

University at Albany, State University of New York

## Scholars Archive

---

Library Award for Outstanding Undergraduate  
Research

University Libraries

---

Spring 2020

# Helen Quirini's Confrontation: McCarthyism and its Effect on the United Electrical Workers Union

Sabrina Flemming

*University at Albany, State University of New York*

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available.

**Please share** how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lib\\_award\\_undergrad](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lib_award_undergrad)



Part of the [Labor History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Flemming, Sabrina, "Helen Quirini's Confrontation: McCarthyism and its Effect on the United Electrical Workers Union" (2020). *Library Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Research*. 2.

[https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lib\\_award\\_undergrad/2](https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/lib_award_undergrad/2)

### Rights Statement



### License

This Research Project is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Award for Outstanding Undergraduate Research by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive.

Please see [Terms of Use](#). For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@albany.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@albany.edu).

## Helen Quirini's Confrontation: McCarthyism and its Effect on the United Electrical Workers Union

In 1948, a female labor activist was hauled before the Investigation of Communist Infiltration of the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America and quieted the room by saying, "I believe very strongly in our constitution, because you are starting with Communism; tomorrow it will be married women; next day Jews; next day Negroes; next day Italians; next day Poles." This statement came from Helen Quirini, a union advocate for the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America (UERMWA, better known as UE), who supported women's rights in the Schenectady GE plant. She made a name for herself within the Local, by raising her voice and demanding answers on various issues. Unfortunately, this made her a target of communist accusations.

Quirini is one example of many labor activists who were plucked from their daily lives to be confronted by the McCarthy hearings and labeled as subversives to the American government. Labor unions saw a decrease in membership and some were completely destroyed during the McCarthy era because government officials claimed that they were Communist. Actions taken to destroy unionism within Schenectady included dismantling Quirini's union, pitting the UE against the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), and forcing workers out of their jobs when suspected of communist ties. Quirini and her Local 301 in New York's capital region will serve as an example of the threatening assumptions that many male and female workers endured during the McCarthy era.

Helen Quirini was born in 1920 to a Polish immigrant family that consisted of her parents, two brothers, and her sister. Quirini and her siblings grew up during the Great Depression and did odd jobs to make a living. One of these jobs was a food delivery service.

Quirini and her brother each made \$12 per week and \$10 of it went to rent. The tight financial situation at home required Quirini to go to school part-time while taking a commercial course. Upon graduating from high school, she desperately wanted to continue her education but did not have the funds to do so. She applied to General Electric to create an education fund for herself and quit once she saved enough, but made the patriotic decision to stay with GE once America entered World War II in 1941 and military demand for GE supplies rapidly increased.<sup>1</sup>

Quirini's choice to join GE was more simple than her decision to join the UE's Local 301. She had grown up believing that unions were not actually beneficial to workers. Local capital region newspapers claimed that unions collected too much money from workers only to then mishandle the funds. Even Quirini's father detested unions, saying that they were full of Communists. Similarly, in school, she was taught that unions did not advocate for their workers. The constant criticism of unions led her to consistently decline offers to join the UE at her GE plant. It was not until she spoke with a shop steward, Mary, in 1942 that she learned of the many benefits offered to workers in the UE. This piqued her interest in joining. The enlightening information from Mary combined with Quirini's desire to effectively rid Communists from the union, due to her dislike of their ideology, led her to sign up for the Local 301. She quickly learned that the threat of Communism from unions was unfounded. But she would learn that union membership had a cost. Ironically, the woman who did not want to join a union because of communist influence would soon be falsely identified as a Communist because of her membership and leadership of that union.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Helen Quirini, "Helen Quirini and General Electric: A Personal Memoir of World War II" (2001 1991), Box 2, Folder 4-5, Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

<sup>2</sup> Quirini, "A Personal Memoir."

