in which southern migrants who had come north for economic opportunity were only able to get conditional, cursory, short-term employment. This was particularly true after the war, when unemployment rates for black Philadelphians grew as industrial production decreased and soldiers returned from the war, expecting their old jobs to be returned. As Gregg writes, “the apparent benefits of the period were in some ways illusory. They represented the establishment of a ‘reserve army of labor,’ which, far from leading to increased opportunities, would in the long run make it more difficult for members of the black community to escape from the ghetto.”155 Ultimately, many of the black workers, who had seen in the sugar refineries an opportunity to gain access to previously exclusive industry, ended up worse off, many of them jobless and all of them victims of racial discrimination.156

It is unclear exactly when the strike ended. The McCahan advertisement listing increased wages suggests that it had ended by March 14, while an *Inquirer* article about the return of 200 Polish workers to the Franklin refinery suggests that it was already winding down by March 1.157 In the end, the refineries only partially granted the strikers’ demands: their pay was raised by only two cents to 27 cents an hour, with a ten percent pay raise to 29.5 cents after two months of labor.158 Strikers were not granted overtime pay, nor were their hours shortened.159 Though their

154 Leavell et al., 157.
155 Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression*, 33.
156 Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 78.
159 Leavell et al., 136.
gains were marginal, immigrant strikers’ organizing strategies – mobilizing community networks and taking advantage of the neighborhood topography – did make an impact. This strike was a catalyst for a much larger neighborhood movement to come.
“Buy No Boycotted Food, Sister!”:

The 1917 Philadelphia Food Boycott

The evening of February 21st, after the riot at the Franklin refinery, the protest grew into a general neighborhood strike when a group of eight South Philadelphia women gathered in a synagogue about seven blocks west of the McCahan sugar refinery. Inspired by reports from “Jewish newspapers” (likely the Yiddish-language, socialist-leaning Jewish Daily Forward) of a boycott in New York City, the group, called the Association to Fight the High Cost of Living (AFHCL), declared a boycott on potatoes, onions, and fish. These customarily inexpensive, high-calorie foods formed the basis of their working-class diet, and were essential ingredients in several traditional Jewish dishes. By protesting food prices, boycotters showed that they considered their domestic responsibilities – shopping, cooking, childcare, and managing family finances – to be a form of labor that afforded them basic ‘workplace’ rights. The rising costs of living had made their jobs significantly more difficult, as they scavenged for deals and struggled to stretch their low incomes to feed large families. Jewish shoppers knew that their purchasing powers held weight in their interdependent and isolated sphere of kosher consumption. By using gendered and ethnic ties, community policing, and rioting in large numbers, poor Jewish women fought for a bottom-up ethnic vision of neighborhood sovereignty.

The following morning, pickets of women stationed themselves on 4th and 7th Streets in the Jewish quarter of South Philadelphia, where pushcarts and shops were opening for the day.

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161 Some reports also have the boycott including chicken, beans, and flour. It definitely spread to include these items at some point, although it unclear when they first were placed on the boycott list. “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot,” Public Ledger, February 23, 1917; “Clash with Police Over Food Boycott”; “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.”
These “delegations” of women had been tasked with monitoring food prices, and were outraged to find that the cost of fish, chicken, and beets had all risen by several cents overnight.\footnote{\textit{162} “Clash with Police Over Food Boycott.”} In an interview with the \textit{Public Ledger}, a boycott organizer named Pauline Goldberg pointed out the religious importance of some of these foods, stating that “carp, a principal ingredient of the Jewish dish ‘gefulte fish,’” had gone from 10 to 18 cents a pound since the day before.\footnote{\textit{163} “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.”} Assured in their mission, women began to approach shoppers, asking them to refrain from purchasing boycotted ingredients. Their appeals were directed specifically at women: one boycott leader named Mary Vachofter was reported saying to a female shopper, “buy no boycotted food, sister, and the prices will come down!”\footnote{\textit{164} “Women Continue Food Protests.”} Vachofter and others knew that their protest grew out of a gendered division of labor in which women were consumers and could wield their economic power with a purpose. Already highly interdependent on each other for childcare and other support, picketers intrinsically understood that communal solidarity – especially among women – would be essential for the success of their movement.\footnote{\textit{165} Caroline Manning, \textit{The Immigrant Woman and Her Job}, United States. Dept. of Labor. Bulletin of the Women’s Bureau : No. 74. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1930), 42.} In fact, many of the neighborhood women likely knew each other, as most lived within blocks, or even houses of each other.\footnote{\textit{166} Insurance Maps Vol. 16.} An appeal to “sisterhood” also reflects a broader awareness of female organizing, as “sisterhood” was mobilized by a variety of women’s movements.\footnote{\textit{167} Orleck, \textit{Common Sense and a Little Fire}, 35.}

Community policing was a central strategy in the women’s protest. On February 23, the \textit{Evening Bulletin} published the following image of the picketers searching the basket of a shopper on a market street in Jewish South Philadelphia:
In the background, protesters look at the camera with a mixture of grimaces and smiles, as they wave empty shopping baskets in the air. These baskets may have been symbolic of the sacrifice they were making in the name of the boycott, or else may even have been used as weapons when they attacked shoppers and vendors. Many wear tichels – headscarves worn by orthodox Jewish women – while others appear bare headed, meaning that they are either unmarried or less observant of Jewish law. Men and children also appear in the picture, corroborating newspaper

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reports of their participation in the protests. Though this movement was hinged on female domestic rights, frustration over the cost of living was by no means solely a women’s issue, and the neighborhood as a whole soon mobilized behind the women boycotters.

On top of the image, the Bulletin overlayed a photograph of at least four picketers "searching the basket of a marketer for contraband." Instances like this were common, as boycotters snatched purchases and wicker shopping baskets from shoppers. On one memorable occasion, a picketer was charged with “highway robbery” for grabbing a chicken out of the hands of a woman who had just bought it.\(^{169}\) Neighborhood policing, by assaulting or publicly shaming shoppers, was an essential tactic for the women, who knew that the effectiveness of their boycott lay in the participation of every consumer. This was a big ask: to maintain the boycott, boycotters declared that they “would try to live on bread and water rather than pay the prices demanded.”\(^{170}\) Already suffering for food, such sacrifices meant that the women had to enact a truly radical vision of community solidarity which prioritized the good of the community over that of the individual. It also meant that boycotting women likely fell back on each other for support, providing food, money, childcare, and other resources to each other as they refrained from purchasing food.

Despite this vocal pressure, the boycott was by no means universally embraced by South Philadelphia women. As women continued to shop, boycotters took their community policing one step further and turned toward the source of the problem itself: vendors. They quickly fell back onto a long-held tradition of militant Jewish consumer protests and began to riot.\(^{171}\) On


\(^{170}\) “Women Start ‘Food Strike.’”

February 22, the *Public Ledger* reported that “from pacific measures to militant exhibition was but a step… [the boycotters] abandoned their coaxing and cajoling methods and stormed the stores themselves instead. They hurled carp, onions, and other foodstuffs about, while they destroyed vegetables and fruits which were piled in stores in profusion.”

Boycotting women also felt personally betrayed by shopkeepers, with whom they had built relationships and a deep-held trust which allowed them to buy on credit. Vendors were familiar with the poverty of women, and knew that they could not afford the higher prices demanded. The shock of this betrayal was further exacerbated by memories of poverty and starvation in Russia, where famines in 1881-2 and 1903-5 had pushed out several waves of emigrants. Many new immigrants had come to the United States expecting not only to be able to feed their families with more ease, but also that the foods they purchased would include those previously reserved for the upper classes back in the Pale. Thus, when their expectations of American plenty were shattered by low wages, unstable work, and high food prices, women, whose domestic responsibilities were made harder by these conditions, responded with a spirit of righteous indignation.

