



Seattle Municipal Archives #14358

*Construction of the Diablo Dam powerhouse on the Skagit River, Whatcom County, Washington, 1935.*

# A Time for Transformers

The stage for the first women utility electrical workers at Seattle City Light was set decades before their arrival. The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s drew the U.S. public into bold and insistent political action. In response, federal programs for social progress, including affirmative action, were enacted during John F. Kennedy’s presidency, in part to quiet such protest. In his acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention, Kennedy outlined his vision of what needed to be changed:

unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.<sup>2</sup>

Kennedy’s 1961 Executive Order 10925 mandated affirmative action hiring and working conditions “without regard to race, creed, color, or national origin.”<sup>3</sup>

Protests against institutionalized racism and other social injustice continued after Kennedy’s assassination in 1963. His successor, Lyndon Johnson, responded with his “Great Society” program, which brought changes to education, medical care, urban blight, rural poverty, and transportation systems.

Throughout the United States, those on the political left—progressives, liberals, and radicals—kept pressure on federal and state governments to end the Vietnam War, to make the Civil Rights Act of 1964 a reality, to fight poverty, to establish equal rights for women and LGBTQ people, to legalize abortion, and to protect the environment.

These social and political values clashed at many levels with those of people on the right. What was then called “the Establishment”—the structures and social mechanisms of the military, major industry, finance, and mainstream politics—used its powers to block

progress on racism, sexism, poverty, and environmental protections.

Blue-collar workers, especially those in the construction trades, generally aligned themselves with the right. Anti-communism had driven radicals and integrationists out of the labor movement during the Red Scare of the 1950s. Anti-communism was also used to justify U.S. military incursions of the 1960s and 1970s, and many unionists opposed the antiwar movement out of patriotism. Sexism was rampant, even within the leftist and civil rights movements, and many treated the burgeoning women's liberation movement with hostility.

In Seattle, two new political organizations emerged, both focused on mobilizing social protest to change society. The Freedom Socialist Party (FSP) had spun off from the Socialist Workers Party in 1966 over several issues, including gender and race. Radical Women, a socialist feminist group, was formed in 1967 and formally affiliated with the FSP in 1973. In the words of co-founder Gloria Martin, Radical Women's purpose was to

demonstrate that women could act politically, learn and teach theory, administer an organization, develop indigenous leadership, and focus movement and community attention on the sorely neglected matter of women's rights—and that women could do this on their own.<sup>4</sup>

Clara Fraser, key to many events in this book, was a founder of both the FSP and Radical Women. A strong personality, she was described variously by reporters as “big, gutsy, vital”<sup>5</sup> and a “warm Jewish earth momma.”<sup>6</sup>

The socialist feminist politics of Radical Women and Freedom Socialist Party emphasized the interconnection of women, class and race. Radical Women had a history in the Pacific Northwest of bringing together women of color, Native Americans, lesbians and gays, women's rights, and labor.

Fraser summarized the groups' overlapping politics in her collection of essays and articles, *Revolution, She Wrote*:

My organizations, Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, are multi-issue, anti-capitalist, socialist feminists....

We fight on all fronts. We see the interconnections of all the different struggles....and we have a vision of the future.<sup>7</sup>

At this time, the workplace in general had become the site for taking on issues of race and then gender inequality. Federally funded construction projects had created a building boom, boosting the wages of construction workers to new highs, especially in relation to manufacturing jobs. With higher wages and ever-increasing demand for trade workers, the traditional union movement's political power grew. But these traditional unions were not training or hiring non-white or non-male workers.

