

HISTORIC MARKER PROGRAM

Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission

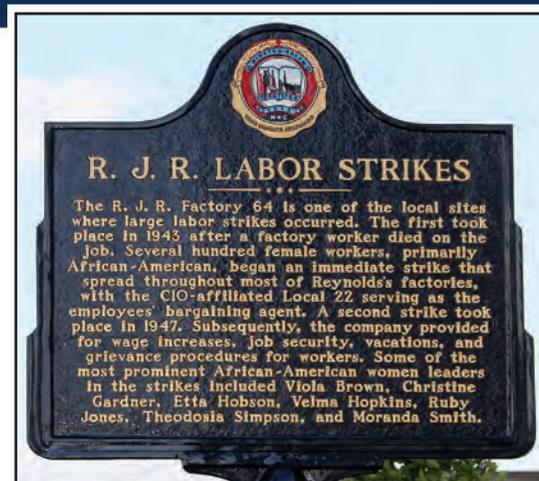
R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company Factory 64 Labor Strikes N. Research Parkway between E. Fourth & E. Fifth Streets

From the 1940s to the early 1950s, labor rights were a contentious issue not only in Winston-Salem, but throughout the United States. In particular, African-Americans and poor whites were consistently struggling with their employers, demanding decent wages and practical benefits. The R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company was one of the largest employers in Winston-Salem at the time, and labor strikes that occurred downtown in 1943 and 1947 impacted a great number of people, both within the tobacco industry and outside of it.

After a worker died on the job at the Factory 64, a group of workers, primarily African-American women, organized a strike that spread throughout most of the R.J. Reynolds factories. Through the United Tobacco Workers Local 22, the workers organized a sit-down strike in 1943. New Dealers, supporters of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal policies, saw the work of Local 22 as an opportunity to advance its “Southern Front,” which included labor unionists, civil rights activists, and Southern New Dealers. This coalition saw the empowerment of poor Southerners as key to reforming the South.



A second strike in 1947 was the result of the R.J. Reynolds administration refusing to create a 65-cent minimum wage for stemmers, mostly African-American women that were responsible for separating the tobacco leaves from their stems. The strike only lasted from July to September, but it enjoyed a significant amount of community support. In the



end, an agreement was reached that would grant a 60-cent minimum wage to workers in Factory 64, as well as three paid holidays for seasonal employees.

Success for unionized labor in Winston-Salem was short-lived, however, as a ruling of the National Labor Relations Board stripped Local 22 of its last rights to represent workers in the 1950s. New Dealers and union activists across the country retreated from the South, having met too much resistance for relatively little progress.

The organizing efforts of Local 22 and the strikes at Factory 64 influenced the development of the African-American community in Winston-Salem, both politically and economically.



This information is also available
at the Forsyth County
Historic Resources Commission's web site:
<http://www.ForsythCountyHRC.org>