Women soon turned their ire to vendors, overturning pushcarts and “threaten[ing] injury” to shopkeepers. Yelling, “we must have food!… You are trying to starve us. You are robbers. We won’t be robbed,” they reportedly sent a “scurrying throng of frightened hucksters” running from their carts. The *Inquirer* described women walking around with “small cans of oil, which they poured over foodstuffs whenever the opportunity presented itself to them.” In the following days,

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172 “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.”
173 Diner, *Hungering for America*, 158.
174 Diner, 179.
175 “Women Destroy Food in Frantic War on Stores.”
several peddlers and storekeepers received letters threatening attacks on their stocks, demanding that they stop buying from wholesalers.\textsuperscript{177} Though extreme, rioting and public intimidation were merely an extension of the boycott: as long as there were no vendors and no edible food, consumers were forced to boycott.

News of the protests spread throughout the neighborhood, and soon the streets were teeming with hundreds of men, women, and children, all of whom lived just blocks from the shopping district. According to the \textit{Evening Ledger}, 7th street “was a mass of excited women, bare-headed and shouting. Many of them carried babies, and little children scampered and dodged in and about the crowds.” Masses of people clogged up the neighborhood’s main arteries and interfered with local business, supporting Paula Hyman’s argument that “the ‘crowd’ was an important means of expression for women’s economic and political interests.”\textsuperscript{178} By gathering in large numbers, protestors reclaimed the public space of the neighborhood from pushcart vendors and shops. Their tactics were successful: most of the stores in the neighborhood stopped selling boycotted goods, and many closed for the duration of the boycott. The women had effectively wielded their community connections to both inspire and intimidate their friends and neighbors into realizing a radical vision of community solidarity.

**Police and Protest**

When vendors called police to interfere with the rioting, violence escalated to new heights. On February 22, the \textit{Public Ledger} reported that “cordons of police… swept onto Seventh street” in response to a riot call. Acting in the name of “public safety,” they sought to establish control

\textsuperscript{177} “Plotters of Riots in This City Sought by Federal Agents,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, February 24, 1917.

\textsuperscript{178} Hyman, “Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest,” 91.
over the street with an overwhelming show of force. Officers met protestors with blatant aggression: according to the *Inquirer*, they “drew their clubs and started to drive at the women,” who retreated until the street became too congested to go any further, at which point the police “charged the crowd” and “arrested members left and right.” In self-defense, men threw “bricks and bits of bottles,” and women showered them with red pepper. These commonplace weapons were ineffective against the shots which police fired into the crowd.\(^{179}\) Like in the sugar strike, police used their unchecked power to reclaim public space, quelling protest, protecting property, and controlling protestors’ movement. Against immigrant boycotters, the police (on behalf of the city government), fought for control of the neighborhood.

In turn, protestors gathered in large numbers to stubbornly uphold their own claim to the streets. Historian Aaron Welt has noted that Jews, “migrating from empires that discriminated against them… brought with them a distrust of law enforcement and the criminal justice system.”\(^{180}\) Those who came to Philadelphia found their distrust justified when they were met with police brutality and discrimination. After an officer murdered Mercquenias Dekactzc, Florence Schalde stated the neighborhood’s stance plainly: “the police, they kill us.”\(^{181}\)

The protestors, believing in their right to govern their own neighborhood, used this intrinsic mistrust to fuel their battle against the police. On the first evening of the boycott, 500 boycotters “stormed” the 4th and Snyder Street police station, where 16 arrested men and women were being held with a high $600 bail. The crowd expressed moral righteousness and fearless disregard for police authority when they entered the station, “shouting and yelling, demanding the release of the prisoners.” Community solidarity in large numbers – the crowd – afforded them a certain

\(^{179}\) “Women Destroy Food in Frantic War on Stores”; “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.”


\(^{181}\) “Striker Is Shot as Sugar Workers’ Truck Is Stoned.”
protection against police brutality: with a group so large, the police had no choice but to “allow the women to shout and yell, without any retaliatory measures.” Similarly, though thousands of people had been violently protesting, only 16 had been arrested.

The *Public Ledger* described another incident on March 2 in which 50 boycotters attacked a woman who had been caught leaving a fish market. When a policeman arrested the shopper “as a precautionary measure” a 200-person crowd surrounded him and someone yelled “get the cop!” after which point there was a “concentrated rush for the policeman.” The crowd redirected their ire at the police officer and turned to protect the woman they had been harassing, demonstrating how police hatred in all forms trumped community resentment. Above all, by attacking police and demanding the release of pickets, protesters were battling for the right to police their own neighborhood, free from the oversight of the city government. They enacted a radical vision of neighborhood sovereignty, in which community members had the right to surveil and manage each other, as an independent entity from the city government.

**Religious Community Policing**

Community policing also fell along religious lines as boycotters used their Jewish connections to further their cause. In Orthodox Jewish community of South Philadelphia, women sat at the bottom of the social ladder. In synagogue, they were required to sit separately from men, and were generally seen as spiritually inferior. Though housewives managed a complex system of kosher meat, kitchenware, and food preparation in accordance with religious laws, it was rabbis who were the ultimate authorities on *kashrut*. In the 1910s, Bernard Levinthal, the

182 “Rioting Women Fight Police in Food Cost War”; “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.”
unofficial chief rabbi of Philadelphia and a Russian immigrant, had standardized the system of monitoring kosher cattle slaughterhouses. Under this system, Philadelphia rabbis had the power to give and remove a kosher butcher’s (shochet’s) certification, which was bestowed after examining the butcher’s knives and testing their knowledge of ritual slaughter practices. It was only with a rabbi’s approval that a shochet would be allowed to market his meat as “kosher,” and thus gain the business of Jewish consumers.185

In return, rabbis were rewarded financially for their services, so much so that historian Murray Friedman has estimated that “the majority of [Levinthal’s] income came from supervision of kashrut.”186 It was not uncommon in this era for rabbis to be accused of cooperating with a kosher “Meat Trust” to unfairly raise food prices.187 Levinthal himself had been blamed by some consumers for high meat prices during a kosher meat boycott in 1907 due to his close ties to the Philadelphia Hebrew Kosher Butchers’ Association.188

Understanding the power of rabbis in South Philadelphia’s isolated food sphere, Jewish boycotters appealed to them for support. On February 24, the Evening Ledger reported that mass meetings had been held at three halls in South Philadelphia that day, during which “messages [had] been sent to rabbis to withdraw the ‘kosher’ knives, so that no more slaughtering may take place according to the ancient religious custom.”189 One of these messages almost certainly went to Rabbi Levinthal, whose congregation many of the women were likely members of. Boycotters knew that if rabbis revoked their approval, even neighbors who didn’t comply with the boycott would have to cease their patronage, thus forcing local butchers to lower their prices. Jewish

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185 Diner, Hungering for America, 152; Seligman, The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902.
186 Friedman, Jewish Life in Philadelphia, 1830-1940, 58.
189 “Housewives Plan City Hall March.”
women felt that, as mothers and consumers, they had a moral authority which allowed them to invert the strict Jewish gendered power hierarchy. This type of religious pressure had also been employed during a 1902 New York kosher meat boycott, when women had interrupted male synagogue services to demand support from rabbis and male congregants. In that instance, women had also quoted the Torah to plead their case.

Despite the women’s desperation, rabbis evidently refused to revoke the shochets’ licenses. In response, women again inflicted a violent communal policing onto the rabbis themselves (albeit indirectly). A week into the boycott, the Public Ledger reported robberies at two separate South Philadelphia rabbis’ homes, during which a chicken and a fish had been stolen. In one case, about 15 picketers had followed a female servant who had just purchased a chicken to the home of Rabbi Levinthal, where they “boldly entered behind the servant and two seized the chicken, while another held the woman.” That same day, 12 picketers spotted the cook of another rabbi buying a large carp at market and followed her home, where “she was pounced upon by the ‘squad,’ which escaped with the fish.” When measured appeals for help didn’t work, poorer women fell back on a tradition of violent protest, admonishing the rabbis by attacking their female servants whom they had some power to dominate. By stealing food, they forced the rabbis to heed the boycott, radically upending the religious hierarchy which governed their community. Boycotting women had an expertise in the kitchen, which rabbis – as men and wealthier Jews with servants and cooks – lacked. By policing the rabbis’ food, women asserted this authority, and claimed their rightful place as experts in cooking, consumption, and fair food prices.