The UE was nationally known for championing electrical working women's rights. With the absence of men in factories in World War II, women became responsible for almost half of the jobs in the electrical field, leading to a booming female population in the UE as well.<sup>3</sup> Behind the scenes, Communists were desperately urging the UE to put women's rights first to create a more equal work environment.<sup>4</sup> Women in electrical industries felt that the UE had their best interests at heart specifically because of the union's constitution. It guaranteed that anyone, no matter their sex, race, or political beliefs, had rights within their factories.<sup>5</sup> This was crucial, as many unions still barred women from entering unions in the mid-twentieth century. Women of color faced the "double bar" from some unions, as they could be rejected because of their sex and race. The inclusion of sex in the UE benefitted female members' working conditions and wages. By incessant pushing from Communists, the UE put women rights concerns on their list of top priorities and consistently fought against wage discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

One example of the UE championing women's rights is the famous 1946 GE protest. Workers of each sex went on a successful strike for over one month in an effort to raise wages at the plant.<sup>7</sup> Later, in 1953, a state-wide UE strike was enacted for women to get "equal pay for equal work." The UE held conferences sponsored by female members to create plans, solutions, and discussions surrounding women's workplace rights.<sup>8</sup> Quirini was able to obtain an on-site counselor for female workers at her GE plant through the UE, which increased the women's efficiency and loyalty to GE and the UE.<sup>9</sup> Quirini was an outspoken woman on union issues and

---

<sup>3</sup>Kannenber, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism," 311.

<sup>4</sup> Zahavi, 528.

<sup>5</sup> Quirini, "A Personal Memoir of World War II."

<sup>6</sup> Kannenberg, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism," 312.

<sup>7</sup> Kannenberg, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism," 309.

<sup>8</sup> "News Clippings About or Mentioning Helen Quirini" (53, 1970-71, 95, undated 1952), Box 2, Folder 2, Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

<sup>9</sup> Quirini, "A Personal Memoir of World War II."

was never once in contact with the Communist Party nor their ideals. Despite this, she still appreciated the work that the Communist Party did to bolster women's rights throughout the country. The GE plant would not have given women men's job assignments or eliminated the wage differential had it not been for the Communists' incessant pushing for equality. Despite this positive aspect of Communism within the UE, both the party and the union faced constant criticism.

Anticomunist sentiments have been present in the United States since the nineteenth century. During this time, Communism represented tyranny, an enemy to the state, and a group set to overthrow traditions in favor of chaos. The burgeoning labor movements of the late 1800s set to reorganize and challenge their employers, protesting unemployment, poor wages, and unhealthy conditions. These movements became aligned with Communism because they were attempting to overthrow the capitalist system that was keeping them subordinate to the wealthy management that governed them. Union organizers made it their duty to organize the movements, as their lack of structure had been crucial factors in their ineffectiveness.<sup>10</sup> Many union organizers and members aligned with the Communist Party, as it represented a new way of dealing with capital, government, and equality.<sup>11</sup> Unions were not the only participants in this ideology.

In the Great Depression, many intellectuals attended Communist meetings to see if the party's proposals would help bolster the failing American economy. It was not unusual for Americans to attend meetings, as they were searching for a way to improve their lives. This newfound interest in the Communist ideology caused membership to fluctuate throughout the

---

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, 1st ed. (Canada: Little, Brown & Company, 1998), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Schrecker, 27.

Great Depression.<sup>12</sup> However, the public maintained a view that labor movements and unions were strictly surrounded by Communists.

Between the late nineteenth century and the start of World War II, the anticommunist sentiments in the United States rapidly surged due to tense foreign relations with the Soviet Union. The anti-union ideas that Quirini's father had grew to a fever pitch across the nation. Only during World War II, when the Soviet Union was a temporary ally in the fight against worldwide fascism did the anticommunism briefly abate. It can be assumed, based on Quirini's experience, that anticommunism was an underlying emotion in American society until it resurfaced during the Cold War. The period of fierce anticommunism in America between the end of World War II and the late 1950s would become known as the Second Red Scare or the McCarthy era.

The McCarthy era is remembered as a time of political repression of people, groups, and parties who dissented against American government and were convicted of crimes of disloyalty.<sup>13</sup> People were forced to abandon their daily lives because of the threats made for both accurate and false accusations of affiliation with Communism. In *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*, Ellen Schrecker points out that it is difficult to analyze the McCarthy era, as people were correctly targeted and convicted of Soviet espionage, while others were threatened for interacting with the Communist Party once, and some were never involved at all, like Quirini, but still had to face consequences.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately for Helen Quirini, she joined a union that was run by Communist Party members, from its shop stewards to the union's highest levels of management.<sup>15</sup> Industries

---

<sup>12</sup> Schrecker, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Schrecker, x.

