

# MORE THAN WAGES

## TWIN CITIES THEATER WORKERS' CONTROL STRUGGLES

**D**uring and immediately after World War I, Minnesota workers in a variety of industries joined laborers across the country in one of the largest strike waves in American history. The ranks of striking Minnesotans included miners, telephone operators, lumberjacks, stagehands, musicians, street-railway employees, meatpackers, milk drivers, and creamery workers. These men and women collectively attempted to gain some control over their working conditions, wage scales, and hours per week of paid labor. But employers won key victories in these struggles, victories that set the stage for the business-labor relations of the

ROBERT SCHULTZ



*The Palace, for decades one of Minneapolis's popular Hennepin Avenue theaters, 1938*



*Stagehands at the Shubert Theater, Minneapolis, 1920s*

1920s, particularly in Minneapolis and St. Paul. During this decade, Twin Cities employers worked through a powerful businessmen's group, the Citizens' Alliance, to solidify their control of industry and labor relations.

These organized employers influenced judges and politicians who worked for their interests within the legal and political systems. The businessmen also developed formal alliances with the Minnesota National Guard to ensure state protection for replacement workers during strike situations. In addition to these alliances, employers hired a network of private industrial spies to gather intelligence on local labor leaders and rank-and-file workers sympathetic to the labor movement. The resulting employer hegemony over industry and labor relations remained entrenched until strikes by Minneapolis truck drivers in 1934 fostered a new wave of union activity.<sup>1</sup>

Minnesota workers during this era also confronted an increasingly ineffectual national union, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), in which the interests of national leaders were often at odds with those of local officials and union members. National leaders advocat-

ed a policy of business unionism that opposed the intense militance that laborers and local officials demonstrated during the postwar strike wave and sporadically throughout the 1920s. Faced with employers' organized assault on the labor movement, AFL leaders settled into a defensive position to preserve the union and dismissed local officials more responsive to rank-and-file demands.<sup>2</sup>

Despite employers' organized power in the 1920s, Minnesota workers continued to struggle for some control over labor relations and working conditions. They fought court injunctions that prohibited them from

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<sup>1</sup> William Millikan, "Maintaining 'Law and Order': The Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance in the 1920s," *Minnesota History* 51 (Summer 1989): 219–33; Lois Quam and Peter J. Rachleff, "Keeping Minneapolis an Open-Shop Town: The Citizens' Alliance in the 1930s," *Minnesota History* 50 (Fall 1986): 105–17; Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920–1933* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1960); Robert Schultz, "Beyond the Fall: Class Conflict and Social, Cultural and Political Change, 1916–1935" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1991); Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Rebellion* (New York: Monad Press, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the structural reasons for union officials' alliances with management, see Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working-Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 214–63.

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picketing and otherwise collectively demonstrating against employers' control of wages, hours, working conditions, and hiring practices. They engaged in publicity campaigns to gain public support for their strike activities and to counter antiunion campaigns orchestrated by the Citizens' Alliance. And when employers adopted new technologies that cut costs and increased profits by reducing the number of jobs, workers often insisted on reduced hours for all in order to maintain full employment. Two strikes at the end of the 1920s demonstrate workers' opposition and the nature of business-labor relations during these years: In 1927 and again in 1930, theatrical stagehands, musicians, and motion-picture operators united against their employers in Minneapolis and St. Paul.<sup>3</sup>

The growth of the motion-picture industry in the 1920s fostered alliances between seemingly diverse theatrical employees, particularly stagehands and motion-picture operators. Stage theaters—burlesque, vaudeville, musical, comedy, and drama—required stagehands to build sets, shift scenes, operate lighting, drop curtains, and do all other behind-the-scenes labor, including carrying actors' trunks in and out of theaters when a production began and when the final curtain dropped on the last show. At first, motion pictures constituted a competitive threat to live theater and, consequently, to stagehands. As two entertainment historians have noted, "By 1909 movies had become a first-class headache to veteran branches of show business."<sup>4</sup>

Vaudeville was big business in the first decades of the twentieth century, for, like movies would be, it was theater for everyone, not just the cultural elite. Vaudeville tycoons amassed fortunes as Americans of various ethnic backgrounds and social positions gathered in front of elaborate, glittering stages to watch a

number of different acts. A typical show provided comedy and thrills, including "freaks" such as hermaphrodites, female exotic dancers, African-American dancers and singers, young women clad in one-piece bathing suits diving into small tanks of water, and comedians barking out one-liners such as "You can drive a horse to drink but a pencil must be lead." Stagehands provided the essential labor needed to set up these acts, to make smooth transitions from one to the next, and to ensure that actors had all of the necessary props. The growth of the motion-picture industry especially threatened vaudeville stagehands' jobs.<sup>5</sup>

But the unique and flexible nature of vaudeville, which created an entertainment mosaic rather than a rigid cultural form, allowed producers to introduce movies into their shows. The dominant trend of the 1920s was to open with a short film and then move into the standard array of stage acts. One of the first times this occurred was in 1919 at New York's Capitol Theatre, where the show opened with a Douglas Fairbanks film, *His Majesty the American*.<sup>6</sup>

Incorporating films into productions also meant introducing motion-picture operators into vaudeville theaters. In a sense, the operators became additional stagehands. Although vaudeville eventually died as the motion-picture industry grew during the 1920s, throughout the decade the two types of entertainment mixed—and so did the two types of workers. Musicians also interacted with stagehands and operators, for they played in movie as well as stage theaters while silent films remained the norm.<sup>7</sup>