In 1966, the Washington State Board Against Discrimination found that Washington State's 15 Building Trades unions, representing over 29,000 workers, had only 7 non-white apprentices.<sup>8</sup>

The federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) had been established in 1965 to address workplace discrimination, administering and sometimes enforcing civil rights laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Johnson's administration also created a federal program that monitored affirmative action hiring mandates and compliance with construction standards, starting in St. Louis, San Francisco, and Cleveland. By 1967, this had evolved into the Philadelphia Plan

which required that prospective contractors...project the number of nonwhite workers on a jobsite *prior* to being awarded the contract. Contracting officers could then evaluate the [hiring] projections along with all other factors in determining to whom the contract should be awarded.<sup>9</sup>

Concurrently, another set of federal mandates addressing urban poverty were implemented. One of these, the Model Cities program (under the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development), targeted racial disenfranchisement, providing funding to cities to

reduce social and economic disadvantages in designated neighborhoods, provide maximum training and employment opportunities, and establish health services for residents.<sup>10</sup>

In April 1968, the Seattle City Council unanimously passed Ordinance 96619, which prohibited discriminatory housing sales, rentals, and financing. That same year, the City of Seattle received federal funding for major urban renewal and appointed Walter Hundley, a minister and director of the Central Area Motivation Program (an anti-poverty project), as ad hoc director of Seattle's Model Cities program. Many movement activists worked on projects and programs funded through the Model Cities program, including Clara Fraser, who later oversaw the beginning of Seattle City Light's Electrical Trades Trainee (ETT) program for women.

In addition, a group of business leaders led by Seattle attorney Jim Ellis proposed a program they named Forward Thrust. It focused on transit and infrastructure construction and improvements to address the Puget Sound area's population growth. The following February, King County voters approved seven of 12 proposed Forward Thrust bond propositions, worth \$333.9 million.

To incorporate federal funding into Forward Thrust projects, King County and Seattle had to meet federal laws on non-discrimination but, at the time, workers on the multitude of public construction projects springing up throughout the Seattle metro area were virtually all white males. (See Appendix 4, Timeline of Affirmative Action and Anti-Discrimination Laws.)

1968 was also a presidential election year, with Democrat Hubert Humphrey, American Independent and segregationist George Wallace, and Republican Richard Nixon running. Across the United States, much of so-called Middle America, frightened by increasing civil disobedience, protests, and a growing counterculture, rallied under the name "the Silent Majority," a slogan made famous by Nixon in the final weeks of his successful campaign. Once in office, Nixon and his administration began to reverse many of the progressive policies and programs from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, including Johnson's War on Poverty.

But even as the Nixon administration sought to redesign policy, others within the federal government were enacting and providing funding for Johnson-era programs. One of their challenges was to make the states, municipalities, companies, and employers who



*Radical Women co-founder Gloria Martin (standing in center) speaks at a 1969 welfare rights demonstration at the state capitol in Olympia, Washington.*

sought federal funding comply with affirmative action and anti-discrimination law. This federal enforcement would push Seattle and other cities toward their own affirmative action and anti-discrimination programs. In Seattle this would eventually include changes at its publicly owned utility, Seattle City Light.

By spring of 1969, Seattle Model Cities Director Walter Hundley was encouraging local Black tradesmen to work together to go after jobs covered by federal construction contracts that required hiring workers of color. In May, the Central Contractors Association (CCA) was formed. Tyree Scott, a charismatic, Black second-generation electrician and former Marine, was elected president of the CCA board. CCA members tried negotiating with both the trade unions and major contractors in the Seattle area but continued to be excluded from their lucrative federal contracts.

In cities across the United States, starting in Philadelphia and then in Chicago and Pittsburgh, African American workers shut

down federal construction sites in protest. By late summer of 1969, the CCA also shifted its strategy to direct action.

Forsaking what they believed to be failed forms of negotiation, the CCA brought every major, federally funded construction site in the city of Seattle to a halt in late August and September of 1969. They did this—as other activists were doing in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Chicago at roughly the same time—by disabling equipment, blocking workers from their jobs, and demanding that federal civil rights law be used to force unions to hire more black workers. The most dramatic actions included running a bulldozer into a large open pit at the University of Washington, and marching [more than] a hundred protesters onto the flight apron of Sea-Tac airport to halt air traffic.<sup>11</sup>

These CCA worksite shutdowns on federally funded construction sites within Seattle held up projects valued at millions of dollars. CCA also filed suit to block federal funding of several projects in Seattle because of hiring discrimination. Then-Governor Dan Evans and King County Executive John Spellman tried to mediate between the CCA and local construction unions, but organized labor would not negotiate. Both the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the federal Department of Labor (DOL) sent representatives to Seattle, although there is no documentation any action was taken.

