

# Special Collections and University Archives

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## Ferd Wulkan Papers

1965-2006

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A 1968 graduate in mathematics from MIT, Ferd Wulkan has been a fixture in activist circles for many years. A member of SDS in

college and a rank-and-file clerical union leader at Boston University, Wulkan moved to Amherst in 1989. Passionate in the intersection of the labor movement with other progressive movements, specifically that of left-wing politics, he served for 15 years as a field representative with Locals 509 and 888 of SEIU, working with non-faculty professional personnel at UMass Amherst and Boston, and then as a representative and organizer for the Massachusetts Society of Professors from 2004 to 2016. In 2007, Wulkan became organizing director for the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts (PHENOM), a grassroots advocacy organization for affordable and accessible public higher education.

The Wulkan Collection consists of a fascinating array of material from Leftist and radical political movements during the late 1960s and early 1980s, with an emphasis on the Cambridge-Somerville area. In addition to a rich assemblage of formally published pamphlets and magazines, the collection includes a large number of fliers, handouts, informally published works, and underground newspapers on Socialist, Feminist, and anarchist topics, The Vietnam War, the labor movement, civil rights, and Black Power.

## Background on Ferd Wulkan

As an undergraduate in mathematics at MIT (SB, 1968), Ferd Wulkan was active in the Tiddlywinks Club and Students for a Democratic Society, the latter of which became a truer guide to his future course in life. A leftist, Wulkan chose to follow the path of many other members of the New Left of the 1960s, to become a committed workplace activist, hoping to spark a Socialist transformation in American society. He began his career as a labor organizer by taking a position as an orderly at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge, joining Transfusion, a Socialist healthcare worker's organization. Building a union at Mount Auburn, however, would not be an easy task. Transfusion imploded over disagreements about whether the intention of organizing was to build a union or seed a revolutionary movement, leaving just five members to continue as the aptly named Red Blood Cell. Although most members of Transfusion become part of the Party-building wing of the New Communist movement, members of Red Blood Cell founded the insistent non-sectarian, Organizing Committee for a Boston Area Socialist Organization. Never considering itself as leading the working class, and believing the time was not yet right for a new Communist party, OC/BASO organized as a "cadre" rather than "vanguard," and focused on discipline and organization, developing clear political positions based on rigorous study and analysis.

After six years at Mount Auburn, Wulkan sought more fertile ground at Boston University, taking a clerical position in the Economics Department in April 1979. There he was thrown immediately into a fraught struggle with the university's reactionary president, Jonathan Silber, to win recognition for clerical workers organizing under the radical District 65 of the United Auto Workers. Barely two weeks after he was hired, he found himself on strike, side by side with faculty and librarians, who were on their own campaign for union representation. After two and a half up and down weeks, the union won.

At BU, Wulkan experienced levels of both success and frustration. Although largely supported by the Economics Department, his labor activism frequently pitted him against the administration, as did his activism against apartheid in South Africa and U.S. intervention in Central America. A turning point of sorts for him came after District 65 succeeded in winning an agency shop at BU in 1985 and sought to expand by organizing clerical workers at several of Boston's private colleges. Outmaneuvered by management, they failed profoundly. At the same time, the long decline and ultimate dissolution of District 65 led the Boston University clerical staff to affiliate with UAW Local 2324, which proved to be more bureaucratic and unresponsive.

In 1989, Wulkan accepted a full time position at UMass Amherst as staff member and field representative for Local 509 (and later, Local 888) of the Service Employees International Union, serving non-faculty professional personnel at the university. From the outset, he found Amherst entirely unlike Boston, discovering a markedly less oppositional environment for organizing and a solid base of experienced organizers with whom to work. During his time in SEIU, he took part in campaigns against merit pay and to organize a graduate student union, but his greatest struggle came after SEIU reorganized its Massachusetts locals, creating a new local (888) for UMass, where Wulkan became the higher education coordinator. The president of Local 888 did not share the democratic style of the professional staff unit nor Wulkan's inclusive style of leadership, setting off a lengthy struggle. After trying to reconcile the differing approaches and fighting for the member-run vision, Wulkan resigned his position and set about organizing the rest of the local (primarily outside higher education) for a democratic process. After exploring the formation of an independent union, he negotiated with SEIU's national leadership and struck a deal whereby 2,300 members left SEIU in 2004 to join the Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA), the union for faculty and librarians at UMass Amherst.