Most Twin Cities movie theaters at this time were no longer independently owned and operated but were links in the growing chains spreading across the country. A decreasing number of owners controlled an increasing number of movie theaters in the Twin Cities and elsewhere. The firm of Finkelstein and Ruben (F&R), for example, had been a major force in local theater since the early days of vaudeville. From the mid-1920s this chain was the main target for corporations seeking acquisitions in the Twin Cities. The successful contender was the Publix Theaters through its parent, Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation, which acquired the Finkelstein and Ruben chain in 1929. Preliminary to this big event was an agreement between F&R and Publix, forged in 1927 and 1928. In 1927 Finkelstein and Ruben had learned that the Publix chain, headquartered in New York, planned to build the Minnesota, a large, new theater in Minneapolis. The newcomer threatened to cut into Finkelstein and Ruben ticket sales, so the latter company negotiated a merger in which each partner controlled 50 percent of the stock in eleven of F&R's thirty-some Twin Cities theaters. In addition to the new Minnesota, these were the State, Garrick, Strand, and Lyric in Minneapolis and the Capitol, Tower, Astor, Strand, Garrick, and Princess in

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of control struggles, see David Montgomery, "The 'New Unionism' and the Transformation of Workers' Consciousness in America, 1909–22," *Journal of Social History* 7 (Summer 1974): 509–29.

<sup>4</sup> Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz: from Vaude to Video* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Green and Laurie, *Show Biz*, 4–14, 268–75 (for quotation, see p. 5).

<sup>6</sup> Green and Laurie, *Show Biz*, 269; Douglas Gomery, "The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain-Store Strategy," in *The American Movie Industry: The Business of Motion Pictures*, ed. Gorham Kindem (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 109.

<sup>7</sup> The major division between theater workers was not between stagehands and operators or musicians but between stagehands and actors. For example, when actors did not tip them, stagehands often retaliated by creating problems with props and sets and by marking actors' trunks with secret codes to warn stagehands elsewhere; Green and Laurie, *Show Biz*, 12.

St. Paul. All of this activity created a near monopoly in the local motion-picture theater industry. Other Twin Cities movie houses belonged to the Pantages Theatre Circuit, headquartered in Seattle, and the Orpheum chain from Chicago.<sup>8</sup>

The Publix chain grew in the 1920s to dominate the industry in Minnesota and the Midwest, in most of the South, and throughout New England. By the end of the decade more than 2 million Americans attended Publix theaters on a daily basis as the chain increased its movie houses to 1,200. This growth occurred predominantly through mergers rather than new construction; Publix simply adopted the business strategies of the grocery, variety, drug, auto, and other chain stores of the period. Under the direction of Samuel Katz, the corporation stratified into a hierarchy that included local, district, divisional, and regional managers, all of whom fell under the central authority of Katz and other executives in New York.<sup>9</sup>

The consolidation of ownership in the motion-picture industry fostered solidarity among diverse groups of workers. The policies of a single employer affected an increased number of employees who then had shared grievances and demands. Technological change also stimulated solidarity. Before "talkies" developed, musicians played in motion-picture as well as stage theaters. The merger of audio and visual in the medium of film threatened musicians' jobs in movie houses. At the same time, the newer movie projectors were easier to use, and theater owners needed fewer motion-picture operators. The films were highly flammable, however, and older projectors required two operators to ensure against fires. While one worker could safely operate the new projectors, theater owners often tried to get by with just one man on the old machines as well. Consequently, safety became a concern for workers during this period. In all, technological developments portended ill for musicians and motion-picture operators' jobs just as owners looked forward to increased profits from reduced labor costs.<sup>10</sup>

The various theatrical craft workers, while laboring seven days a week, up to fourteen hours a day, also faced threats to their job security in these years. To try to gain some control, craft unions nationwide formed councils in the 1920s. The Minneapolis Allied Theatrical Crafts Council, founded in 1927, included motion-picture operators, musicians, stagehands, and bill posters. "The purpose of the council," the *Minneapolis Labor Review* noted, "is to make possible joint consideration of all problems affecting the theatrical crafts."<sup>11</sup>

The conditions that united the various types of Minnesota theater workers in the 1920s were industry wide rather than craft specific and encouraged united actions in cities throughout the country. Minneapolis musicians struck in 1920, and theater workers in the city

picketed the Wonderland Theatre in 1922 before the Minnesota Supreme Court upheld a lower court's injunction against picketing. In the court's opinion, the pickets engaged in an unfair business practice that negatively affected ticket sales. Organized theater employees threatened a national strike in 1926. This one, too, originated with musicians, who, according to the *Minneapolis Journal*, staged a "mammoth downtown parade" in San Francisco that included musicians, stagehands, chorus girls, and others. When San Francisco theater owners asked the chief of police to stop the parade, he replied that the employees were taxpayers and citizens and therefore had the right to demonstrate. Twin Cities theater workers prepared for a sympathy strike, but the San Francisco unions negotiated a settlement. Chicago motion-picture operators struck in early September 1927 but soon settled. Twin Cities theater owners were more intransigent than their Chicago counterparts. When later that month Minneapolis and St. Paul theater workers followed the Chicago motion-picture operators' lead, their employers prepared to break the various theatrical craft unions.<sup>12</sup>

**A**t midnight on September 17, 1927, stagehands in fourteen Twin Cities theaters walked off their jobs. The strike grew rapidly to involve nearly six hundred employees, as managers of an additional thirty-three theaters united and locked out union workers. The