<sup>14</sup> Schrecker, xii.

<sup>15</sup> Schrecker, 29.

specializing in national defense, like maritime, electrical, and communication, were under especially heavy scrutiny of the government because of their importance to wartime efforts. Sit-downs, strikes, and other forms of protests by workers for better conditions were viewed as “sabotage” against the American government. These demonstrations were thought to have a hidden agenda due to the UE’s communist ties, despite the events revolving around workers’ rights.<sup>16</sup> This had detrimental effects on workers, as their pleas and protests were discredited by political opinions. One of the main catalysts for the McCarthy witch-hunt on the UE was the national union’s first president, James B. Carey. After he rightfully lost his re-election to the union presidency in 1941, he red-baited the UE.<sup>17</sup> Despite the UE never acting against the nation’s interests, they were still investigated, discredited, and damaged by the processes the accusations hurled at them throughout the McCarthy era.

As an industrial city, Schenectady, New York had long been a target of recruitment for labor organizers and Communists. Its industrial roots began in 1886 and grew rapidly when a General Electric plant and automobile factories were established there in the early twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Schenectady factory workers attempted to create their own labor organization and joined to create the Metal Workers Industrial League. In 1935, this union joined the national UE and became the Local 301. The UE’s heavy involvement with the Communist Party was known by union members and GE workers. Despite this knowledge, many managers and fellow workers did not mind. The communist members and sympathizers of the plant were elected as leaders for the union, taking roles on the Executive Board, as shop steward, or another officer position. One

---

<sup>16</sup> Schrecker, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Schrecker, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Zahavi, “Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954,” *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 514–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944945>, 517.

former GE worker said that they were elected because of their vast knowledge and execution of protests in order to receive employee demands in a timely fashion. Even officers in charge of overseeing the plant did not mind the Communist presence on the job because the union Communists were generally nice people.<sup>19</sup>

Workers enjoyed having Communists as their union leaders because they effectively voiced the workers' concerns as well as acting in protest when demands were not met. In fact, the union members had so much faith in their Communist leaders that they did not attend UE member meetings, thinking they would be able to handle all the workplace issues on their own. Based on oral historian Gerald Zahavi's interviews with GE workers, it seems that the employees accepted that Communists were involved at GE and turned a blind eye because they were leaders who were extremely helpful in the work environment.<sup>20</sup> Helen Quirini was extremely against Communism when she first entered the UE. After attending a union meeting, however, she realized that they were actively attempting to benefit the workers and decided to sympathize with them. She maintained a significant role within GE and the union but always made sure to turn a blind eye to Communism within the plant, as she knew the consequences that came with harboring knowledge on workplace subversives.<sup>21</sup>

During the last weekend of September in 1948, several members of Schenectady's Local 301 were called before the Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor to be questioned on Communist infiltration within the UE. Executive Board members like Recording Secretary Quirini and President Peterson were pulled before the hearing, shop

---

<sup>19</sup> Zahavi, 519.

<sup>20</sup> Zahavi. 521.

<sup>21</sup> Helen Quirini, Interview with Gerald Zahavi: Unedited Transcript, 1991 1982, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8, Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).



stewards were also called upon, and even past and present Local 301 members were questioned. They were selected based upon the assumption that all UE members were active participants of the Communist Party; this was false. Each session of questioning contained questions along the lines of “Were you ever part of the Communist party?” or “Do you know of any member affiliated with the Communist Party?”<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the McCarthy era, people were pulled to be the target of witch hunts regardless if the Committee had any evidence. In some cases, a lack of evidence was enough to be questioned. Their belief was if there was not enough proof of anticommunism, the accused must have some sort of Communist affiliation.<sup>23</sup> This thought process is unjust, yet it led many people into the interrogation room. This is certainly the case for Quirini, as she desperately tried to avoid communist ties within her Local and was still called in for the hearing. Quirini claims that she did not ask questions about Communist members or discuss it with others so that she could honestly say “I don’t know” when questioned on the topic.<sup>24</sup> Quirini being called in front of the congressional committee in 1948 highlights the fact that there was a red-baited target on her back.

