NOMINATION of HALENA WILSON for the

2022 COOPERATIVE HALL OF FAME – Unsung Hero

Halena Wilson deserves recognition as an unsung co-op hero because of her 30 years as a consumer co-op educator, developer and advocate in the mid 20th century. She was one of the few Black women to be elected to serve on the national Consumer Cooperative Council. She helped to start and support at least 17 co-op study groups in major cities in the US and Canada; and was a cofounder of at least 2 co-ops, The Brotherhood Buying Club, and the Cooperative Union Optical Center in Chicago. For years she regularly contributed articles to the *Black Worker*, and created pamphlets, on cooperative economics and consumer co-op strategies. She believed in and organized collaborations and projects between the labor and cooperative movements – she understood that the power of labor lay not just in their collective bargaining, but also in their buying power as consumers, and the democratic control over work and business ownership that cooperatives enable. Wilson organized lectures by prominent cooperators, and co-op study tours. She was instrumental in raising the awareness of cooperative alternatives in Black communities around the country for decades. Halena Wilson was a selfless and tireless crusader for co-ops, a co-op organizer and advocate as well as a co-op educator and visionary who exemplifies co-op conviction, dedication, perseverance, passion, and insight. Halena Wilson deserves a place in the Co-op Hall of Fame.

Early Years

Halena Wilson was a person anxious to make a contribution to society. Born in 1897 in Denver, Colorado, Wilson was cognizant of a benevolent streak from an early age. In "The Women Behind the Union: Halena Wilson, Rosina Tucker, and the Ladies' Auxiliary to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters," Paula Pfeffer notes that Wilson considered herself a "troubled young girl who wanted to do good and experienced peace of mind only upon praying for guidance." This

sentiment haunted Wilson into adulthood where she suffered from the "'feeling of being useless, of living an utterly aimless and unproductive life'" (561). Wilson was not one though, as becomes apparent, to fold her deck and quit, so she opted for a change in scenery – moving to Chicago where she married Pullman porter Benjamin Wilson.

In Chicago, she joined a number of "social and civic movements and served as a Worthy Matron of the Order of the Eastern Star" (Pfeffer), a fraternal, non-profit mutual aid organization open to both men and women alike. Through her husband's trade union, The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Wilson found a place for herself in the Ladies' Auxiliary. Similar to the mutual aid societies Wilson had leadership in, the Auxiliary provided a place where "she could be of real service in a cause that was seeking to liberate a much exploited people" (Pfeffer 561). It was through her involvement in the Auxiliary that Wilson realized her potential as a consumer cooperative educator and organizer. Collective action and cooperative enterprises were necessary to combat the discrimination faced by African Americans in both the labor and commodity markets. Wilson was cognizant of this fact, and internalized it. Although little-recognized during her lifetime, Wilson's effort and ability at advancing labor-conscious cooperation is worthy of praise nearly a century after she was first elected President of the Ladies' Auxiliary in Chicago.

The Brotherhood & the Auxiliary

The Brotherhood (BSCP) was a labor union organized by African American porters of the Pullman Company, a rail transport company. In *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters,* Melinda Chateauvert states that the BSCP was ultimately responsible for the rise in status of Pullman porters, who were regarded as "aristocrats of black labor in the African American community" stemming from the "union's political power" (xiii) after the BSCP had been granted a contract by the Pullman Company. The BSCP was instrumental in dignifying service work, "establishing the right of porters and maids to earn a living wage under decent conditions" (18). Chateauvert emphasizes that although the Brotherhood was formally regarded as

a trade union, it was “not simply a labor union, nor a race organization, nor a political movement, nor was the Auxiliary just a women’s group; they were an amalgam of all four. Black union leaders understood that race, gender, and class were fundamentally political, and their programs reflected that consciousness” (xii-xiii). “The Ladies’ Auxiliary,” Chateauvert continues, “was the distaff side of the Brotherhood,” and while the union sisters – as the women of the Auxiliary referred to themselves as – considered “themselves members of the Brotherhood,” they were in actuality the “wives and female relatives of sleeping car porters” (xi) who lent their support to their husbands and the union as a whole.