When Seattle and King County officials started to move toward enforcing affirmative action, the building trades unions provided forceful opposition. In October 1969, the Voice of Irate Construction Employees (VOICE) mobilized 2,000 Caucasian “hard hats” in a downtown Seattle march protesting “forced” hiring of workers of color. Later that month, 3,000 building trades members held a rally in Olympia against “minority” hiring.

In the midst of this turmoil, Wes Uhlman ran for mayor of Seattle. At 34, Uhlman was the youngest legislator in Washington State at the time. He had worked his way up over four terms to the powerful position of the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee and then served a term in the Senate.<sup>12</sup>

Just before he began his campaign, Uhlman had significantly increased the power of Washington mayors:

As a state senator, he quietly pushed through legislation in 1969 to transfer critical budget authority to the mayor.<sup>13</sup>

This meant Seattle’s next mayor would have much greater autonomy over the millions of dollars that Model Cities and Forward Thrust initiatives were pumping into Seattle projects. Mayoral candidate Uhlman delicately courted both liberal and conservative voters, won, and took office a month early, on December 1, 1969. Then, less than two months later, Seattle was hit with what came to be known as the Boeing Bust.

In just over one year, Boeing’s Seattle work force shrank from 103,000 to 49,000 employees. The resulting economic depression and unemployment meant the locally generated portion of city coffers Uhlman now controlled were empty. By the end of 1970, unemployment in Seattle was, at 10.7 percent, the highest in the United States. Meanwhile, the city continued to be the site of numerous protests.

Demonstrators repeatedly shut down buildings at the UW [University of Washington], clogged downtown streets, packed the courthouse lawn, and (every day for one memorable week in May 1970) occupied the Interstate 5 freeway.<sup>14</sup>

A student strike at the University of Washington protesting the Vietnam War culminated in a march of more than 10,000, from campus to downtown, in addition to stopping traffic on Interstate 5. Radical Women, the three-year-old socialist feminist group, took part in these protests and provided leadership in others, especially around the issues of civil rights and women’s liberation.

The CCA continued its worksite protests, but was having internal debates over whether it should serve Black workers or Black contractors.<sup>15</sup> In early 1970, Tyree Scott left the CCA to form the United Construction Workers Association (UCWA), which focused on continued worksite protests against segregated unions. A growing number of Seattle activists supported the UCWA, and sometimes participated in UCWA actions. Megan Cornish and other Radical



Bob Miller/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

1972 United Construction Workers Association march in downtown Seattle.

Women members took part in several UCWA protests. They asked for—and received—UCWA support for allowing women into the trades as well. Cornish was among those arrested in UCWA actions and would later be one of the women hired in Seattle City Light’s first apprenticeship program for women.

Seattle’s unions continued to refuse all of the various settlements proposed by local elected officials to address illegal discrimination. In response, the federal government made the CCA party to federal-court-ordered implementation of the revised Philadelphia Plan. Two years earlier, Nixon had revised the original Philadelphia Plan to replace racial quotas with “good faith efforts in hiring”<sup>16</sup> and use its affirmative action requirements as

a political wedge issue which could divide two reliably Democratic constituencies: African Americans and organized labor.<sup>17</sup>

In 1970, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission signed its first Memorandum of Understanding with the federal Department of Labor. Nixon-appointed DOL Secretary George Schultz then used this interagency agreement to enforce the revised Philadelphia Plan. Labor historian Marc Linder, author of *Wars of Attrition*,

also attributes the DOL’s interest in going after racist practices in the trade unions as a way to break the union movement while also fragmenting the Democrats’ traditional constituency, pitting labor against social progressives.<sup>18</sup>

At any rate, federal enforcement of the revised Philadelphia Plan required “an acceptable affirmative action program” in more trade unions in more cities, and targeted their apprenticeship programs. When the unions did not comply, union locals were placed under federal court injunctions with specific directives on how many non-white apprentices they must admit and when these apprentices should be certified as journey-level workers. The apprenticeship programs of four Seattle unions were put under this court order: Sheet Metal Workers #99, Iron Workers #86, Plumbers and Pipefitters #32, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers #46. The CCA and the UCWA took part in the settlement process, but also continued worksite protests, some of which involved physical confrontations and the destruction of property.