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A Hybrid Protest: Jewish Women’s Protest Tradition in the United States

The food boycott and riots of February and March 1917 were part of a long tradition of Jewish women’s radical domestic protest. Like most radical Jewish movements, violent consumer protest like this one found its roots in New York City’s Lower East Side, starting with kosher meat boycotts in 1894, 1902, and 1910, as well as rent strikes in 1907-8. In South Philadelphia, domestic protest had exploded into rioting once before, when Jewish housewives had organized to boycott kosher meats in July 1907. These riots were arguably more violent than those in 1917, with newspapers citing instances where picketers burned shoppers with carbolic acid and snatched revolvers out of the hands of policemen. Across different consumer protests, Jewish women deployed similar methods, including community policing, the destruction of property, and street-based protest. The consistency of their actions suggests a strong socially reproduced communal standard for how to respond to high food prices.

Historian Annalise Orleck has argued that Jewish women’s consumer protest in the U.S. was born out of the intermingling of radical trade unionism with traditional Old-World ideals. As Jewish workers – men and women alike – began to organize in factories, they brought radical ideas of wealth redistribution and fair treatment into the domestic sphere. Those ideas were also rooted in the Pale of Settlement, where thousands of young men and women had been radicalized by the growth of political movements such as Socialism, Zionism, Russian Revolutionary Populism, and Yiddish Cultural Nationalism. At the same time, mothers passed down Old-World principles of housekeeping, motherhood, and money management, which were seen as equally essential to working-class quality of life. Orleck argues that within the home, wives, mothers,

194 Orleck, Common Sense and a Little Fire, 17, 24.
and daughters adapted and shaped radical socialist theory to address their own domestic concerns, creating a hybrid form of activism which drew from socialist ideals of class struggle, community networks, and Jewish female consumption traditions. Far from the shtetl, they needed both techniques to respond to newly industrialized, globalized economy. As Orleck writes, by the early 20th century, immigrant Jewish housewives “saw a power in organized consumers that paralleled that of organized producers.”

Orleck’s argument is applicable in the case of South Philadelphia, where socialist ideals were promoted daily by union members and proliferated by Yiddish-language newspapers like the Jewish Daily Forward. Many of the boycotting women were likely either connected to a union member (whether that be of the IWW or another trade union), or union members themselves, in the Women’s Trade Union League. The influence of socialist labor theory on the housewives’ actions was clear in their language: their boycott was a “food strike,” and they organized themselves into “pickets.” They also gathered in the same halls where IWW sugar strikers met— including Lithuanian hall – and those who met with Frances Schalde on February 21 reportedly sang “labor songs” as they shouted for food. Several IWW organizers even got briefly involved with the boycott leadership.

Following the rioting in South Philadelphia, the boycott was soon adopted across the city by other working-class women, as well as a range of other parties. In South Philadelphia, non-Jewish households expressed support for the boycott, and it was adopted in all parts of the city, particularly northeast and west Philadelphia. The boycott’s spread points to a larger anxiety

195 Orleck, 27.
197 “1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen.”
198 “Plotters of Riots in This City Sought by Federal Agents.”
about rising food prices, which impacted all Philadelphia women, regardless of their religion or national origin. The most prominent new organization was the Women’s Protective League (WPL), which had been founded two weeks prior in West Philadelphia, in response to butchers raising meat prices.\textsuperscript{200} The WPL had a total membership of about 2,000 women and had formed a citywide coalition with chapters in South Philadelphia, Kensington, Frankford, and North-Central Philadelphia. According to the \textit{Evening Ledger}, “nearly every nationality [was] represented in the sectional leagues,” including “women of English, Jewish, Italian, Scotch, German, Irish, Polish, Russian, and other extractions.” The WPL was well organized: it held elections to appoint officers, sent a formal appeal for help to President Wilson, and assembled picketing groups which would patrol “beats” in shifts.\textsuperscript{201}

According to the \textit{Public Ledger}, at least 50 labor and social organizations eventually got involved in the movement.\textsuperscript{202} Most of these organizations were not specified, and this number is likely an exaggeration, but other newspaper reports suggest that the cost-of-living issue was soon adopted by a range of actors across the city, including working-class men and women, as well as middle-class reformers, social workers, the Socialist party, and Jewish philanthropists. Newspapers featured few interviews with South Philadelphia boycotters, and instead centered English-speaking leaders and organizations. Still, several mass meetings in South Philadelphia were held per day, where leaders encouraged women in Yiddish to stick to the boycott. Within the neighborhood, women continued to utilize socialist and Old-World organizing techniques to argue for a broad theory of labor that encompassed all parts of life.

\textsuperscript{200} The Women’s Protective League appeared under several different names within the same articles, including the “Housewives’ Union” and the “Federation of Housewives’ Leagues.” “Woman Fined as Picketer in Food Boycott,” \textit{Evening Ledger}, March 2, 1917; Constance Drexel, “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing,” \textit{Public Ledger}, March 3, 1917.

\textsuperscript{201} Drexel, “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing”; “Woman Fined as Picketer in Food Boycott.”

\textsuperscript{202} “Mayor Puts Ban on Food Parade; Women Defiant,” \textit{Public Ledger}, March 4, 1917.
“Rioting and Anarchy Threaten the Nation”:

Philadelphia Newspapers’ Response to the Food Boycott 203

As rioting exploded in South Philadelphia, the city’s English-language newspapers – the \textit{Inquirer}, the \textit{Evening Bulletin}, the \textit{Public Ledger}, and the \textit{Evening Ledger} – scrambled to report on the situation. This segment explores patterns within the newspapers’ depictions of the riots and food crisis, working with the assumption that newspapers both created and reflected the English-speaking public’s prejudices, priorities, and anxieties. Though the newspapers agreed that the food situation was a “crisis,” their rhetoric, as well as which actors they decided to focus on, delegitimized the actions of Jewish rioters. Newspapers attributed rioting German intervention, racialized immigrant boycotters, and celebrated an acceptable, white middle-class version of feminine food protest. They were a powerful tool for shaping public perception of the protests, and in the end their rhetoric garnered public support for the food crisis while disenfranchising the ethnic, violent organizing in South Philadelphia.

On February 22, the day that riots began in South Philadelphia, the \textit{Inquirer}’s front page bore the headline: “Rioting and Anarchy Threaten the Nation; Food Famine Grows.”204 This type of rhetoric was typical of reports of the boycott, which frequently referred to rioters as “anarchists,” a coded term for ‘terrorist.’ Two days later, the \textit{Bulletin}’s front page featured an article titled, “Food Uprisings Due to Germans, is Hint.”205 Another article in the \textit{Inquirer} explained that the 150 “agitators” were coming into Philadelphia from the New York riots, funded by “German propagandists anxious to promote a virtual reign of anarchy wherever possible in this

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203 “Rioting and Anarchy Threaten the Nation; Food Famine Grows,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, February 22, 1917.
204 “Rioting and Anarchy Threaten the Nation; Food Famine Grows.”
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This was perhaps the most sensationalist of any reports, and fed directly into a national paranoia about international espionage and German intervention in American domestic life during World War I. In their radical, violent protest, Jewish immigrant women had come to symbolize a threat to the American status quo. This would be further heightened by the February Revolution on March 8, when a working women’s march in Moscow led to the start of the Russian Revolution. During this period, socialism, immigrant organizing, and radical public demonstration presented a real threat to American democracy. By tapping into wartime anxieties about the future of democracy and the threat of international espionage, newspapers turned the public against immigrant Jewish boycotters.