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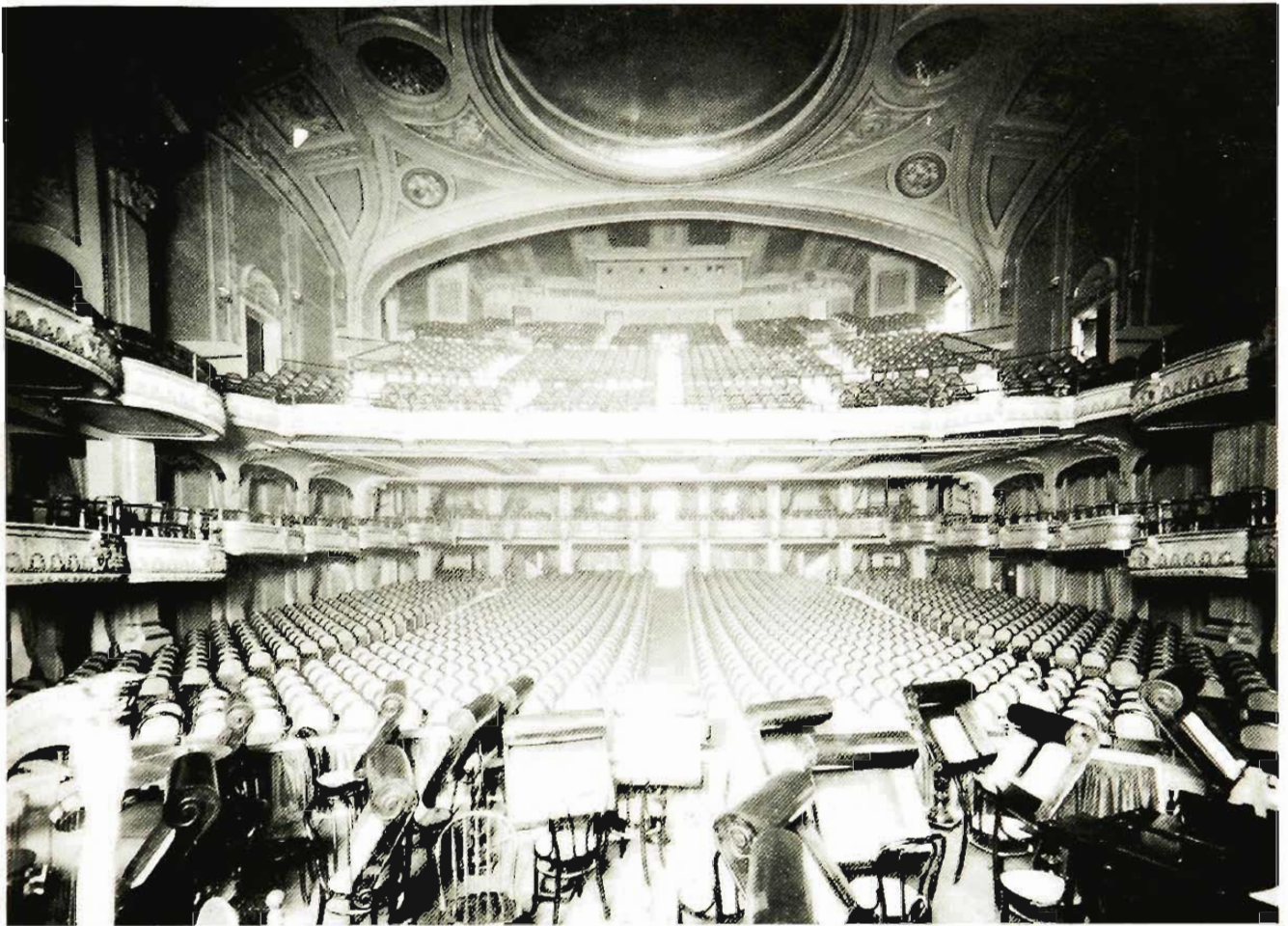
<sup>8</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 21, 1927, p. 9, 10; *Minneapolis Journal*, Feb. 27, 1928, p. 3; Robert Stanley, *The Celluloid Empire: A History of the American Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Hastings House, 1978), 32; Ephraim Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1979), 893; *Exhibitors Herald-World* 96 (July 20, 1929): 47. The reported number of F&R theaters varied widely. For a list of thirty-three, see *Film Yearbook*, 1926, p. 611. As many as a dozen more were listed in the yearbooks for subsequent years.

<sup>9</sup> Gomery, "The Movies Become Big Business," 9–11, 104–16; Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1977), 455–76.

<sup>10</sup> James Monaco, *How to Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History, and Theory of Film and Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 56; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 5, 1926, p. 2; clippings, Citizens' Alliance Records, microfilm roll 20, frame 261. Minnesota Historical Society: *Minnesota Union Advocate* (St. Paul), Aug. 14, 1930, p. 1; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 27, 1927, p. 1. References to the Citizens' Alliance Records, hereafter, will cite R[oll] and F[frame] numbers.

<sup>11</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Jan. 14, 1927, p. 1, Sept. 23, 1927, p. 1, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, July 30, 1920, p. 10, Sept. 3, p. 1, Sept. 4, p. 8, Sept. 5, p. 2—all 1926; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Feb. 3, 1922, p. 1; *Daily Worker* (Chicago), Sept. 2, 5, 1927, both p. 5.



*Lavish interior of the Capitol Theater, soon to be renamed the Paramount, St. Paul, 1920s*

strikers included carpenters, scene shifters, electricians, and all others involved with stage construction and operation at burlesque, vaudeville, motion-picture, and other theaters in the Twin Cities. These members of the International Alliance of Theatre Stage Employees struck after negotiations with organized employers in the Northwest Theatre Owners Association failed to produce a new contract. The union demanded a two-dollar wage increase for workers who cleared stages between performances. These employees currently earned \$1.75 for each performance. Wages were not the central issue, however, and the stagehands dropped the demand during the course of the strike. The strike was actually a struggle over who—labor or management—would determine the length of the work week, the annual term of employment during the thirty-week theater season, and the reasons for which an employee

could be terminated. In short, union theater employees tried to increase their social and economic security by gaining some control over their working conditions and labor relations.<sup>13</sup>

The president of the Northwest Theater Owners Association, W. A. Steffes, made it clear that owners viewed the strike as a struggle for control. Referring to the union stagehands, Steffes remarked, "They are also demanding that the right of discharge be placed in their hands and, in addition, they want to cut the number of performances per week to 14 in theaters which are now operating on a schedule of 21 performances a week." The business manager of the stagehands' local, William Dunn, also emphasized control: "We will fight for this day off if it costs a million dollars." Concerning the other issues, Dunn continued, "Any man who is discharged, with the exception of those found incompetent or drunkards, we believe is entitled to appeal his case to the union executive board. We also ask that a guarantee of 30 weeks' employment be given the heads of the various departments, the property men, assistant property men, the carpenters and the electricians."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 21, 1927, p. 9, 10; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 18, 1927, p. 1, 6; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 23, 1927, p. 1, 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 18, 1927, p. 1, 6.