Scholars Chateuvert, Pfeffer, and Jessica Gordon-Nembhard all accentuate the fundamental role played by the union women in the success and political and economic might of the union. Women ultimately controlled the purse: their porter husbands brought home their salaries, but the wives ultimately would decide what to spend the income on. For the “Auxiliary women, consumerism was more than a labor strategy: it was also a tactic to obtain civil rights” (Chateauvert xiii). Their fundamental goals were to make their husbands’ salaries stretch, but also, importantly, to keep the funds flowing through the African American community – support and build up African American-owned, led, and operated businesses and cooperatives. President Wilson was of the mind that if people spent their earnings on union-made goods, consumer demand would create more union jobs (140). Thus, a symbiotic relationship would exist between union labor and consumption – the important takeaway is that the effort had to be collective for this relationship to work. “By operating consumer cooperatives and providing advice on ‘better buymanship’ and other consumer issues,” Chateauvert states, “the Auxiliary politicized the spending habits of all union women and raised members’ living standards” (139). Auxiliary members became involved in civic efforts to “improve their neighborhoods, schools, and public facilities" (14), and they managed to do so in a variety of ways. The Auxiliary hosted parties and luncheons in order to bring in new members, and regularly attended and led conferences. Members

were active in the arenas of political and labor issues, as well. Along with organizing and partaking in protests and picket lines, the Auxiliary was involved with the "ratification of the woman's suffrage amendment and *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas,* [which illuminates] the foundations women laid for the modern civil rights movement" (Chateauvert 16).

Throughout its existence, the Auxiliary was graced with many bright, driven, and skilled women, who truly became the spine of the trade union; however, one would be hard pressed to find someone more devoted and more fierce an advocate for this organization, for the women, and for conscious cooperative effort than President Halena Wilson. To say that Wilson was the beating heart that delivered the vital blood flow to the organization would be an apt metaphor.

Organizing & Empowering Women

"Organization," Halena Wilson declared, "is the only force recognized by the great capitalists of this country" (Chateauvert 95), but it was not to appease these 'great capitalists' that brought Wilson to lead the Chicago starting in 1930, and eventually the International, Ladies' Auxiliary starting in 1938. She remained president of the Chicago chapter until 1953; and president of the entire International Ladies' Auxiliary until 1965. She made good on the duties expected of her by the Brotherhood, such as promoting the BSCP and enticing others to join the union; starting and stockpiling an "Unemployment Fund" in the case that a porter loses his job and cannot afford to pay for his family's livelihood; and collecting dues from union members. But the union wanted, in the words of BSCP President A. Philip Randolph, "more than dues from a member. . . . It wants his allegiance, devotion and understanding, which can only come through continuous education, agitation and organization" (Chateauvert 95). In this sentiment, Randolph and Wilson aligned, and Wilson took her part in educating and organizing the women of the Auxiliary very seriously.

The porters' wives were the ultimate decision makers of how the family budget is spent, and building on the wives' spending power, Wilson "encouraged labor-conscious consumerism to affirm the economic importance of women" (Chateauvert 14). In her position as an educator,

Wilson felt it was vital that the women esteem to be and recognize themselves as labor-conscious consumers. Wilson's educational curriculum, then, centered on how to leverage the husbands' good salaries in order to build social and financial assets for the African American community. In 1938, in the "Bulletin of Instruction on Decisions and Orders of the First Convention of Ladies Auxiliary and International Executive Board," one of the many bulletins Wilson would direct in the years to come, the Ladies' Auxiliary "dictated that 'as soon as convenient,' the local auxiliaries should subscribe to 'Consumers Union' and 'Consumers Guide' publications. [Members] were also directed to 'information about the history and conduct of consumers' cooperatives' and 'advised to study credit unions,'" (92) Gordon Nembhard explains in her book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice.* In a great example of where organization meets education, Wilson would write to local auxiliaries, suggesting topics that would be worthwhile to include in their educational programs, such as consumer education, how to combat high living costs, and generally how co-ops are structured and their benefits. Wilson was content with starting members off with "condensed pamphlets she had written and gradually build their knowledge of and interest in consumer cooperation" (93). The purpose of these educational programs stretches far beyond allegiance to the union. The drive behind Wilson's efforts was devotion towards a greater cause: "During that period of study the members learn of the many advantages common to the Cooperative Movement. They learn how to get quality and value for the money being spent. They learn how to put an end to ruthless exploitation, how to lower prices and how to shorten the distance between the middle man and the ultimate consumer who happens to be themselves. They learn that the future well being of themselves and their offspring, that the success of the enterprise depends upon the consolidated efforts of the entire group" (Wilson, 1942 in Gordon Nembhard 93-94). Wilson was truly unmatched in the organization as a co-op educator. It is difficult to find another individual who shared her fervor and positive outlook regarding cooperatives.

It Starts with Education

Her role as an educator was important to Wilson. Thus, with BSCP President Randolph, Wilson "spearheaded the auxiliary's interest in consumer education and cooperatives" (Gordon Nembhard 156), through promotion and development of study groups for Auxiliary chapters nationwide. Led by Wilson, the "Chicago Ladies' Auxiliary formed several study groups on consumers' cooperatives," Chateauvert confirms (143). Beside Wilson's hometown of Chicago, the study clubs emerged in Denver, St. Louis, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Detroit, Indianapolis, Washington DC, New Orleans, Omaha, Oklahoma City, Los Angeles, Seattle, Montgomery, Pittsburgh, Montreal, Buffalo, and Jersey City, devoting "at least one meeting per month to discussing cooperatives" (Chateauvert 143). The Denver, Chicago, and Washington DC Auxiliaries started buying clubs, and the Portland Auxiliary started a consumer store.