The fear of being labeled as Communist and accused as a subversive to the American government was enough for people to censor themselves of any type of anti-American speech or activity. This phenomenon is called the chilling effect: the discouragement of natural or legal rights due to fear of government retaliation. This spread quickly throughout the United States, as

---

<sup>22</sup> United States Congress House Committee on Education and Labor, *Investigation of Communist Infiltration of UERMWA.: Hearings Before a Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Eightieth Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to H. Res. 111* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948).

<sup>23</sup> Schrecker, 189.

<sup>24</sup> Quirini, Interview with Gerald Zahavi: Unedited Transcript.

both Communist members and sympathizers began to decrease their public voice on their passion for change in government.<sup>25</sup> Quirini proved to be unaffected by the chilling effect, as she spoke openly and honestly throughout her testimony. Her bravery is translated into opposition, as she openly tells the congressional committee that their fearmongering among the American people will have a negative effect on free speech.

Helen Quirini's testimony during the 1948 investigation is one filled with emotion, information, and courage. The questioning began with congressman Charles J. Kersten asking Quirini questions about her job, the union, her roles, and other mundane topics. She answered without hesitation. He stepped into the communist side of the investigation by asking her if there are meetings that occur before the actual meetings, ones that are made up of Communists planning how they will divert the meeting to fit their ideology into trade unionism. Quirini pleaded her first and fifth amendments' rights much to Kersten's dismay. She consulted with her attorney and lawyer on how to answer the next question appropriately, which caused Kersten to argue that she is not allowed to consult others. Based on the transcription, it seems that tension was filling the air rather quickly at this point. In a last ditch attempt to obtain information on UE Communism from Quirini, Congressman Joseph L. Fisher stepped in and asked her whether or not she believes that exposing Communists in her local will result in the union being busted. Again, she went to her constitution and claims that she does not have to answer and said, "I believe very strongly in our constitution [UE Constitution], because you are starting with Communism; tomorrow it will be married women; next day Jews; next day Negroes; next day Italians; next day Poles." Fisher then adjourned the meeting.

---

<sup>25</sup> Thelma McCormack, *Censorship and Libel: The Chilling Effect* (Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1990).

Many people pleaded their constitutional rights against self-incrimination as Quirini did and faced bitter consequences. Seven GE employees were fired after pleading the fifth amendment at the investigation when only four of them had actual communist ties.<sup>26</sup> Quirini was extremely bold in her hearing, as she directly called out the wrongful deeds that were being committed. She rightfully accused the congressmen of targeting people for their political ideologies. It is not a crime to be dissenter of the government, yet the McCarthy era made it so.

Thomas Louis Riggi, former Local 301 member and former Communist Party member also took a stand in his investigation. He began with a reference to Nazi Germany and how its effort to rid society of Communism led to the near extinction of valuable trade unions, thus damaging the German democracy. He voiced his fear that the same events are occurring in America under McCarthyism, to which Congressman Kersten half-heartedly assured him that they are not trying to eradicate trade unions.<sup>27</sup> Despite Kersten's statement, the McCarthy era decreased trade union membership, because of the negative, unfounded information it instilled into the American public. The tactic of associating Communism with unionism deterred the public from advocating unions, which therefore damaged the fight for equal rights in the workplace.

Two weeks after the Schenectady investigation concluded, the General Electric plant cut its ties with the UE in exchange for the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE). This decision was a direct cause of the investigation, as GE did not want to be affiliated with a Communist organization. The Executive Board members voted on the split, as noted in Quirini's

---

<sup>26</sup> Bob Conner, "Ex-GE Worker Admits He Was a Spy," *The Daily Gazette*, September 13, 2008, [https://dailygazette.com/article/2008/09/12/0912\\_schooladd](https://dailygazette.com/article/2008/09/12/0912_schooladd).

<sup>27</sup> Labor, *Investigation of Communist Infiltration of UERMWA*, 244.

documents, and she was the only one who did not approve the change.<sup>28</sup> One can assume that Quirini did not want to change to the IUE because she trusted the UE and saw how hard it had fought against discrimination in the workplace; this was a union characteristic that the IUE did not possess. Quirini was deeply upset about this split and openly discussed it with her colleagues. Workers were able to choose which union they belonged to, but the change certainly affected their choice of union. Perhaps what is most upsetting is that women were losing their chance for an established union representation because of the extreme anticommunist sentiments that put a target on the UE's back.

