



Historical Union Records Inventory Report

AFSCME Local 1939

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

4 Linear Feet in two file drawers

ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

AFSCME Local 1939 was first chartered on February 1st, 1968. The organizing effort had begun in the mid -1960s. Its prime movers were Betty Phillips, Cleo Berkun, and Betty Grossberg, employees of Family Services in New Haven. In addition to the obvious problem that the staff was underpaid, one of their major concerns, explains Dr. Phillips, was that “the Board took unilateral action” on issues dealing with clients, because “there was no mechanism for consulting the staff.” They felt that staff would have greater strength if they were in “in a bona fide union.”

“The exciting thing about it was that there were people who became educated about the value of the union so that when the vote came through it was really strong,” recalls Dr. Phillips. They began interviewing possible unions to find one that would fit their needs, and decided on AFSCME because they were impressed by the organizer who met with them. The vote was 18-2 among professional and clerical staff in favor of the union. Betty Phillips served as President until 1968, when she left to go to the School of Public Health. She was succeeded by Cleo Berkun. Irm Wessel joined the union when she became a part time employee in the mid 1970s, and was president from the late 1970s until the demise of Family Counseling on June 14th of 2002—an event which also meant the end of Local 1939.

As of January 2002, Family Counseling Services had nine union and seven non-union employees. Although the salaries of the non-union employees were negotiated separately, all other issues—such as benefits, vacation time, and the like—were negotiated by the union, for all employees. In 1999, United Way refused to continue funding the Agency due to fiscal mismanagement, thus beginning the process which led to its recent closing. The Local struggled for (and won) a three month severance agreement.

THE RECORDS

The records are held in one filing cabinet at the Greater New Haven Labor History Association archives, where a completed finding aid is available in hard copy. They include: financial reports; membership records; organizing materials dating back to the Local’s inception in 1967; personal notes about union meetings as well as official minutes; negotiations; arbitrations; copies of contracts; member rosters and records; and correspondence of all types. The primary record keepers of the Local were its President,

Irm Wessel, and its Treasurer, Arlene Murphy. The records richly document the history of a small, private union local struggling to survive in an unstable environment. They have enduring historical value for documenting aspects of New Haven's corporate, social, and labor history.