The owners kept their theaters open by using managers, assistant managers, ushers, and other nonunion employees in place of the stagehands. Motion-picture operators and musicians threatened to go out on sympathy strikes if theater owners hired scabs. That threat soon became a reality. The operators joined the stagehands on September 20—three days after the strike began—adding an additional eighty union workers to the ranks of the strikers. The secretary of the Minneapolis Musicians Association, Fred W. Bimbach, awaited the approval of his international union before giving the okay to join the operators' sympathy strike. With the approval of the president of the American Federation of Musicians on September 23, the strikers' ranks swelled to well over five hundred. More than three hundred union musicians were still under contract and, according to Bimbach, "have had no difficulty with the theater owners in Minneapolis." But they protested the attempt to break the stagehands' union by using scab labor—high-school and University of Minnesota students.<sup>15</sup>

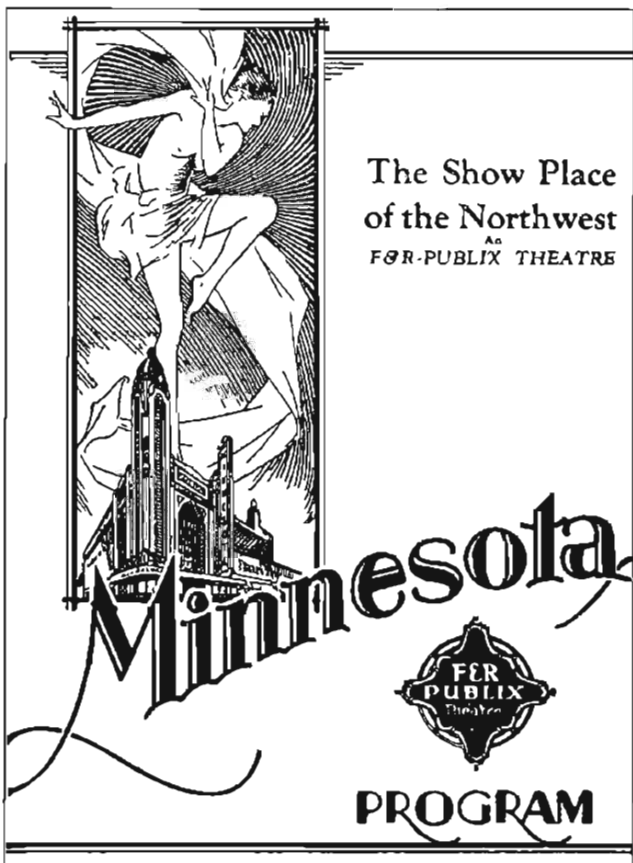
When the motion-picture operators joined the stagehands, theater owners recruited other operators

from small towns outside of the metropolitan area. After the musicians demonstrated their solidarity, owners imported five complete orchestras from Chicago. They realized it might be difficult to recruit in local neighborhoods, and they used the out-of-state musicians in Twin Cities burlesque and motion-picture theaters and vaudeville and musical-comedy houses.<sup>16</sup>

All but eight independent Twin Cities theaters became involved in the strike, which within a week included such popular houses as the Gayety, Metropolitan, Palace, Hennepin-Orpheum, Pantages, Logan, Seventh Street, and all houses in the Finkelstein and Ruben-Publix chain. The eight independents employed only union actors, musicians, and stagehands. Of these the Glenwood, Homewood, and Liberty theaters "assumed a neutral stand," closing their doors for the duration of the strike. Five others—the Dewey, Cozy, Miles Standish, Stockholm, and Elite—refused to join the lockout and continued to operate with union workers. They thus allied with labor against the chains, for their market share had dwindled as monopoly practices increasingly dominated the local theater industry. *Variety*, the trade magazine, referred to three of these theaters as "pretentious independent neighborhood houses in strong labor sections."<sup>17</sup>

Twin Cities theater owners had been preparing for a number of years to break the craft unions. As *Variety* noted in 1927, "They very evidently are determined that the Twin Cities shall show the way for the rest of the country." The Citizens' Alliance provided the owners with a well-financed and well-structured organization from which to wage their campaign. For years this group had kept records on key figures in the Twin Cities labor movement, including members of Motion Picture Operators' Union Local No. 219. These records demonstrated sophisticated organization and activities that included espionage. They usually contained information on the union member's place of residence, place of employment, and activities. For example, one file noted: "Horace Evans: This party is now president of the Motion Picture Operator's Local #219, is at present employed as operator of the projecting machine at the Lyric Theater, 711 Hennepin Avenue and is recognized as one of the inside ring that runs this particular union. It is reported that he resides at the Elgin hotel." Other cases delved into the histories of some union members' labor activities, noting, for instance, that L. G. "Curly" Cowan had been the business agent for Local 219 when

*Undated program from the Minnesota Theatre, Minneapolis, a glittering link in the Finkelstein and Ruben-Publix chain*



<sup>15</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 23, 1927, p. 1, 2; *Variety*, Sept. 21, 1927, p. 9, 10, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 19, p. 13, Sept. 20, p. 9, Sept. 21, p. 15, Sept. 22, p. 14, Sept. 25, p. 10 (quotation)—all 1927.

<sup>16</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12.