Wilson regularly "contributed articles and auxiliary news to the union organ, the *Black Worker* and inaugurated a Consumer Education Committee to expose fraudulent and misleading advertising" (Pfeffer 567). Her articles in *Black Worker* were a fundamental portion of the reading material that members were encouraged to review. Additionally, members would attend lectures by local cooperative representatives, and participate in "sponsored group tours of stores, credit unions, and housing projects" (Chateauvert 143). So the curriculum was well-rounded, offering members a variety of tools by which to study and learn from cooperative enterprises. The appeal of cooperatives laid on the premise that "cooperative buying kept money in the hands of workers and kept hard-earned money circulating in the labor movement instead of leaking out in purchases from non-labor-supporting producers and sellers" (Gordon Nembhard 155). This worked to advance economic justice in African American communities - something Wilson was keen to achieve.

Indeed, Wilson was absolutely instrumental in raising awareness within the African American community of the alternatives that exist but that remain underutilized – opting for

businesses and services that serve the community, rather than, for example, those that unfairly raise prices for African American customers. Through her national educational campaign, Wilson was able to reach union wives beyond her locale in Chicago, and by publishing articles in the *Black Worker,* she was able to engage a wider audience, reaching eyes beyond the Auxiliary and Brotherhood membership.

Brotherhood Cooperative Buying Club

Wilson was a significant figure in organizing the Consumer Cooperative Buying Club in Chicago and was chair of its Education Committee (Gordon Nembhard 155-157). When it first opened in November 1943, the Cooperative Buying Club only operated on Saturday afternoons, but later opened during weekdays as well. It was not in the most convenient location as some members would have to travel ten or more blocks to reach it, and it did not provide everything a household would need, necessitating stops at the butcher, baker, etc., but despite its limitations, the buying club served as an important experiment in exposing members to alternative economic solutions. "Black trade unionists," much like Wilson herself, "endorsed consumer cooperatives as an alternative to the overpriced, low-quality goods sold by stores in racially segregated neighborhoods" (Chateauvert 142). Operation of the Cooperative Buying Club hinged on the idea that "cooperatives would eliminate profiteering from racial discrimination" (142). Under Wilson's guidance, the store adhered to the Rochdale Principles, which rested on democratic control. "Membership was unlimited and open to all without exclusion," and unlike in capitalist ventures where one share equals one vote, "cooperatives allowed only one vote per member, no matter how many shares of stock he or she owned" (Chateauvert 143). The Club set the price to join at $1, and each share cost $10. The women organizing the Chicago store collectively decided that once they reached three hundred shares, they would open a storefront – which they eventually did. There were several cooperative stores like the Cooperative Buying Club that were open on the South Side of Chicago during this period in the 1940s, but what sets the Brotherhood store apart is that

it was “perhaps the only one founded and controlled by African American women” (143-144). Referenced as the “Brotherhood” store, the name certainly obscured the buying club’s true organizers and operators, Wilson and the women of the Auxiliary.

While the cooperative buying club did well for itself after the Depression, the co-op store did not see the same success post-WWII and was officially dissolved in February 1950, with members’ equity returned by check. Chateauvert attributes the decline in the cooperative store’s popularity to economic prosperity, as the “abundance of goods filling grocery and department stores,” which “made the basic groceries offered by the Brotherhood Cooperative look paltry” (152). BSCP President A. Philip Randolph tried to rekindle interest in the co-op, but was ultimately unsuccessful. Wilson, true to her belief in cooperative ventures, proposed that the proceeds of the buying club be used to open a credit union instead. In 1945 the Montreal chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters had opened a credit union, Walker Credit Union, so they had an example. Chateauvert indicates a letter Wilson wrote to Randolph in July 1949, in which she explains that the credit union “was suggested as a ‘last attempt to save the Co-op Buying Club’” (152). Co-op members were divided on this and there was strong opposition among the Brotherhood leadership not to proceed with a credit union in Chicago, so the credit union idea was not approved. This was a particularly low point for Wilson and she felt that her co-op efforts in Chicago were defeated. Randolph replied glowingly and optimistically to a pessimistic letter from her in 1949:

> “I hope that you are not discouraged about the outcome of your splendid efforts in behalf of the development of a cooperative and credit union for the Auxiliary. … You can feel that your efforts have been fruitful because you have planted the seed of cooperation among the women. This seed is bound to grow and eventually flower” (Randolph 1949).