Similarly, the mainstream press stirred up xenophobia against boycotters by rhetorically equating them with an invading, foreign army. Newspaper reports from the more sensationalist Public Ledger and its evening edition, the Evening Ledger, repeatedly referenced picketing women in militaristic terms. According to the Evening Ledger, on February 22, picketing women gathered in “war councils” before charging at shops, while the Public Ledger describes how they “deployed several battalions” of women in an attack on pushcart vendors. In one instance, a “flying squadron” of men and women overturned a pushcart on 4th street, while on February 23 a group broke into a crockery shop to collect “ammunition” to throw at the windows of a fish store next door. Even the more reliable and widely read Inquirer used similar language, stating that the housewives made “war on stores” and “battle[d]” with police and vendors. Within the context of World War I, this rhetoric fomented stereotypes that immigrants were

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206 “Plotters of Riots in This City Sought by Federal Agents.”
208 “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot”; “Clash with Police Over Food Boycott.”
209 “Women Continue Food Protests”; “Rioting Women Fight Police in Food Cost War.”
210 “Women Destroy Food in Frantic War on Stores.”
warlike, aggressive, and unreasoning.\textsuperscript{211} It had highly racial undercurrents and played off of a growing nativism which would eventually lead to major immigration restrictions on European immigration in 1924.\textsuperscript{212}

If half of newspapers’ time was spent deriding rioters, the other half was spent highlighting other women across the city who were boycotting in more acceptable ways. Newspapers highlighted two women in particular – Esther Altschuler and Catherine “Mother” Munro – as models for a tamer, sanitized, more admissible version of female protest. Though neither were from South Philadelphia, these two women were covered extensively in local newspapers and became the public face of the boycott. Both disparaged rioting, but ironically both Altschuler (a Russian immigrant from West Philadelphia) and Munro (a middle-class reformer from Kensington) otherwise practiced the same gender and community-based social organizing as South Philadelphia Jewish women.

On March 2, nineteen-year-old Esther Altschuler was arrested and fined $10 for “breach of peace” in West Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{213} The later-famous journalist Constance Drexel interviewed her for two articles with the \textit{Evening Ledger} and the \textit{Public Ledger}, where Altschuler explained in broken English that she was the secretary of the Women’s Protective League and had been arrested while peacefully picketing in her neighborhood.\textsuperscript{214} Drexel depicted Altschuler as domestic, nonthreatening, and white: the inverse of the violent, ethnic women of South Philadelphia. According to Drexel, Esther Altschuler was the perfect domestic housewife, a

\textsuperscript{211} “Clash with Police Over Food Boycott.”
\textsuperscript{212} Jacobson, \textit{Whiteness of a Different Color}, 41.
\textsuperscript{213} Drexel, “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing”; “Woman Fined as Picketer in Food Boycott.”
\textsuperscript{214} Constance Drexel was indicted for treason during World War II for putting out pro-Nazi radio broadcasts from Berlin. She was later released. This might explain some of the language that she used to describe Altschuler and the food rioters. Drexel was also famous for posing to be a socialite daughter of the influential Philadelphia Drexel family. See: John Carver Edwards, \textit{Berlin Calling: American Broadcasters in Service to the Third Reich} (New York: Praeger, 1991); “Woman Fined as Picketer in Food Boycott”; Drexel, “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing.”
“demure little mother” who was “as gentle as can be.” Unlike immigrant rioters who were unfaithful to the United States, her husband had naturalized and was now a “stanch, loyal citizen” who would not stand for criticism of the country. Altschuler was nonthreatening to the extreme, and by characterizing her as a “dainty homebody,” Drexel denied the ways that she and other picketers actively claimed public spaces to fuel their protest.

Figure 5. “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing.” The Public Ledger, March 3, 1917.  

Altschuler was also a paradigm of white American beauty: she had “a petite figure and mass of shining gold hair,” which, ironically, looked distinctly brown in the photo accompanying the article (Figure 5). The fact that she had immigrated from Russia six years prior apparently “[did] not seem to explain her saucy, retrousse nose,” apparently referencing the stereotypical large,

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hooked noses which appeared in caricatures of Jews at the time.\textsuperscript{216} This stood in stark contrast to Drexel’s descriptions of the average picketer as a “heavy, aggressive type ready to throw the kitchen stove at her visitor.”\textsuperscript{217} In these articles, Drexel presented an acceptable version of immigrant femininity which was benign, patriotic, and ‘white.’ That this is one of the few features of food boycotters stripped away the true roots of the movement – and even Altschuler’s own organizing – as an ethnic class struggle. This rhetoric perpetuated racist stereotyping and xenophobic standards of femininity, while at the same time using those rhetorical tools to legitimize Altschuler’s own peaceful boycott in the public eye: the whiter and less threatening she was, the more valid the movement would look to the white, English-speaking readership of the \textit{Ledger}.

The newspaper portrayals of other organizers across the city also had the effect of sanitizing the boycott movement in the public eye. If Altschuler represented the tame Eastern European boycotter, the middle-class reformer and Scottish immigrant Catherine “Mother” Munro represented another form of acceptable female activism: charity. In Kensington, Munro immediately formed a coalition of “workingman’s wives which started a “cooperative marketing campaign” in which women “canvassed marketplaces for food at reasonable prices. Vegetables were purchased by the basketful and then divided up among women, each paying her pro-rata share.”\textsuperscript{218} Much like in South Philadelphia, Munro’s communal buying scheme was dependent on an extensive, interdependent network of neighborhood women. She even suggested that a coalition of 150 women had already been carrying out a “silent boycott” of potatoes, sugar,

\textsuperscript{216} A retroussé nose is “turned up at the tip in an attractive way.” “Retroussé, Adj. and n.,” in \textit{OED Online} (Oxford University Press, n.d.), accessed April 21, 2023.
\textsuperscript{217} Drexel, “Just a Dainty Homebody, but Fined for Picketing.”
\textsuperscript{218} “Plotters of Riots in This City Sought by Federal Agents”; “Talk on Marriage,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, November 14, 1910; “Call Mayor Home in Crisis on Food.”
butter, and eggs for several weeks before rioting began in South Philadelphia, indicating that the
boycott was not an exclusively Jewish practice. In their co-operative buying coalition, women
cut out the middlemen which South Philadelphia rioters so violently attacked, attempting to take
control of an out of control economic system.

Munro became the most visible single individual in the movement, as newspapers frequently
interviewed her, printed photos of her, and even published a telegram that she sent to
Philadelphia’s Mayor Thomas B. Smith pleading for his action. Even though her work was
highly collaborative, newspapers framed it as a top-down “philanthropy,” celebrating her as an
individual distinct from women with whom she worked (Figure 6). This was further supported

Figure 6. “‘Mother’ Munro Again Demonstrates Her Practical Philanthropy.” Evening Ledger

220 “‘Mother’ Munro Again Demonstrates Her Practical Philanthropy.”
by her nickname “Mother” (as well as the presence of two children in the below photo), which positioned her as a maternal benefactor to the people to whom she selflessly “endeared herself.”

Much like with Altschuler, Philadelphia newspapers used Munro to water down the image of an authentically grassroots protest movement. Descriptions of Munro’s activism pointedly removed the agency of poor women, instead attributing the boycott to a benevolent middle-class reformer. Again, Munro represented an acceptable version of femininity which stood in stark contrast to the rioting of immigrant picketers. This was aided by her later appeals for civility, requests for government remediation, and public disapproval of lawbreaking.