Newly elected Seattle Mayor Uhlman was definitely slammed by the combination of major white-collar unemployment and intense, prolific social protest. Uhlman took cover for a bit and regrouped.

At the end of that first frustrating year [1970], Wes Uhlman virtually disappeared, hunkering in the political bunker. He proposed no new initiatives and held no news conferences. In fact, he rarely left his office.

Then, when the mayor resurfaced, he had a new plan: He would save the city by streamlining it and turning the welter of city agencies into an efficient bureaucracy.

First, he set about creating a number of new departments—he called them “superagencies”—that would give as much authority as possible to Uhlman and his appointees, mostly enthusiastic young professionals without much civil service experience.<sup>19</sup>

Uhlman worked his regional political connections, especially his connection with Senator Warren Magnuson, then chair of the federal Appropriations Committee, to secure significant federal funding for his superagencies. Uhlman instituted citizen commissions,

used Model Cities funding to create Community Service Centers (known as Little City Halls), and created the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). The OMB began to standardize Seattle's departments, their budgets, and their hiring and promotions. In effect, the newly created OMB was Uhlman's mechanism for assuming the fiscal power he had legislated to mayors just before becoming one.

Uhlman continued to make more appointments, including Jack Driscoll as director of Personnel. Driscoll's role then expanded to include head examiner of Seattle's Civil Service Commission and director of its Civil Service Department staff. With these three overlapping positions Driscoll was set up to

[run] roughshod over civil service and unions to pursue an aggressive affirmative-action program to integrate the city's nearly all-white workforce.<sup>20</sup>

In theory, Uhlman's appointments of Seattle's first Black department heads, as well as the formation of Seattle's Human Rights Department (HRD), charged with investigating discrimination charges and recommending policies and legislation, were designed to integrate Seattle's administration.

In reality, Uhlman was not prepared to bring affirmative action into specific departments. Although the Human Rights Department existed, it was not part of Uhlman's administrative decision-making process. Uhlman instead relied upon Jack Driscoll, head of both the Personnel Department and the Civil Service, to implement EEOC requirements.

In late 1971, Uhlman had the opportunity to replace another department head, the superintendent of Seattle City Light. John M. Nelson had held the position since 1963, and had pursued an old-school style of utility management that collaborated with the Lighting Department's unions and encouraged industrial development and low-cost public power. During the latter part of Nelson's administration he proposed several controversial projects including raising Ross Dam, co-ownership of a coal-fired generating plant in Centralia, and construction of a new nuclear power plant near Deception Pass.

Uhlman didn't want Nelson or his policies. This included Nel-

son's good relations with the unions representing City Light's engineers and trades workers.

In December 1971, Nelson announced his retirement when Uhlman declined to renominate him. The *Seattle Times* wrote, "In the present period of power-policy conflict, it is small wonder that Nelson was willing to 'take a walk' from the City Light Superintendency when Uhlman reportedly gave him an opportunity to go out with his head in the air rather than bear a stigma of not being reappointed."<sup>21</sup>

Uhlman wanted a superintendent from outside the utility, one who hadn't come up through the ranks. But Uhlman underestimated the power of City Light's internal culture.