<sup>17</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 23, 1927, p. 1, 2; *Variety*, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12.

the union began its struggle with the Wonderland Theatre in 1916.<sup>18</sup>

Both the employers and the theater workers used various strategies to elicit public support for their positions in 1927. Strikers immediately began to picket in front of the businesses of members of the Northwest Theater Owners Association; they forced three houses to close during the first days of the strike. Pickets carried banners that stated, "Theatrical stage employees ask one day's rest in seven." Workers also covered theater posters with union signs and passed out flyers that described what became their central demand: a six-day work week with no reduction in pay. One stagehand, Germain Quinn, emphasized this issue in an address to the Central Labor Union (CLU) in Minneapolis: "We did originally ask for other improvements in conditions but withdrew them and asked only for one day rest in seven." The CLU voted unanimously to back the striking workers after Quinn pleaded, "We ask you to support us in our demand. All we ask is what is given horses and cattle."<sup>19</sup>

For their part, theater owners posted flyers in lobbies and in box-office windows enjoining, "Please Know the Facts." They took advantage of their captive audiences by projecting their views of the strike on movie screens before the shows began. Organized owners also bought newspaper ads denouncing union workers. The daily papers, moreover, demonstrated their alliance with the owners by granting them numerous interviews, which amounted to free newspaper space. The *Minneapolis Journal* sided with the theater owners and even argued their case on the editorial page, asserting that all theatrical employees received "fat pay." The paper further editorialized that granting the strikers' demands would keep residents from going to the movies: "By forcing higher admission schedules, they could get the Minneapolis public out of the habit of going to shows, which achievement would be the height of folly on the part of individuals whose livelihood depends on this very show-going habit of the public. The paper did not ask whether the additional costs could come out of company profits instead of increased ticket prices."<sup>20</sup>

Theater workers could not utilize the movie screens, but they did take advantage of another modern medium—radio. Monday through Friday on Minneapolis sta-

<sup>18</sup> Untitled report on labor activists, May 20, 1926, R20, F256, Citizens' Alliance Records; *Variety*, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12.

<sup>19</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 23, 1927, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12; *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 22, p. 14, 15, Sept. 23, p. 28, Sept. 24, p. 2, Sept. 27, p. 16 (quotation)—all 1927.

<sup>21</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Oct. 21, 1927, p. 1; *Variety*, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12.

## PLEASE KNOW THE FACTS!

THAT THE STAGE EMPLOYEES  
WALKED OUT OF THE THEATRES  
OF THEIR OWN ACCORD

In sympathy with them, the Motion Picture Operators went out. The Operators took this action after they had arrived at a satisfactory agreement as to their wages and working conditions, and a contract between all parties had been signed on September 3d, 1927.

The Stage Employees Demand—

1. Seven days' pay for six days' work.
2. The right to say who shall work in each theatre, regardless of owner's wishes.
3. That none be discharged without consent of the union.
4. In two theatres, they insist on using ten men where six have always been employed, conditions and policies the same.
5. In the legitimate theatres that were open fourteen (14) weeks last year, they demand thirty weeks' guaranty, whether the theatre is open or not.
6. Segregation of all departments. This means that a stage carpenter cannot hold a ladder for an electrician while he puts in a lamp; but another electrician must be employed.

TO SUM UP:—THEIR DEMANDS MEAN THAT THE OPERATION OF THE THEATRE IS TAKEN ENTIRELY OUT OF THE HANDS OF THE OWNERS AND PLACED IN THOSE OF THE STAGE EMPLOYEES' UNION.

ALL MINNEAPOLIS THEATRES WILL BE KEPT OPEN AS USUAL

Respectfully,

NORTHWEST THEATRE OWNERS' ASSOCIATION

Advertisement, *Minneapolis Journal*, September 22, 1927, which duplicated flyers that owners distributed in their theaters

tion WDGY, employees presented their side of the strike to Twin Cities listeners. A committee from the union announced strike developments, and members responded on the air to questions they received through the mail. As *Variety* reported, "Both sides are devoting considerable effort to win public sentiment."<sup>21</sup>

The effectiveness of these campaigns for public support seems unclear. The strike forced three movie houses to close, but theater owners claimed that ticket sales remained fairly stable. In early October *Variety* reported that sales had declined slightly. After the strike ended later that month, the owners association estimat-

# \$3,000.00 REWARD!

For Information Lead-  
ing to the Arrest and  
Conviction of the Per-  
petrators of the

## **BOMB OUTRAGE**

Friday Night, Sept. 30

at the

**PARAMOUNT  
FAMOUS LASKY  
CORPORATION**

1100 First Avenue North

Signed

*Paramount Famous Lasky Corp.  
Minneapolis Film Board of Trade  
Northwest Theater Owners' Ass'n.*

Any Person Whose Information Regarding This Case Should Be Forwarded  
To the Office of Police Plans, 8 Broadway, Minneapolis, 1927

*Announcement published in several  
Twin Cities newspapers; this example is from  
the Minneapolis Journal, October 3, 1927.*

ed that weekly ticket sales had dropped 10 percent. At the five independent houses in working-class neighborhoods operating with union labor, ticket sales were higher than they probably would have been.<sup>22</sup>

As the strike progressed, the theatrical unions reduced their demands. By the end of September, union workers no longer insisted on wage increases for stagelands, the right to appeal cases of discharged employees, a guaranteed period of employment, or any other of the original demands save the six-day work week. Business manager William Dunn said he believed negotiations should involve the same type of "give and take" that they had in previous years. W. A. Steffes represented the theater owners' position when he told the press. "We do not plan to accede to their demands for a six day week with pay for seven days." Thus, while the union showed a willingness to negotiate, employers did not. The ever-watchful *Variety* reported, "With theatre owners locking horns with their union employees in a bitter clash to the finish to establish what the owners assert is the right to run their own business without outside dictation, the eyes of much of the theatrical world are believed to be centered on the Twin Cities."<sup>23</sup>

In late September it appeared that organized labor and organized capital were irreconcilably opposed. This stalemate fostered a wave of bombings at Twin Cities theaters in the weeks that followed. One could easily assume that the explosions were militant laborers' attacks on employers' property, but authorities never found any evidence linking strikers to the bombs. Although union theater employees may have planted the explosives, circumstantial evidence suggests that organized employers may have ordered the bombings.