Through racialized and xenophobic rhetoric, Philadelphia’s newspapers tapped into widespread World War I-era anxieties about immigration, international espionage, and radical female uprising. They discounted the rioting methods of South Philadelphia Jewish women, while presenting acceptable, nonthreatening alternative versions of the female protestor, which hoped to spread support for those peacefully working to ameliorate the food crisis. Despite newspapers (and later the city governments’) disapproval of rioting, it was that selfsame rioting which had inspired citywide action and outrage over food prices. Through community policing along gender, religious, and ethnic lines, immigrant Jewish women not only fought for food sovereignty, but also neighborhood sovereignty. They battled for their labor rights as domestic workers and asserted their right to govern their neighborhood as they wished.

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221 “‘Mother’ Munro Again Demonstrates Her Practical Philanthropy,” Evening Ledger, February 24, 1917.
222 “Mayor Puts Ban on Food Parade; Women Defiant”; “15,000 Food Army Mobilizes Today,” Public Ledger, Monday, March 5.
The City’s Response: 

Progressive-Era Politics and the Philadelphia Food Commission

In late February and March 1917, politicians at all levels of government mobilized in response to the food riots which had swept across U.S. cities. Through the proposal of various state legislation and the creation of a Philadelphia municipal Food Commission, they mobilized a Progressive-era apparatus which diverted responsibility for remedying the food crisis to the government, and away from the people. Using rhetorics of care, politicians sought to co-opt the movement while suppressing the bottom-up economic justice enacted by boycotting women and sugar strikers, which threatened existing systems of capital and governance. At the same time, politicians, businessmen, and reformers blamed the crisis on speculators and poor money management, diverting blame from the real culprit – the free market’s natural response to wartime economic pressures - and in some cases, toward the protesters themselves. In the end, none of the proposed changes came to fruition, food prices continued to rise, and the city government took no stance on the sugar strike.

In response to the food crisis, state and national legislation were flooded with proposed legislation. Even before rioting began in New York City, President Woodrow Wilson immediately requested that the Congress allocate $400,000 for a federal probe into food prices, while in Pennsylvania, state congressmen proposed various bills and resolutions at the state house in Harrisburg to act against the “food problem.” Most pressing of these was one presented by Republican representative Edwin R. Cox, but drafted by the Philadelphia Director

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of Public Safety, William H. Wilson, and approved by the mayor of Philadelphia, Thomas B. Smith. The Cox bill, presented on February 26, would allow the city of Philadelphia to purchase food directly from farmers and sell it at cost to consumers, thus eliminating the heightened prices caused by wholesalers and other middlemen.\textsuperscript{225} Two other competing resolutions, proposed by South Philadelphia Rep. Leopald C. Glass and Delaware County Rep. Frederick Beyer, allowed for the creation of a state commission which would investigate food prices and hold the power to prosecute speculators.\textsuperscript{226}

The food crisis came at a time when Republican city politics were in flux. Since the turn of the century, Philadelphia had been dominated by the Republican “Organization,” a famously corrupt political machine which maintained power through political favors, election tampering, and intimidation.\textsuperscript{227} Operating under ward bosses, the machine controlled 10,000 city offices, contracts, and jobs, which its leaders would distribute to political allies in exchange for favors or an “assessment,” a monetary donation to the party. Historically, there were strong ties between business and political interests, so much so that Republican politicians are commonly referred to as “contractor bosses” because their businesses would receive government contracts at low bids, losing the government millions of dollars. The Vare brothers, of South Philadelphia, owned a street-cleaning and trash-collection company, and Senator James P. “Sunny Jim” McNichol made a fortune through city contracts with his construction company.\textsuperscript{228}

\textsuperscript{225} “Bill Permits Phila. to Purchase Food for Sale at Cost,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, February 26, 1917.
\textsuperscript{228} Abernathy, “Progressivism, 1905-1919”; Warner, \textit{The Private City}; McCaffery, \textit{When Bosses Ruled Philadelphia}.
Almost as soon as the Republican machine ascended to power in the 1890s, factional disputes emerged between the state and city branches of the party. By 1911, this power struggle was waged by Senator Boies Penrose (the “big boss”), a Harvard graduate from a wealthy Philadelphia family, and the Vare brothers (William, George, and Edwin), three sons of a South Philadelphia truck farmer who controlled South Philadelphia’s electoral base. The brothers had grown up poor, and the youngest, William, even spent a stint peddling produce and stove oil in the streets of South Philadelphia, much like the pushcart vendors whom immigrant women boycotted in 1917.\footnote{Warner, \textit{The Private City}, 216.}

In 1911, tensions exploded into a fight for party control when William Vare declared his candidacy for mayor, opposing the Penrose candidate, the respected lawyer and financier George Earle Jr.\footnote{Abernathy, “Progressivism, 1905-1919,” 351–53.} In a serendipitous turn of events, Earle was directly connected to Philadelphia’s sugar refining industry, having been named the receiver of the Pennsylvania Sugar Refining Company (PSRC) in 1907. The company had been caught in dire financial straits due to the predatory loaning practices of the American Sugar Refining Company, and that year Earle won a highly publicized anti-trust suit against the ASRC.\footnote{Zerbe, “The American Sugar Refinery Company, 1887-1914,” 356.} He maintained control of the PSRC from that point onwards, and eventually was named president.\footnote{“Earle Protests Fining of Business,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, August 3, 1917.}

Though there is no evidence of Earle’s public participation in machine politics before or after his candidacy in the 1911, that he was chosen by Penrose as a mayoral candidate – and a political pawn, under the boss system – makes a compelling argument for a connection between the sugar refining industry and the Pennsylvania Republican party. This connection is indicative of typical politician-business alliances ties under the Organization and may explain the city’s response to
the sugar strike in 1917. Though Philadelphia’s mayor and various city officials were very vocal about remedying the food crisis, none commented on the strike which had inspired it. At the same time, the police presence around the refineries continued to grow and regulate strikers’ movement, protecting both the refiners’ capital (refineries and sugar) and their means of production (strikebreakers).

The presence of two competing candidates divided the Republican electorate in 1911, and a Democrat-endorsed third-party reform candidate named Rudolph Blankenburg won the mayoralty. Set on ridding Philadelphia politics of corruption, Blankenburg instituted several reforms, such as placing experts in charge of municipal departments, ending police assessments, and regulating government contracting.233 Realizing their mistake, Penrose and William Vare (now a senator) reached a tentative compromise and put forward Thomas B. Smith, the former postmaster general and a Vare ally, as their “harmony candidate.”234 Smith’s landslide election signified a political victory for the Vare branch, and the return of contractor-bossism. It was Smith and his cabinet who would spearhead the city’s response to the food crisis in February and March 1917.

During his mayoral term, Smith is perhaps most famous for his use of police to interfere in ward elections during the summer of 1917. In August 1917, a Penrose and a Vare candidate were waging war over an election in the fifth ward. Under the radar, Smith decided to send a group of policemen to help the Vare candidate intimidate his way into the position, ending in the beating of the opposition candidate and the death of a policeman. In the end, six policemen were found guilty of conspiracy, and Smith was indicted on charges of misdemeanor in office and impeding a free and fair election. Though Smith was eventually acquitted in 1919, according to historian

234 “Vare Men Look for Congressman to Run for Mayor,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 11, 1915.
Lloyd M. Abernathy, he could never escape from the “cloud of suspicion that hovered over the last two years of his administration.” This incident occurred after the boycotts of February 1917, but it provides useful context for how Smith (and the Vare administration as a whole) was willing to use police forces for party gain. It also demonstrates the general atmosphere of corruption under which Smith’s administration operated, and the larger forces at play (i.e., internal party conflict) which would shape the city’s response to the crisis. This is not to mention that Smith was also the president of a bail-bonding company, which means that he may have benefitted financially from increased arrests and high bails.