From 2004 to 2016, Wulkan worked for the Massachusetts Society of Professors (MSP) and as an organizing director for PHENOM, the Public Higher Education Network of Massachusetts (PHENOM), advocating for public higher education at the state level. Although he retired in 2016, he has remained true to his roots, staying active in PHENOM and other causes.

## Scope of collection

The Wulkan Collection consists of a fascinating array of material from Leftist and radical political movements during the late

1960s and early 1980s, with an emphasis on the Cambridge-Somerville area. In addition to a rich assemblage of formally published pamphlets and magazines, the collection includes a large number of fliers, handouts, informally published works, and underground newspapers on Socialist, Feminist, and anarchist topics, The Vietnam War, the labor movement, civil rights, and Black Power. Some groups highlighted throughout the collection include the Radical Education Project, Solidarity, Our Generation, and the IWW.

## Series descriptions

### Series 1. Labor Activism

1970-2006

Wulkan's own in-depth collection of personal notes, records, and research, as well as papers he wrote during the 1960s into the early 2000s, relating to his activism. Also included are detailed communications and documents of the unions he was involved with including SEIU Locals 888 and 509, as well as documents from his time at BU. Issues of *Transfusion* and *Deadpan* from Wulkan's time as a hospital worker are also included along with local pamphlets, mail, periodicals, and handouts from Somerville and the Greater Boston Area.

### Series 2. Labor Publications

1970-1986

Publications focused on the union and labor movements of the late 1960s into the early 1980s both nationally and internationally. Among it are various pamphlets on workers control, with documents pertaining to union organization strategies as well as historical cases of union formation and strikes. Note that periodicals in Series 3 also offer insight on the labor and union movements: periodicals associated with labor-related aspects of the Women's movement or African Americans are included in Series 2, while periodicals from social justice movements pertaining to those groups are located in Series 3.

### Series 3. Social and Political Movements

1965-1995

Publications including a variety of newspapers, magazines, handouts, pamphlets and other documentation related to the social justice movements and events of the 1960s-1980s. The series has a strong focus on the 1970s and features a collection of various newspapers as well as a collection of the periodical *Radical America*. Among the topics included are the women's movement, civil rights, gay liberation, the tenant's rights movement, and Native American rights.

Publications including political documents, essays, and pamphlets focusing on the theory and application of socialism and communism and their global movements with focuses on China and the Soviet Union. Also present are a diversity of pamphlets and handouts of radical and anarchist movements. Periodicals and pamphlets documenting struggles in the Middle East. Groups such as SDS and Solidarity are featured and the series also includes documents on the Vietnam War and American influence abroad.

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## Administrative information

### Access

The collection is open for research.

### Provenance

Acquired from Ferd Wulkan, Sept. 2014 (2014-132).

### Processing Information

Processed by Julia Casey, January 2019.

### Related Material

Antiracism

Communism & Socialism

LGBTQ

Peace

Political radicalism

Social justice

Vietnam War

Women & feminismw

### Language:



English

## Copyright and Use (More information )

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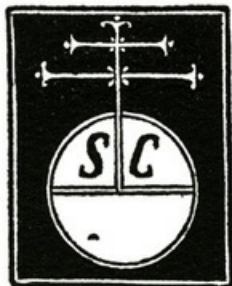
## Search terms

### Subjects

Cambridge (Mass.)--History  
Clerks--Labor unions--Massachusetts  
Feminism  
Hospitals--Employees--Labor unions--Massachusetts  
Labor unions--Massachusetts--Amherst  
Labor unions--Massachusetts--Boston  
Radicals--Massachusetts--Cambridge  
Socialists--Massachusetts  
Somerville (Mass.)--History  
Underground press publications  
Vietnam War, 1961-1975--Protest movements

### Contributors

Wulkan, Ferd **[main entry]**  
Service Employees International Union. Local 509 (Boston, Mass.)  
Service Employees International Union. Local 888 (Boston, Mass.)  
Massachusetts Teacher's Association  
Transfusion  
Organizing Committee for a Boston Area Socialist Organization



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Ph. 413-545-7282 (545-SCUA)