Authorities anticipated violence, so when the strike began on September 17 they stationed police officers at each of the buildings of members of the Northwest Theater Owners Association. The first bombs, discovered about ten days later, were stench bombs, not explosives. Composed of acids and other foul-smelling chemicals, they filled the houses with putrid fumes during performances but caused no structural damage to theaters and no harm to theatergoers. This "chemical warfare," as the *Minneapolis Labor Review* called it, merely cleared theaters and stopped performances. Other bombings were not quite so benign. A blast at the Paramount Famous Lasky Corporation film exchange on September 30 caused minor damage to the back of the building and shattered some windows in the neighborhood. Another explosion at the Logan Theater, owned by W. A. Steffes, slightly damaged the rear wall and the projection screen inside. These dynamite bombs were usually placed on ledges near the rear doors of the theaters. As a result of these incidents, the Minneapolis police chief recruited one hundred additional part-time officers for duty in local theaters.<sup>24</sup>

Organized labor adamantly denied any connection to the explosions. Union representatives asserted that theater owners had arranged the bombings to convince the public that unionists were willing to endanger moviegoers to achieve their objectives. The owners supposedly colluded with the Citizens' Alliance to hire "gangs of rowdies" to do their dirty work. As one union official remarked, "We know there is an organization in Minneapolis which thrives on industrial strife. Its very existence depends on making employers believe that trade unionists are thugs, dynamiters and desperate characters." Employers resorted to such tactics because "the winning of a strike is a severe blow to the prestige of the anti-unionists' association, and we know that

<sup>22</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 22, 1927, p. 14; *Variety*, Oct. 5, 1927, p. 7, Nov. 2, 1927, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Sept. 26, 1927, p. 9; *Variety*, Sept. 28, 1927, p. 5, 12.

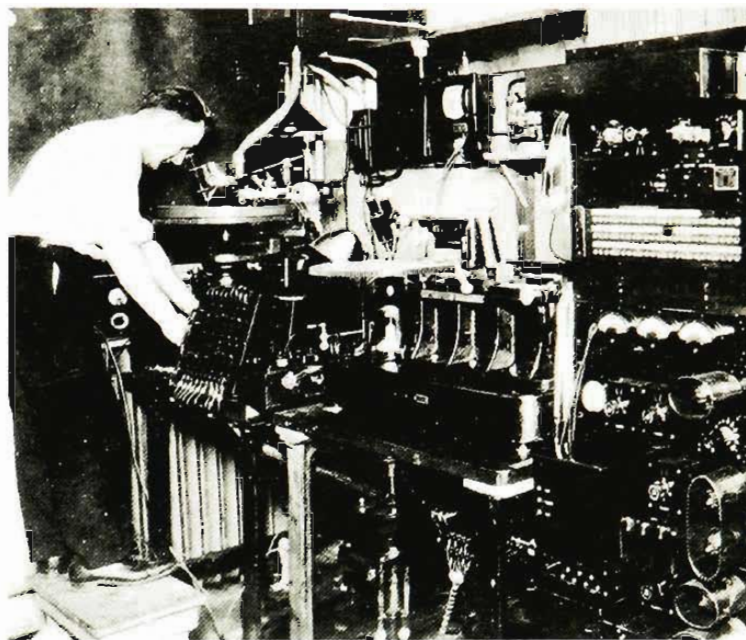
<sup>24</sup> List of bombings, undated, R20, F255, and clippings, R19, F372. Citizens' Alliance Records; *Variety*, Sept. 21, 1927, p. 9, 10; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 27, 1927, p. 1, Oct. 14, 1927, p. 3; *Minneapolis Journal*, Oct. 1, 10, 13, 1927—all on p. 1.



nothing is too 'raw' for them to do in order to place every obstacle in the path of organized labor." The bombings occurred after the unions had dropped all of their demands except the six-day week, so the official's conclusion sounds strangely optimistic: "Even if we did resort to the methods used by so-called open shoppers in their attempts to discredit organized labor, does anyone think we would be insane enough to bomb a theatre right when we have our strike won?"<sup>25</sup>

Authorities found no hard evidence incriminating either the strikers or the theater owners. Police arrested some stage employees on the evening of the blast at the Logan Theater but immediately released them because they could not be placed in the vicinity at the time of the explosion. The *Minneapolis Journal* reported that someone saw two "mysterious men" in a sedan near the Paramount on the night of the explosion there but neglected to report who saw these men and did not postulate whether they were associated with organized labor or the Citizens' Alliance. Labor's claim that the alliance hired thugs was based on a case in 1923, when police arrested a man with dynamite in his possession. At his trial the judge discovered that the man was employed by the businessmen's group. Condemning its president, O. P. Briggs, for inciting men to carry dynamite, the judge dismissed the case because he believed that it would be wrong to convict the man in a case that did not include Briggs. Although a similar incident did not result from the 1927 strike, the bombings caused little damage to the theaters, and employers' desire to discredit organized labor was sufficient motive. Both militant workers and militant employers had reasons to set the blasts.<sup>26</sup>

With the strike becoming violent, the United States Department of Labor sent Fred Keightly, commissioner of conciliation, to the Twin Cities to try to resolve the dispute. Keightly met with state and national labor representatives and with theater owners for fifteen hours on October 8 and again the following day. These meetings proved unproductive. Theater workers had only one demand: the six-day week with no reduction in pay from their current earnings for working seven. But theater owners remained intransigent. A few days after Keightly's efforts failed, the owners and union representatives met with Minneapolis city council members and discussed the six-day issue. At this meeting the union made a further concession, proposing that owners share the cost of the day off with the