On March 3, ten days after rioting began in South Philadelphia, Smith announced the formation of a municipal Food Commission, which was tasked with investigating and ending high food prices in the city. The Food Commission was comprised of four committees, made up of over 20 people from different fields. Smith named William H. Wilson, the Director of Public Safety and a close member of his cabinet, to chair the commission and oversee the work of individual committees. Wilson was a devoted Vare adherent, a lawyer, and an ex-representative in the Pennsylvania state congress from the fifth ward. He was the mayor’s regular second in command, having substituted for him earlier in the month when Smith was on vacation in Florida, and written the Cox bill in his absence. He also supervised the police department and had even directed policemen during the riot at the Franklin sugar refinery on February 21. The fact that he had been appointed by the mayor to spearhead the city’s ameliorative response to the boycott and rioting - as head of the Food Commission and drafter of

\[\text{Abernathy, “Progressivism, 1905-1919,” 562.}\]
\[\text{“Smash Food Rings,” Says Mayor, as He Names Commission,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 4, 1917.}\]
\[\text{“Smith Announces His Cabinet,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, December 6, 1915.}\]
\[\text{“Mayor Smith Probe Aim of Resolution Launched in House,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 28, 1917.}\]
\[\text{“1 Killed, 14 Hurt When Hungry Mob Fights Policemen.”}\]
the Cox bill – points to the administration’s priorities: namely, law and order and the suppression of public dissent. More broadly, public policing in immigrant communities was a common characteristic of Progressive-era reform.240

This emphasis on law and order could be seen in public speeches by the mayor Smith and other Food Commission members. While Smith was generally respectful of the boycott as a protest tactic, he responded to the rioting with a heavy-handed hostility that showed his true disapproval of the movement. On March 5, in a statement to the Inquirer, Smith stated that “every case of malicious destruction of food ought to be criminally prosecuted… If it is necessary to teach some people drastic lessons in law and order, it shall be done.” He also threatened to send out more policemen to “arrest every violator of the law on sight” should the rioting continue.241 By centering his response around the “malicious destruction of food,” Smith justified his response around the protection of personal property. Ultimately, Smith refused the Women Protective League’s permit to march, stating that “some anarchists might take advantage of the occasion to cause trouble.”242 This rhetoric fomented fear and reframed the protests as products of international espionage and terrorism rather than a grassroots fight for human rights.

Other individuals appointed to the Food Commission reflected different concerns and alliances. Some members were drawn from the government, such as the Pennsylvania Commissioner of Agriculture, the Philadelphia Director of Supplies, and the presidents of the city’s Select and Common Councils. Others were experts in their various fields, such as Raymond T. Bye, an economics professor from the University of Pennsylvania, who was pulled in to investigate high prices and relative wage increases in Philadelphia between 1914 and 1917.

240 Welt, “Policing the Jewish Quarter,” 116.
241 “Rotan Joins Mayor in Food Price War,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 6, 1917.
242 “Smash Food Rings.”
In the Transportation of Foodstuffs committee, freight agents for three major railroads appeared, representing the same railroads which carried sugar out of Philadelphia. Several representatives from various charitable groups were also present, such as the Garden Club, the Philomusian Club, and the Society for Organizing Charities. These charities were products of a Progressive-era growth in social service agencies headed by middle-class social reformers, many of them women. Florence Sanville, of the Women’s Trade Union League, was placed on the Investigation committee, and the secretary of the Central Labor Union (CLU) was appointed to the Supplies and Distribution Committee. While the WTUL and the CLU were supportive of sugar strikers and outwardly critical of the city’s police force, they represented a tamer version of unionizing that was less threatening than the radical, Marxist Industrial Workers of the World.243 The IWW went unrepresented on the Commission, despite their close ties to the South Philadelphia boycott.244

Three representatives of the Women’s Protective League were included in the Commission. Joseph E. Cohen, a well-known Jewish socialist, was appointed to the Investigation committee, while Pauline Goldberg and Lena I. Jaffe were placed on the Committee of Publicity and Education as representatives of the “Housewives’ Protective League” (likely an alternate name for the WPL).245 There is little information about Jaffe, but 27-year-old Goldberg was one of the founding leaders of the Association to End the High Cost of Living, and was one of the women who had pioneered the boycott on the evening of February 21. The following day, she “marshalled” picketers along 7th street, and according to the Inquirer, was arrested on charges of

243 Sanville, “Food and Strike Violence as Seen by a Labor Expert.”
244 “Mayor Attacks Food Gamblers,” Public Ledger, March 7, 1917.
“inciting to riot” on three separate occasions over the following weeks. The last of these arrests occurred just two days before the mayor announced her name in the list of Food Commission members. Goldberg (and possibly Jaffe) was the only Jewish boycotter included on the Commission, and may have even participated in the rioting which the Mayor so vehemently condemned. She was perhaps the most radical of the Commission’s members, and perhaps one of the only ones who had personally felt the pressure of the rising food prices. By placing her on the Committee of Publicity and Education, Wilson had relegated her (and most of the other women on the Commission) far from the center of decision-making. Despite her lived experience as a community organizer, a South Philadelphia Jewish consumer, and a housewife, she had little power to enact change. Instead, the perspectives of other Food Commission members – charitable actors, railroad executives, union organizers, party politicians, and the Director of Public Safety – suggested the government cooptation of a grassroots, community movement.

The Food Commission and the Progressive Era

The Food Commission and the proposed legislation are examples of a seismic shift in U.S. governance that occurred between 1890-1920. While the goals and morals tying together Progressive-era reform were far-reaching, scholars agree that the Progressives “shared a generalized commitment to meliorist political action” – in other words, the understanding that government power should expand in order to manage the ills of the industrial age and the

246 “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.”
excesses of Gilded Age capitalism. During the period, a diverse set of actors rallied around this goal, demanding social, economic, and political reform. Governments at the national and local level passed bills to regulate the free market, expand civic rights, and regulate the working and living conditions of the poor. In Philadelphia, this could be seen in the growth of charities (both Jewish and otherwise) and boarding houses seeking to help the poor, orphaned, or immigrant masses. It could also be seen in a tentative political reform movement which had reached its zenith in 1911 with the mayoral election of Rudolph Blankenburg and dispersed after the end of his administration. The Pennsylvania Republican party itself was not immune to reformist ideals, and Boies Penrose increasingly turned toward the progressive after the election of Thomas B. Smith.

In responding to the food crisis, Mayor Smith used Progressive-era philosophies of government intervention and a rhetoric of care to deter continued protest. On March 3, Smith further explained reasoning for refusing the permit to march:

“The entire object of public demonstration must be to induce the government to act. Well, the government is already thoroughly aroused and needs no such demonstration. We are alive to the situation and will bring the powers of government to the relief of the people in the shortest possible time. All representatives of organizations which have any complaint or

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249 Moreno, “Progressive Movements.”
250 Friedman, Jewish Life in Philadelphia, 1830-1940; Insurance Maps Vol. 5; Diner, Hungering for America, 186.
suggestions to make to the Food Commission will be welcomed in presenting them. But the public procession is positively forbidden”

Here, Smith reoriented responsibility for the crisis to the government, taking power to redress the situation out of the hands of the protesters. While a faction of the protestors (largely middle-class reformers and the Socialist party) had indeed presented petitions and resolutions requesting government action, the government was not intended audience for original South Philadelphia rioters. Instead, rioters had taken the situation into their own hands through community policing and the destruction of food, enacting their own visions of economic justice at the point of purchase. In response, Smith employed the permit – a Progressive-era tool to control people’s movement in public spaces – to deny them the constitutional right to assemble and remove them from the very thing that formed the core of their protest: the physical and social fabric of the neighborhood. He then invited boycotters (but only those representing formal “organizations”) into the private, controlled, English-language environment of the council chambers, where they would have to comply with unknown rules of etiquette and were not guaranteed a receptive audience. As historian and Socialist Irving Howe wrote about New York’s immigrant Jews, “many were too frightened, most too inexperienced in American ways to go and fight City Hall.”

