

United Tobacco Workers Local 22: Civil Rights and Tobacco Unionism ^[1]

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by Michael Hill, Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History, 2012

<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> ^[2]

Labor strike by tobacco workers, mostly African American and female, on June 17, 1943 led to seven years of labor & civil rights activism by Local 22.

The 1940s were a fertile period for labor organizing in the tobacco industry, inspiring a movement for workplace democracy that fed directly into the nascent civil rights movement. African Americans in the Winston-Salem tobacco industry formed the United Tobacco Workers Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural, and Allied Works of America—Congress on Industrial Organizations. Their allies included a few hundred white workers in those factories, much of the rest of the black population in the city, and an assortment of activists from around the state and nation.

The labor organizing began with a grassroots sitdown strike on June 17, 1943, in Plant #65 of the R. J. Reynolds Company, then the largest tobacco manufacturing facility in the world. The factory was on Chestnut Street between First and Third Streets. The workers were primarily African American women who did the stemming of the leaves. Over the next seven years, Local 22 and the Winston-Salem workers played leadership roles in the union-based movement. The movement forwarded the “Southern Front,” a loose coalition of labor unionists, civil rights activists, and southern New Dealers who saw a strong labor movement and the re-enfranchisement of the southern poor as key to reforming the South.

Local 22 drew strategically on ideas and resources from all streams of activism. In the end, the movement in Winston-Salem, like the national movements of which it was part, foundered during the Cold War era. The last collective bargaining agreement was reached on June 7, 1947. Organizers supported the presidential candidacy of Henry Wallace in 1948. In 1950 a National Labor Relations Board ruling stripped the union of its last rights to represent workers.

In 2012, the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources installed a highway historical marker in Winston-Salem, North Carolina commemorating the June 17, 1943 strike. The marker is located at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive at Fourth Street.

References:

Robert Rodgers Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (2003)

Subjects:

[Black and African American People](#) ^[3]

[Labor Unions](#) ^[4]

Authors:

[Hill, Michael](#) ^[5]

Origin - location:

[Forsyth County](#) ^[6]

[Winston-Salem](#) ^[7]

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[Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History](#).^[8]

Years:

1943

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