IUE membership grew in conjunction with anticommunist sentiments. The UE's incessant urge to increase women's rights became a deciding factor in workers leaving the union. This communist agenda turned both male and female workers away from GE, as they felt that the UE's focus of concern changed from gaining worker's benefits and amending their concerns into a civil rights organization.<sup>29</sup> However, dedicated female UE workers maintained their firm stance within the union, as they had benefits that did not exist in the IUE. The UE women sent flyers to other GE plants and other factories contemplating switching to the IUE. In these letters, they begged the women to stay with the UE for their own benefit and list the numerous problems with the IUE.<sup>30</sup>

In a letter from a GE plant in Triffin, Ohio, female UE members begged the Schenectady women to stay with the IUE in order to preserve their local union. "... In unity, there is strength," they write in 1953, desperately telling them to join them in opposition to the IUE.

---

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Kannenberg, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism: The UE Experience," *Labor History* 34, no. 2-3 (June 1, 1993): 309-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00236569300890191>, 322.

<sup>29</sup> Zahavi, 531.

<sup>30</sup> "IUE/UE Switch, UE Propaganda for Women" (1954), Box 1, Folder 56, Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

They argue that the UE has increased female wages in over ten GE plants versus the IUE which has increased female wages in only one GE plant. In this letter from Schenectady GE women to Lynn GE women, the women explain the many wages, conferences, and solutions the UE has put forward to improve the women's workplace, such as fighting for a rate no lower than a common laborers and other protests.<sup>31</sup>

The IUE made its stance on gender equality clear in the contract which included various paragraphs that diminished women's rights in the workplace. The IUE contract did not recognize seniority, which was an important issue for workers, both male and female. Section M of the contract stated that female workers with able-bodied, job-holding husbands did not hold seniority rights over single women. This meant that a married woman could lose her job at any point, should a better, single woman seek a job at the factory. In another part of the contract, it stated that after three days of marriage, the previously single woman would be dismissed from her job.<sup>32</sup> The UE did not have any such rules, and in fact positively highlighted the issues of seniority and married women in factories. This contract statement shows the anti-women sentiments of the IUE in opposition to the pro-women, communist UE. The rift between the IUE and the UE not only created a gap between workers, but it also created a gap between women. The two labor unions were in constant competition, leaving female union workers separated from one another when unity should have taken a front-seat priority.

Quirini was so well known for her activism that the IUE wanted to hire her. The organization offered Helen Quirini a position as an organizer, making \$30 more than she was getting in the GE plant. Because of her knowledge that the IUE did not align with her passion for

---

<sup>31</sup> "Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman: A Message From Schenectady GE Women to Lynn GE Women" (1953), Box 1, Folder 62, Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

<sup>32</sup> "IUE/UE Switch, UE Propaganda for Women."

female rights, she declined.<sup>33</sup> The UE had a rule that no top officer would make more money than the top person in the shop, which limited wage gaps within the union itself. This rule speaks for itself, as the UE management believed themselves to be equal to the workers rather than above. On the other hand, Quirini states that the IUE was making money “hand over fist.” The IUE was a more attractive union for companies to associate with because their contract explicitly states that workers with Communist tendencies will not be accepted. Quirini claimed that the explicit anticommunism allowed for the IUE and companies to fire people easily, as they could label any workers opposing them as communists.<sup>34</sup> This furthers the argument that McCarthyism set to discredit unions, as employer-friendly ones gained more popularity.

To the public, the UE was a haven for economic tyranny and a threat to America. The union’s membership decreased by 460,000 members between the 1940s to the 1950s due to McCarthy’s spoken propaganda against the union’s alleged communist ties. The IUE presented itself as protection against communist accusations, a safe home from the McCarthy era and its chilling effect. Anti- Communists believed that Communists would disrupt traditional American life and therefore cancelled anything having to do with the ideology from their lives.<sup>35</sup> Pushing out the UE meant purifying Schenectady of Communists, therefore, outside forces became involved in dismantling the UE.

The Catholic Church was strongly against the UE and took dramatic measures to see it fail because of its communist ties. During the split, the Catholic churches in the capital region set an agenda against targeted subversives. However, the “subversives” happened to be people who were not active within the church. Leaders of churches associated faithfulness with

---

<sup>33</sup> Quirini, Interview with Gerald Zahavi: Unedited Transcript.