The first nominee [for Superintendent], R.D. Ford, was not confirmed by the City Council after City Light staff members lobbied against his appointment.<sup>22</sup>

Uhlman then nominated Seattle's recently retired fire chief, Gordon Vickery. Chief Vickery had gained a reputation within Seattle government and the community for his autocratic style and abrasive personality. After ordering a number of top-down worksite changes and a contested recruitment program for firefighters of color, Vickery had retired. Some thought Uhlman hired Vickery to make sure he wouldn't run against Uhlman in the upcoming mayoral election. Uhlman told the *Seattle Times* that Vickery is "one of the finest administrators in Seattle" and "knows the bureaucracy, the system and how to get things done."<sup>23</sup>

On May 31, 1972, Gordon Vickery became the utility's ninth superintendent. What Uhlman didn't realize was that federal mandates, in combination with his own administrative decisions (including appointing Vickery), would create a tempest of discord within the city. Out of this would also come an opportunity for tenacious women to break some of the gender barriers at City Light.

Shortly after Vickery's appointment, congressional amendments to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act gave the EEOC the power to litigate and removed exemptions for local governments as employers.

In response, Uhlman issued an executive order establishing an affirmative action program for all city departments, including Seattle City Light.

As one of Seattle's departments, City Light had been receiving the same directives to meet EEOC compliance as all the other city departments. But the utility had its own corporate culture. Many who worked for City Light took great pride in their employer and personally identified with its legacy as a publicly owned utility founded by J.D. Ross to serve the community.

Going into the early 1970s, people who worked at City Light, especially its tradesmen, considered themselves to be "part of the City Light family." Linemen and other electrical tradesmen (and they were all men) were members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local #77. As such, they usually got their work skills and jobs via the informal "FBI" of organized labor: fathers, brothers, and in-laws. This was part of the same overwhelmingly white, all-male, quasi-hereditary unionism that, at the time, most organized craft unions shared.

And as at many utilities, the pay of all of IBEW #77's electrical workers at City Light was (and is) pegged to that of its lineworkers.

This encouraged solidarity since a contractual injury to a line-worker at City Light was a contractual injury to every other IBEW #77 member at City Light. At the same time, the union was experiencing a generational schism in its membership. The new wave of apprentices, which included some Vietnam veterans, were more open to liberal politics and changing social norms that came into conflict with old-school tradesmen.

Concurrently with Vickery's 1972 appointment as superintendent, City Light instituted its first Electrical Trades Trainee (ETT) program. This program was for men of color, although in reality the program did nothing more than boost them up a hiring list, using what is called "selective certification."

Seattle had approved the use of selective certification in entry-level and promotional hiring in 1971. This allowed for the highest-ranking applicants of a particular racial group, if already eligible for a position, to be placed higher on a list of candidates for hiring. But

it didn't give them a job.

In the first City Light ETT program, individual Black and Asian American men were placed in the field, singly. Their ETT training was nothing more than one day of orientation, including a free lunch. Then they were assigned as helpers on a line crew. (A line crew helper assists with on-the-ground tasks needed to support the lineworkers, but may work above ground or on electrical circuits, at the discretion of the crew chief.) Minimal statistics were kept on the outcome of this program. Some of these men did make it as helpers at City Light.

Meanwhile, Superintendent Vickery autocratically and preemptively "cleaned house" at the utility. Many who worked under him, including IBEW #77 members, were insulted at Vickery's contempt for workers and their work, his habit of issuing edicts, and his presumption they were all slackers. Even Vickery supporters saw the conflict. According to Walt Sickler, the supervisor of Overhead Construction at City Light:

[Vickery] was what everybody deemed as an outsider and of course he was a fireman and we had a difficulty equating what a fireman knew about administering a power company. You think in your own channels that somebody to be your boss has to know what you're doing, but what you have to know is that when you get to a certain level it's more administrative than functional.<sup>24</sup>

Resentment quickly grew within the utility's workforce.

In just a year on the job, [Vickery] had fired or dismissed hundreds of employees, had others prosecuted for theft, and changed City Light's staffing policies.<sup>25</sup>

Vickery had also received a citywide directive to come up with an effective affirmative action program at City Light, one that better met federal and municipal mandates. With this, Vickery initiated conceptual plans for a new Electrical Trades Trainee (ETT) program, aimed at women.