With Wilson’s spirit, however, the defeat of the buying club and the failure of the credit union to take off did not prevent her from trying her hand at other kinds of cooperative undertakings. In 1947 Wilson and other members of the Auxiliary attended a Co-op Labor Conference sponsored

by the Council for Cooperative Development. Wilson was put on the By-Laws Committee that would outline the relationship between labor and the cooperative movement (Gordon Nembhard 159-60). This was an important role for a Black women - and was an example of the esteem that she was held by both the labor movement in Chicago and the co-op movement. That same year, the education director of National Cooperatives, Inc., C.J. McLanahan, wrote a letter to Randolph praising the co-op education work that the auxiliaries were doing. In his letter in reply, Randolph indicated that they were "making headway in the development of an educational program in consumer cooperation," and hoped that the Auxiliary would keep in contact with the co-op movement (Gordon Nembhard 159). In 1948, McLanahan wrote Wilson directly (another example of the esteem) about a demonstration project National Cooperatives was developing but needed help with. He asked Wilson not just for financial support from the Ladies' Auxiliary, but also to help shape "the course of a total cooperative program for the labor communities" (McLanahan 1948).

Union Cooperative Optical Center

Wilson and the Chicago Auxiliary "continued to participate in consumer cooperatives after its own buying club closed" (Chateauvert 153). In the fall of 1951, Wilson helped found the Chicago Union Cooperative Optical Center. This was a joint project between the Coalition of Trade Unions and Consumer Cooperation in Chicago, many American Federation of Labor unions, and the BSCP Ladies' Auxiliary (the only exclusively women organization of the affiliated groups (Gordon Nembhard 155)). The co-op "made more than sixty thousand trade union families eligible for low-cost eye care" (Chateauvert 153). The objective of this eye care center was to allow people to access "worthy and reliable eye care at prices they can afford to pay" (153). The price of coverage was just 30 cents a month, and glasses would cost half the price charged by conventional eye care providers.

Wilson did not stop at the eye center, though, rather she aspired to take "further steps in providing medical care and treatment under joint union sponsorship." This would allow members to have a wide variety of coverage: both in choice of healthcare providers and in types of medical services rendered. Although the Auxiliary was not able to bring that vision to become reality, it is clear that Wilson certainly did not lack foresight.

Youth Involvement

Despite not having any children of her own, Wilson saw the value that lay in investing in youth, particularly in teaching children cooperative principles. She greatly protested the introduction of Junior Achievement (JA) business management programs in public schools, as Wilson regarded these as "'the most subtle long range anti-labor campaign ever conducted in America'" (Chateauvert 151). She condemned the programs, sponsored by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), as a kind of ploy to preserve 'American Business,' or the status quo that is concerned only with profit, not with workers. Such curriculum, Wilson argued, instructed youth how to "'raise capital by selling stocks and bonds, how to vote dividends, how to make, advertise and sell their merchandise,'" and how to "circumvent 'existing labor laws and how to oppose organized labor'" (151). It is hard not to empathize with Wilson, as she did not want to watch African American children grow up and go down one of two avenues: work strenuously yet not get very far as a result of discrimination, or turn their backs on their brethren and 'sell out' to the highest bidder. Cooperatives do not make one choose between two undesirable or unsettling choices; rather cooperative education instructs youths on respect for labor and contributing to one's own wellbeing and to that of his or her community. And although this endeavor never came to fruition, it is not for lack of trying on Wilson's part, who – with Randolph and the International Executive Board – had drawn up "a constitution and a program for a Junior Auxiliary in the mid-1940s" (152). Wilson's desire to educate and instruct the youth was unquestionably indicative of her vision of the union's involvement in cooperatives.

Other Cooperative Efforts & Concluding Remarks

Beside the activities already mentioned, Halena Wilson also served on the "city-wide Chicago steering committee organizing the 1935 Thursday-Friday meat boycott to protest prices," and she ended up later joining the "Southside Tenants' League to work against the high rents landlords demanded from African Americans" (Chateauvert 78). Wilson's dedication truly knew no bounds, as she was involved in a diverse range of cooperative activity – from consumer cooperatives, to health, youth, and even housing cooperative efforts. Regarding the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, "it was the women who made the union," Chateauvert claims, yet women's trade union auxiliaries "have largely been ignored by historians" (15). Few easily searchable records remain on Halena Wilson and the Ladies' Auxiliary – yet this is not for lack of achievement, rather the deficiency is indicative of the discriminatory views of the time in which Wilson operated. As an African American woman, Wilson was disadvantaged in two ways during her lifetime, but neither her sex nor the color of her skin kept her from advocating for her community the best way she knew how: through cooperative ventures. She was a co-op educator, leader and visionary.

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