<sup>34</sup> Quirini. Interview with Gerald Zahavi: Unedited Transcript.

<sup>35</sup> Zahavi, 532.

anticommunism. Quirini was visiting her friend's church one day when a list of Communists was passed around. Much to her surprise and dismay, her name was listed! Along with this list, the churches advocated the IUE to go against the list of "Communists." Quirini details that the basement of St. John's Church on Union Street was used as a space to create propaganda used for smear campaigns against the UE.<sup>36</sup> Catholics also made a presence within the labor movements by forming "labor schools" in which they taught Catholics how to organize anticommunist factions in labor unions.<sup>37</sup> Catholic churches used their notoriety and audience as a tool to fight against the alleged Communist UE.

Congressman Fisher hinted at the UE being busted in his investigation of Helen Quirini. When he asked if exposing Communists would lead to the union's demise, he certainly knew it was going to go down regardless.<sup>38</sup> By soiling the UE name with Communist accusations at all levels, McCarthyism was deterring UE membership with spoken propaganda. The IUE sought the fall of the UE by raiding UE-associated factories in an effort to expose Communists.<sup>39</sup> In 1949, the UE was dismissed from the Congress of Industrial Organizations for being a "communist- dominated organization."<sup>40</sup> Ten other left-wing unions were expelled for their reputation of Communist membership as well.<sup>41</sup> Being ousted from one of largest confederations of unions served as a final, detrimental blow for the UE and it sent even more workers over to the IUE. Without CIO membership, the UE were left only with their soiled presentation as a result of McCarthyism.

---

<sup>36</sup> Quirini, Interview with Gerald Zahavi: Unedited Transcript.

<sup>37</sup> Schrecker, 74.

<sup>38</sup> Labor, *Investigation of Communist Infiltration of UERMWA*, 265.

<sup>39</sup> "IUE/UE Switch, UE Propaganda for Women."

<sup>40</sup> Kannenberg, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism," 315.

<sup>41</sup> Schrecker, 339.

Helen Quirini was fortunate that she was able to continue her job after expressing opposition to the McCarthy witch-hunt committee. There were certain workers accused of Communism who proudly spread their ideologies despite public outcry towards them. Women embraced the communist UE because they knew it was their only way to fight for their rights, as the IUE did not prioritize it to the degree that the UE did.<sup>42</sup> But many people desperately tried to shy away from the Communist label as they knew the repercussions that followed.

There are various results that could occur from being labeled as a Communist. Among these are public humiliation, dismissal from work, or having to completely change identity. After the 1948 UE investigation hearings, seven GE workers were fired.<sup>43</sup> One of these employees was Arthur Owens. His next-door neighbor at the time, a man named Boyd, was strongly against the UE and Communism. He revealed that the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) had tapped Owen's phone and frequently called Boyd for Owen's whereabouts and updates.<sup>44</sup> GE's Plant Protection and Security Department kept surveillance of employed radicals, suspected and confirmed, and shared the information with the FBI and New York State government.<sup>45</sup> Forms of private surveillance included going through mailboxes, sifting through the accused person's trash, and wiretapping phones. In a more inconspicuous way of obtaining information, the Bureau would subscribe to the UE's newspaper, get pamphlets, access government reports of the union, and inspect license plates outside of union meetings.<sup>46</sup>

Schenectady's Local 301 endured at least six congressional committee investigations between 1948 and 1954. This number shows the growing rate of McCarthy accusations against

---

<sup>42</sup> Kannenberg, "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism," 323.

<sup>43</sup> Conner, "Ex-GE Worker Admits He Was a Spy."

<sup>44</sup> Zahavi, 535.

<sup>45</sup> Zahavi, 538.

<sup>46</sup> Schrecker, 188.