In fact, when several Kensington WPL representatives had gone to the mayor’s office to meet with him on February 28, they had been turned away by his secretary.

Smith’s attempt to bureaucratize the food response would have cut many poor immigrant protestors – especially women – out of the decision-making process.

252 “‘Smash Food Rings.’”
253 Irving Howe, World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made (Newburyport, MA: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1989), 152.
254 “Price Boycotters Fail to See Mayor,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 1, 1917.
Just as they claimed responsibility for remedying the crisis, politicians diverted blame toward outside powers such as food speculators. Newspapers, middle-class reformers, and even the Women’s Protective League echoed this sentiment, accusing “illegal combinations” and “food rings” of hoarding food to sell to European consumers at heightened prices.\(^\text{255}\) On February 25, 100 members of a “boycott committee,” which was chaired by a Jewish wholesale dry goods seller named Morris Polin, signed a resolution demanding that the government criminalize food speculation, blaming the crisis on “a combination of food pirates on one hand and official neglect and indifference on the other.”\(^\text{256}\) Both the Glass and Beyer bills were focused on starting a probe into food speculation and would grant the investigative committees the powers to prosecute any discovered speculators. On a local level, the Food Commission began to collaborate with the District Attorney Samuel P. Rotan to see about prosecuting speculators, and the President of the Select Council, James P. Lennon, stated in violent language that the Investigation Committee’s goal would be to “jump on food speculators with both feet” to make them “disgorge their hidings.”\(^\text{257}\) Ironically, Rotan, a Penrose ally, would later go on to prosecute Smith after the fifth ward battle that summer. As the crisis went on, speculators became a scapegoat for delays with the Cox bill when a member of the Investigation Committee raised concerns that “the sinister hand of illegal combinations” may have attempted to “dope the bill to death.”\(^\text{258}\)

Generally, there seems to have been little evidence that food speculation was nearly as prevalent as it was made out to be. On February 28, Pennsylvania Secretary of Agriculture

\(^{255}\) “‘Smash Food Rings’”; “Rotan Joins Mayor in Food Price War”; “Mrs. Derr Blames Food Speculators,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, March 7, 1917.


reported to the legislature that millions of pounds of food were being held in cold storage and that farmers were receiving less than one third of the retail price charged for their products. Similar reports scattered the pages of Philadelphia newspapers but were rarely contextualized with statistics on average cold storage numbers. Though the comparative retail and provider prices seemed to differ substantially, price bumping like this was a normal effect of capitalism. High food prices were caused by the economic system which organized the country: in response to a growing demand for food in Europe, food prices had naturally risen in the United States. Instead of voicing a systemic critique of capitalism’s response to wartime economic changes, actors at all levels instead diverted blame to individuals—speculators—to protect the economic system which benefited many of them and ran the country. This sensationalist rhetoric around speculators was like that used to foment fear about the IWW and “anarchists.”

Another way that various authorities reoriented blame for the crisis was through rhetoric of “economic consumption,” which accused poor immigrant women of spending their money unwisely. The most memorable instance of this was when the tristate Retail Grocer’s Association, which controlled 1,100 grocery stores in Philadelphia and vehemently opposed the Cox bill, blamed “high living” for high food prices. Refiners used a similar tactic when alleviating concerns over a sugar famine, arguing at various points that sugar prices had gone up because housewives had been riled up by rumors of the strike and started overbuying sugar. Rumors of poor money management were tinged with gendered and ethnic prejudice, and fundamentally misunderstood— or else ignored— the cost-cutting techniques that poor immigrant

260 “Rotan Joins Mayor in Food Price War.”
261 “Sugar Scarcity? Refiner Says No.”
women used daily to feed their families. They also ignored the protestors’ site-based knowledge of fair prices, which had motivated their boycott in the first place.

This response was part of a larger trend during the Progressive Era in which relief agencies and social workers had come to widely accept that malnutrition, particularly among immigrant groups, was caused by ignorance rather than poverty. In response, many reformers had embraced the field of home economics, which promoted an ideology which Harvey Levenstein has labeled “New Nutrition.” With New Nutrition, the diet was reordered according to the “nutritional value” of certain foods: based on a new scientific taxonomy of food, housekeepers were encouraged to spend their money the most productively by purchasing foods with the lowest prices and the highest comparative nutritional values. While perhaps practical on the surface, New Nutrition failed to recognize the social and cultural importance of food, particularly in immigrant and Jewish communities. For example, one Philadelphia social worker reported to the Food Commission that when she had encouraged boycotting women to buy rice instead of potatoes, they had “laughed at the idea,” calling rice “Chinese food.” Not only were women already extremely careful with their expenditures, but a strong commitment to their ethnic foodways also meant that rhetorics of economic consumption would not be effective in changing their diet. Furthermore, nutritionists frequently used this scientific reasoning to disparage immigrant foodways as unhealthy.

In Philadelphia, New Nutrition was an active component in the public and private sector’s response to the food riots. The Food Commission had one member who was a food economist, and one of the goals of the Investigation Committee was to teach people about

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263 Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 99.
265 Diner, *Hungering for America*, 214; Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table*, 104.
“comparative food values and prices in such a manner that they can intelligently turn from an article for which they are being squeezed to something of equal nutritive value which is plentiful and cheaper.”266 Other charitable organizations responded similarly: one group called the Life Extension Institute assembled a “Diet Squad” of eight members in North Philadelphia who they tried to feed on only 25 cents a day.267 The endeavor garnered a disproportionate amount of attention in local newspapers, and spread the doctrine of New Nutrition by repeatedly emphasizing its “scientific” merits.268 Meanwhile, the Retail Grocers’ Association invited Philadelphia housewives to a “Living Cost Solution” conference during the first two days of their annual food fair, where food economists would “tell housewives how they can cut down the high cost of living without rioting,” in presentations translated into Yiddish, Italian, and Polish. In one demonstration, a food economist and an “untutored housewife” were sent to the market with $5, and then compared their purchases upon their return in terms of nutritional value and relative cost.269 At the food fair, the Retail Grocers’ Association explicitly mobilized “education” as a tool for control, to prevent rioting and suppress protest. It blamed the crisis on boycotters themselves and positioned itself as a benevolent educator, while benefiting financially from their peaceful return to the marketplace. By teaching New Nutrition, these organizations publicly delegitimized housewives’ outrage over high food prices by proving that living cheaply was not only possible, but easy.

Despite big claims made by the Smith administration, nothing came of the government action. Ultimately, the most the Food Commission did was hear the testimony of local experts

266 “Rotan to Examine Data Discovered by Food Probers,” The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 11, 1917.
267 Lisetta Neukom, “Diet Squad Tries Two-Bit Menus,” Evening Ledger, March 5, 1917.
and meet with retailers and farmers in anticipation of the passage of the Cox bill.\textsuperscript{270} That summer, it also published a study of the comparable average food prices and wage increases in Philadelphia between 1914 and 1917.\textsuperscript{271} In turn, President Wilson’s $400,000 appropriation for a food investigation was rejected, and the Cox, Glass, and Beyer legislations all languished within the halls of the state senate.\textsuperscript{272} The Food Commission never managed to purchase and sell food for cheap to residents, and though food prices dipped briefly due to the boycott, they skyrocketed again in mid-March, until the establishment of the U.S. Food Administration that summer.\textsuperscript{273} In spite of this government failure, South Philadelphia voters – black, immigrant, and poor – stayed loyal to the Vare Republicans until the 1930s.\textsuperscript{274} Nominally, the Smith administration sought to help the immigrant boycotters, but in practice, its use of police forces, as well as rhetorics of care, Progressive-era government intervention, and economic consumption allowed it to regain control over the neighborhood and suppress the bottom-up protest movement.

\textsuperscript{270} “Lennon Promises Food Prosecutions”; “Farmers Opposed to Direct Sales,” \textit{The Philadelphia Inquirer}, July 12, 1917; “Rotan Joins Mayor in Food Price War.”