*Working the complex registering and amplifying apparatus of the Vitaphone, Capitol Theater, St. Paul, 1927*

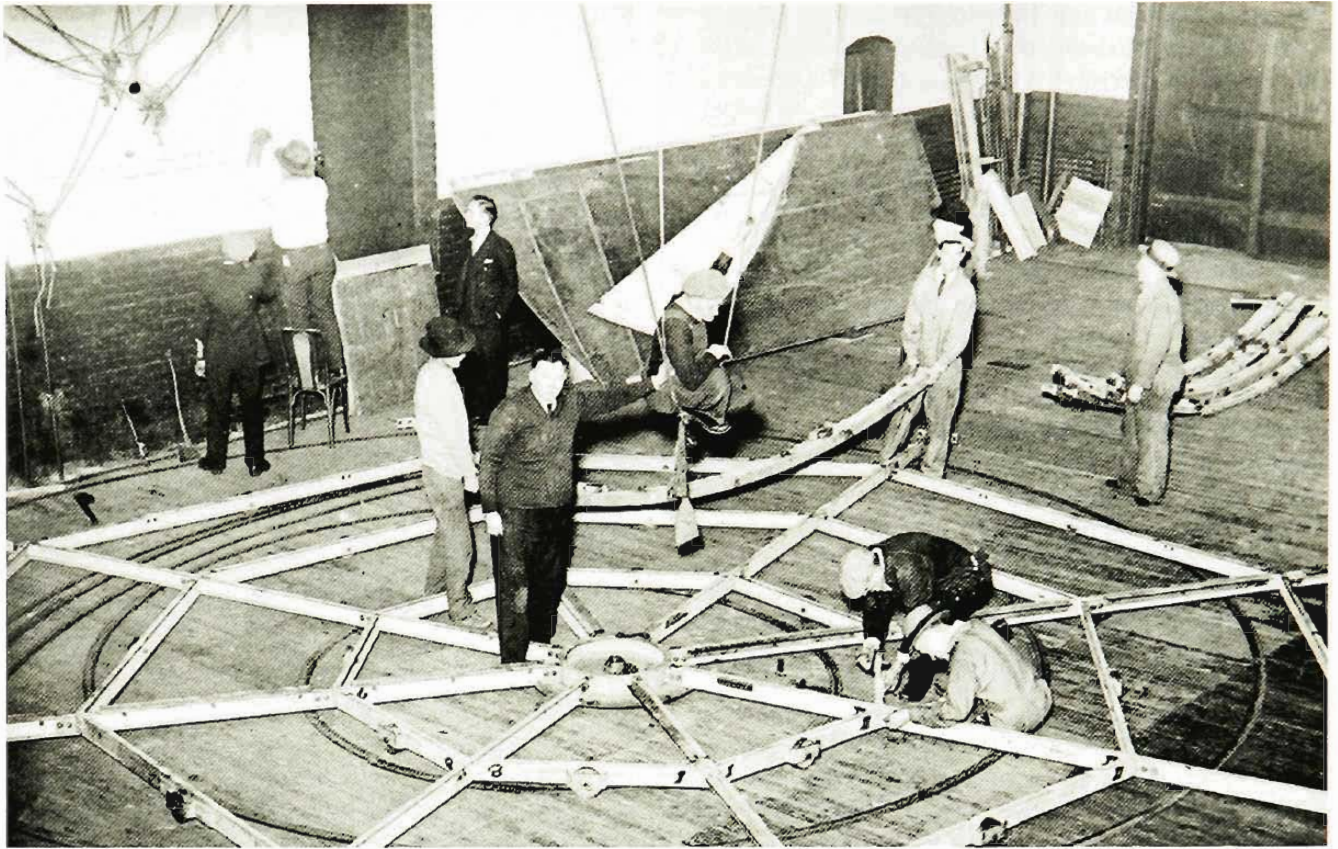
stagehands and increase their share over the next few years. Stagehands actually lost two days' pay when they took a day off because they had to pay their replacements. They now offered to take a reduction in their weekly wages in exchange for a day off if theater owners would agree to pick up the cost gradually. The owners refused, asserting that the proposal could eventually increase stagehands' pay four dollars a week, which they said they could not afford. Subsequent developments demonstrate, however, that employers were more concerned about relinquishing a management decision—the length of the work week—than they were with wage increases.<sup>27</sup>

With negotiations deadlocked, the president of the International Alliance of Theatre Stage Employees traveled to the Twin Cities to try to break the stalemate. William F. Canavan arrived in Minneapolis on October 24. In return for wage increases, Canavan used his authority to get the local union to abandon the demand for a six-day week. With the control issue out of the way, employers immediately agreed to the higher pay. Stagehands signed a new three-year contract, and motion-picture operators signed a two-year extension to their existing contract. Stagehands received an immediate two-dollar-a-week increase, an additional three dollars the second year, and another two dollars the third. Motion-picture operators received a five-percent increase over a two-year period. Canavan handled the negotiations for the union and refused to comment on the settlement. Pickets left their posts, and the Minneapolis police chief reduced his force to its pre-

<sup>25</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Oct. 14, 1927, p. 1, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Variety*, Oct. 12, 1927, p. 4; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Oct. 14, 1927, p. 3; *Minneapolis Journal*, Oct. 1, 1927, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Oct. 9, 1927, p. 6, Oct. 13, 1927, p. 1.