Communist-based organizations, especially unions. At the height of McCarthyism, GE took extreme lengths to cleanse itself of anything and anyone with communist ties. The company hired Charles LaForge, a New York State Bureau of Criminal Investigations inspector to report on un-American activity within the workplace.<sup>47</sup> By 1953, the overwhelming surge of anticommunism was heard by GE, and they announced, “GE will discharge all admitted communists, spies and saboteurs and will suspend employees who refuse to testify under oath on such matters when queried in public hearings conducted by competent government authority.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the outward violation of constitutional rights that this rule utilized, GE was allowed to enact these charges because of extended interpretation of the 1940 Smith Act. This legislation made it legal to discharge or prosecute anyone suspected of overthrowing the government or interfering with the United States military, which fell under the allegations of Communism.<sup>49</sup> The policy was a direct attack on Fifth Amendment rights, putting McCarthy’s wishes for a cleansed country ahead of the United States Constitution.

In 1954, Local 301’s business agent, Leo Jandreau, pulled the local from the UE and directly put it into the IUE. The majority of workers were complacent with the decision, as they did not want to live with the chilling effect, intimidation, and uncertainty that threatened the GE workers since the first congressional hearing in 1948.<sup>50</sup>

The Communists of the UE never attempted to sabotage the American government. Yet, they were targeted for their progressive ideals of equality within the workplace. In American society, the radical ideas of equal rights for minorities created a Communist label for anyone

---

<sup>47</sup> Zahavi, 539.

<sup>48</sup> Zahavi, 546.

<sup>49</sup> Schrecker, 104.

<sup>50</sup> Zahavi, 547.

who believed or sympathized with it. The McCarthy era took the international tensions America faced and twisted it, using alleged Communists as a scapegoat for the nation's problems. It turned the constitutional right to freely practice political ideas and right to freedom of speech into a crime, setting out on witch hunts to rid the nation of its home-grown enemies. Through these processes, the McCarthy era damaged individual lives of thousands of Americans.

The McCarthy era not only uprooted individuals, but it completely changed workplace environments. The chilling effect made the Communist Party go underground, despite the fact that they were not interested in anarchy against the state. Workers became more closed-minded, afraid of being let go for reading a certain paper or speaking to a communist sympathizer at work. Unions fell apart because of the McCarthy propaganda against them, deteriorating labor organizations that were intended to benefit workers and educate them on their rights as employees.

Helen Quirini of the GE plant in Schenectady, New York serves as one individual of the many who were intimidated and effected by the McCarthy witch-hunts. Her liberal union, the UE, was cut from GE in exchange for an anti-women, anticommunist union that was not created to benefit workers, but created to benefit employees who wanted to escape Communist accusations. Her testimony of opposition in the 1948 congressional hearing is one that exemplifies bravery in the face of all that is terrifying during a time when constitutional rights were withdrawn from the public. When Quirini directly attacked the institution that dismantled her Local 301 piece by piece, she was protecting not only herself, but she was also sticking up for those who had been put down by the wrath of McCarthyism.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Conner, Bob. "Ex-GE Worker Admits He Was a Spy." *The Daily Gazette*, September 13, 2008.

[https://dailygazette.com/article/2008/09/12/0912\\_schooladd](https://dailygazette.com/article/2008/09/12/0912_schooladd).

"IUE/UE Switch, UE Propaganda for Women," 1954. Box 1, Folder 56. Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

Kannenberg, Lisa. "The Impact of the Cold War on Women's Trade Union Activism: The UE Experience." *Labor History* 34, no. 2-3 (June 1, 1993): 309-23.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00236569300890191>.

Labor, United States Congress House Committee on Education and. *Investigation of Communist Infiltration of UERMWA.: Hearings Before a Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, Eightieth Congress, Second Session, Pursuant to H. Res. 111*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948.

McCormack, Thelma. *Censorship and Libel: The Chilling Effect*. Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1990.

"Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman: A Message From Schenectady GE Women to Lynn GE Women," 1953. Box 1, Folder 62. Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

"News Clippings About or Mentioning Helen Quirini," 53, 1970-71, 95, undated 1952. Box 2, Folder 2. Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

Quirini, Helen. "Helen Quirini and General Electric: A Personal Memoir of World War II." Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY), Albany, New York, 2001 1991. Box 2, Folder 4-5. Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

———. Interview with Gerald Zahavi: Unedited Transcript, 1991-1982. Series 1, Box 1, Folder 8. Helen Quirini Papers, Grenander Archives, University at Albany (SUNY).

Schrecker, Ellen. *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. 1st ed. Canada: Little, Brown & Company, 1998.

Zahavi, Gerald. "Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932-1954." *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 514-48.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2944945>.