\textsuperscript{271} Bye and Reitell, “Food Prices vs. Wage Increases.”


\textsuperscript{273} Bye and Reitell, “Food Prices vs. Wage Increases,” 238.

\textsuperscript{274} McCaffery, \textit{When Bosses Ruled Philadelphia}, xxi.
**Conclusion**

In the 1917 Philadelphia sugar strike and food boycott, protestors fought for radical control over their neighborhood, guided by a broad theory of labor which linked all parts of life. South Philadelphia sugar strikers and Jewish women alike fought for labor rights in a battle for control over the neighborhood. They mobilized ethnic, religious, and gendered social networks to form a neighborhood-wide coalition of friends, family, and union members. Immigrant sugar workers, fighting for a living wage, navigated global wartime changes on a highly localized scale, clashing with police and refiners, who all had a vested interest in maintaining the economic status quo. Poor Jewish women, fighting for their domestic labor rights and affordable food, asserted their right to a neighborhood-based economic and policing system which was distinct both from Philadelphia’s city governance and the global free-market economy. Using a deeply place-based understanding of their neighborhood, as well as ethnic social networks, protestors waged guerrilla warfare on policemen, mobilizing the power of their bodies in a radical form of community solidarity.

On August 10, 1917, just five months after workers first walked out of Philadelphia’s Franklin sugar refinery, the U.S. Congress passed the Lever Food and Fuel Control Act, which authorized the creation of the federal Food Administration (USFA), headed by Herbert Hoover. Insisting that the equilibrium of supply and demand had been irreparably disrupted by the pressures of the wartime economy, the USFA did what the Philadelphia Food Commission could not: it took control of the American food supply, regulating the prices, distribution, and exportation of “key commodities,” including wheat, meat, fats, and sugar. April Merleaux has argued that the USFA’s approach was heavily influenced by the food riots of February 1917.
Fearing that shortages and enforced rationing would lead to more uprisings within ethnic urban communities, the USFA sought to ensure that there was enough food at reasonable prices for all.\(^{275}\) The USFA’s successfully brought wartime food prices down in Philadelphia, though they never again dropped to prewar levels.\(^{276}\)

Simultaneously the USFA recruited American and immigrant housewives alike as volunteers into a “food army” for conservation. In Philadelphia, the Food Commission, now working under the USFA, distributed 600,000 pledge cards to every woman older than 15 in the city, sending translators to explain the cards to those in the “foreign quarters.”\(^{277}\) Using slogans like “Food Will Win the War” and “Food is Ammunition,” USFA propaganda campaigns centered the success of the Allies around consumers’ willingness to conserve food.\(^{278}\) Sugar was a central commodity they sought to protect, and it was marketed as “fuel food” needed to support Allied troops and starving Belgian children. They recentered the importance of food around military success, rather than the communal nourishment that Philadelphia boycotters had been fighting for. Through this propaganda, self-restraint and economic consumption became fundamental patriotic qualities.\(^{279}\) Surprisingly, despite propaganda and the organization of millions of American women into a voluntary conservation army, Americans actually increased their consumption of restricted foods during the war, perhaps due to nationally rising wartime wages.\(^{280}\)

\(^{275}\) Merleaux, _Sugar and Civilization_, 81.


\(^{277}\) “Phila. Housewives Welcome Hoover’s Food Saving Cards,” _The Philadelphia Inquirer_, July 9, 1917.

\(^{278}\) Helen Zoe Veit, “‘We Were a Soft People’: Asceticism, Self-Discipline and American Food Conservation in the First World War,” _Food, Culture & Society_ 10, no. 2 (July 1, 2007): 167–90; John E Sheridan and U.S. Food Administration, _Food Is Ammunition_, c 1918, Lithograph on paper, mounted on strawboard and varnished, 534mm x 738mm x 2mm, c 1918, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.


\(^{280}\) Nordstrom, “‘And Serve the Cause of Freedom,’” 43.
Meanwhile, the IWW underwent major changes during the war era. In September 1917, the U.S. Department of Justice, which had come to Philadelphia in February 1917 to investigate Wobblies’ involvement in the food riots, raided 64 IWW halls and offices across the country, including Local 8’s hall in South Philadelphia. Federal agents arrested six Philadelphia Wobblies on charges of treason and sedition, including Walter Nef and Edwin Doree, who had both helped organize the sugar strike. Though those arrested were accused of violating the Espionage Act of 1917 and interfering with the Selective Service Act, scholars generally agree that the goal of the crackdown was, put simply, to “crush the IWW” for promoting radical socialist and anti-war ideals.  

While damaged, Local 8 would survive the war and continued to control labor activity among longshoremen on the docks in and around Philadelphia’s refineries. The Sugar Refinery Workers Industrial Union #496, however, appears to have faded out of existence. Dangerous working conditions persisted in refineries, and even at an increased wage rate of 27 cents per hour, sugar workers were being paid less than half of the longshoremen who had successfully organized across racial lines.

Regarding the boycotters, there is little evidence showing what happened to them. No sources again mention central actors like Pauline Goldberg and Florence Schalde, and the Women’s Protective League disappeared from the record after 1918. During the war, however, a militant spirit remained among the men and women of South Philadelphia, who took to the streets again the following winter, in response to wartime coal shortages. Women maintained their ethnic, religious, and cultural bonds in private homes, religious spaces, and on shopfloors.

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Forced by circumstance, they returned to the stores which they had boycotted, though they likely shifted their purchasing habits in memory of the protest. After World War I, many Jews, having started to gain economic freedom, began to move out of the neighborhood, to nicer homes in West Philadelphia and Strawberry Mansion. There, they built synagogues and again formed community, but this time lacking the urgency of poverty to inspire radical action.\(^{286}\)\(^{287}\)

In the century since the strike and boycott, we have seen the United States come to address many of the concerns of South Philadelphia’s immigrant protestors. While food prices have continued to inflate nationally, government intervention which found its roots in the Progressive Era has also grown to mitigate some of the effects of poverty and malnutrition, with programs such as food stamps and public-school lunch programs. Though the memory of the Old World and the prevalence of street markets faded as the 20\(^{th}\) century went on, for those who remained in South Philadelphia, community ties lasted in synagogues and community centers, and Yiddish continues to be spoken. South Philadelphia sugar strikers and food boycotters played an important role in this continued growth. We can learn much from them, as community members, organizers, and neighborhood stewards.


Primary


*Evening Ledger.* “Come and Hear Mr. Hugh F. Munro.” February 14, 1920.


*Evening Ledger.* “‘Mother’ Munro Again Demonstrates Her Practical Philanthropy.” February 24, 1917.


*Evening Ledger.* “Samp, or Big Hominy, Blow to Living Cost.” February 24, 1917.


———. “Diet Squad Tries Two-Bit Menus.” *Evening Ledger*, March 5, 1917.


*Public Ledger.* “15,000 Food Army Mobilizes Today.” Monday, March 5.


*Public Ledger.* “16 Men and Women Held in Downtown Food Riot.” February 23, 1917.


*Public Ledger.* “Mayor Attacks Food Gamblers.” March 7, 1917.

*Public Ledger.* “Mayor Puts Ban on Food Parade; Women Defiant.” March 4, 1917.


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The Philadelphia Inquirer. “Probe Bill Rushed to Senate; May Be Club Over Mayor.” January 24, 1917.
The Philadelphia Inquirer. “‘Smash Food Rings,’ Says Mayor, as He Names Commission.” March 4, 1917.
The Philadelphia Inquirer. “Strikers Tighten Hold on Shipping.” May 18, 1913.
The Philadelphia Inquirer. “Suffering Crowds Storm Coal Yards; Railroads Helpless.” January 4, 1918.
The Philadelphia Inquirer. “Vare Men Look for Congressman to Run for Mayor.” August 11, 1915.


Secondary