Workers setting the revolving stage at Minneapolis's Metropolitan Theater, 1931

strike size. Stagehands' and motion-picture operators' contracts now expired at the same time—August 1930.<sup>25</sup>

By the time theater workers' contracts expired in 1930, two technological developments had made it possible for employers to increase their profits, dramatically affecting motion-picture operators and musicians. Audio and visual technologies merged in the new "talkies" and made musicians' fears a reality. Although they continued to work in stage theaters, Twin Cities musicians knew their days in movie houses were numbered and accepted their fate. Similarly, more efficient projectors halved theater owners' need for motion-picture operators. But these workers engaged in a control struggle with the owners to decide who would determine the number of men to be employed. Unlike musicians, motion-picture operators could not practice their trade elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

In August theater owners informed the operators that they had to reduce their numbers by 50 percent or be replaced by nonunion men. The operators responded by offering to take a 20-percent pay cut as a group, but they refused to force half of their workforce to join the ranks of the unemployed at the outset of the Great Depression. Theater owners then locked out all union

operators. Stagehands walked out in sympathy, just as operators had demonstrated their solidarity three years earlier.<sup>30</sup>

The operators strike in 1930 followed a course similar to that instigated by stagehands in 1927. Vandals threw stench bombs into movie theaters and painted some yellow. This time, an operator confessed to bombing several movie houses, and a Minneapolis judge sentenced him to ninety days in jail. Theater owners demanded and received police protection of their property, and operators picketed in front of Twin Cities movie houses once again.<sup>31</sup>

The members of the Northwest Theater Owners

<sup>25</sup> *Minneapolis Journal*, Oct. 26, 1927, p. 1; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Oct. 28, 1927, p. 1, 3; *Variety*, Nov. 2, 1927, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 3, p. 1, Sept. 10, p. 5, Sept. 17, p. 3—all 1930.

<sup>30</sup> *Minnesota Union Advocate*, Aug. 14, 1930, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Here and below, see *Variety*, Aug. 27, 1930, p. 31; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Sept. 5, 1930, p. 1; Robert H. Zieger, *Republicans and Labor, 1919-1929* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1969), 70-86, 138-42; Bernstein, *Lean Years*, 83-143.

Association hired an attorney to get a court injunction outlawing the picketing, but Judge Thomas H. Salmon refused to issue it, stating, "Banner and picketing are all right." Throughout the 1920s employers nationwide had relied on court injunctions to curtail workers' direct actions. Consequently, the *Minneapolis Labor Review* was correct in reporting that Salmon's decision was "one of the hardest blows that has been struck locally against the hoary and tyrannical labor injunction."

Salmon's refusal represented a break in the close relationship that Twin Cities organized business leaders had forged with the courts since 1920. On July 7 of that year, Judge Winfield W. Bardwell, a man with strong ties to the Citizens' Alliance, issued an injunction banning motion-picture operators from picketing the Wonderland Theatre in Minneapolis. The pickets had been marching since February 1917, when the Wonderland's owner laid off his operators and began to run the projectors himself. After Bardwell's 1920 ruling, the Citizens' Alliance effectively used the injunction in labor disputes throughout the decade. The Minnesota legislature passed a weak anti-injunction bill in 1929, but it was ineffectual. In order to get an injunction banning strikers from picketing, the bill required attorneys only to demonstrate that violence had occurred. Once such violence was reported in the local papers, injunctions were issued without hearings. This bill was an incentive for the Citizens' Alliance to hire men to plant bombs—as they had in 1923. Judge Salmon's decision to allow picketing in the 1930 strike even though bombings had occurred broke with the precedent set in 1920 and portended a new direction for the courts in the labor battles of the Great Depression decade.<sup>32</sup>

Since the stakes were high for both sides in 1930—increased profits for theater owners and certain unemployment for one of every two motion-picture operators—there was little room for negotiation. Once again the national union leadership broke the stalemate.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1927 strike, Canavan had used his position as president of the International Alliance of Theatre Stage

Employees to subvert the authority of local union officials, conceding to the continuation of the seven-day work week in return for wage increases. In 1930, however, Canavan did not merely pull rank; he suspended William Donnelly, the local president, and William Dunn, the local business agent. This time the national union did not even sanction the Twin Cities strike, so Canavan suspended the two for violating the international's bylaws. He then ordered the rank and file back to work under the terms of the old contract, which left employers with the authority to lay off the motion-picture operators. Thus, when the union local ordered two crews to report to work at a Publix theater, for example, management promptly turned one crew away. Canavan, like other national AFL officials in the interwar years, acted to conserve his organization and his position in it, even though doing so meant siding with management on control issues.<sup>34</sup>

The events of 1927 and 1930 in the Twin Cities theater industry demonstrate that the national American Federation of Labor's conservative business unionism was increasingly inconsistent with the more radical positions of local union members. Stagehands, motion-picture operators, and musicians showed a unity of purpose in both strikes; they picketed constantly and did not break ranks. Each strike was settled when Canavan pressured the local union to abandon demands related to control issues. That pressure included suspending officials who had enjoyed rank-and-file support. When Canavan purged Dunn and Donnelly, he acted pragmatically (from his perspective in the AFL hierarchy) to conserve what he could of the union. By doing so, however, he allowed organized employers to define the terms of negotiations and settlements, and those terms left workers with no control of their labor relations and working conditions. Like most employees in the United States, the theater workers that remained on the job entered the 1930s lacking any job security. It would take widespread militant actions by rank-and-file workers and radical local union officials in the context of the Great Depression to make national union leaders and state and federal officials more responsive to the security concerns of the American workforce.

*All illustrations and the movie-projector reel at left are from the Minnesota Historical Society collections.*

<sup>32</sup> *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Feb. 3, 1922, p. 1, Feb. 17, 1928, p. 3, Feb. 24, 1928, p. 1; Millikan, "Maintaining Law and Order," 221–22, 230–31.

<sup>33</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 10, 1930, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> *Variety*, Sept. 24, 1930, p. 33, Oct. 1, 1930, p. 26, 38; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Nov. 7, 1930, p. 1.





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