

# A strike for justice

## The UAW was a key player in knocking down racial barriers in bowling

Bowling has a way of creating solidarity outside the workplace like no other activity. Amid the repeated thumps of balls hitting the alleys and crashing into pins, we gather at our local alleys to compete and socialize with our union brothers and sisters. By the mid-1940s, it was America's most popular participation sport and remains popular among our members today.

As popular as it became, it was not always a sport that allowed everyone to bowl together.

Walter Reuther recognized that only white UAW members could enjoy the sport because the American Bowling Congress

(ABC), bowling's sanctioning body, limited participation in its events to whites at the nation's 75,000 alleys. Reuther could not accept that while our union was working hard to desegregate the workplace, that work was being undermined because of discrimination in society. A year after becoming UAW president in 1946, he put the UAW at the forefront of the national movement

to desegregate bowling alleys across the nation.

"Walter Reuther believed that fighting discrimination in the workplace had to be extended to other parts of our daily lives," UAW President Dennis Williams said. "Not everyone was supportive of this at the time, but he recognized it was the right thing to do as union activists and human beings."

It's with that history that some of the top bowlers from locals from across the nation will gather in suburban Detroit to compete in the International UAW Finals Bowling Championship on May 7. This tournament was first held in 1948 as a response to the ABC's discriminatory policy and the fact that the Detroit Bowling Proprietors' Association banned African-

Americans from city bowling alleys.

The UAW's strong participation in desegregating bowling alleys is an important piece of our union's history, said Alyce Graves Kirk, a Local 6000 retiree who bowls in two leagues. While there may be some people who believe that unions should stick to issues within their workplaces, Kirk is thankful that her union took a stand for equal rights for all.

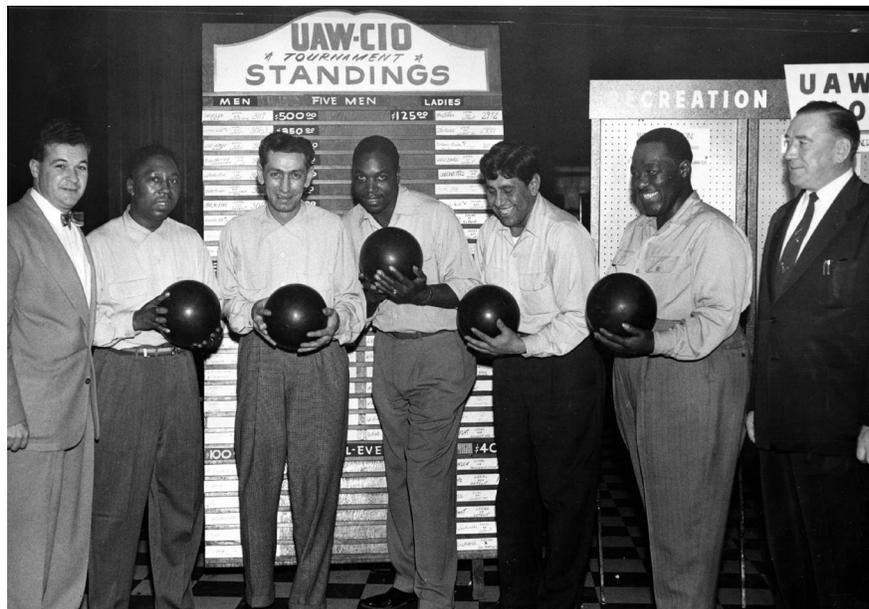
"It's one of the main things I think a union should fight for," Kirk said. The former eligibility specialist for the Michigan Department of Human Services added that

younger members of the union can learn a great deal from this moment in our union's history – and get involved to ensure rights are preserved.

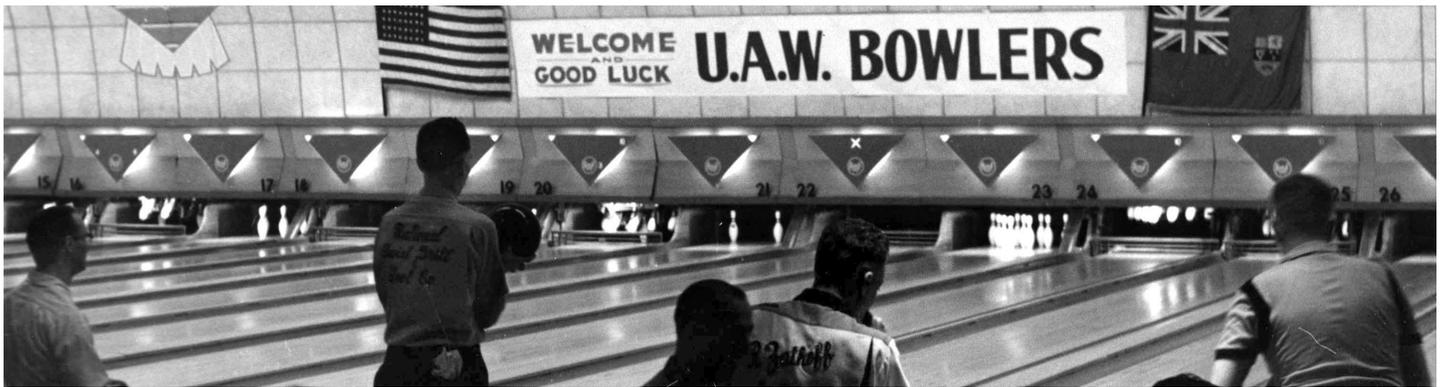
In 1946, Father Charles Carow, a member of the ABC's executive board and of the executive committee of the Catholic Youth Organization in New York, petitioned the ABC board to rescind its discriminatory policy to no avail. But his efforts

caught Reuther's attention. Reuther soon instructed William H. Oliver, co-director of the UAW Fair Practices Department, to form a national committee to pressure ABC to desegregate. Reuther also gave Olga Madar, the director of the UAW Recreation Department who would later become the union's first female vice president, the task of eliminating racial bias in organized UAW bowling. The Recreation Department took the campaign to UAW locals across the country to get reluctant white bowlers to break with the ABC and the Women's International Bowling Congress (WIBC).

It wasn't easy work. John D'Agostino and Jess Corona, two Recreation Department staffers, were given the assignment of taking the campaign to bowling alleys



The UAW's strong participation in desegregating bowling alleys is an important piece of our union's history.



where UAW members bowled. D'Agostino told *Solidarity* magazine in 1995 that he recalled a particularly rough confrontation at a Detroit local.

"It was a very heated meeting. The members were very angry that we might take bowling away from them," said D'Agostino, who needed an escort by a local officer to ensure his safety when he left the meeting.

"We are not trying to deprive our membership of the right to bowl," he wrote one union local in Ohio. "But we would like them to bowl unsanctioned. How else are we going to break the un-American, un-democratic ABC organization?"

The UAW formed the National Committee for Fair Play in Bowling (NCFPB) and recognized it needed a strong personality with persuasive political skills to lead the committee and draw other prestigious Americans to the fight. Oliver and another union member, Joseph V. Tuma, went to Minneapolis to convince its young mayor, Hubert H. Humphrey, to chair the committee. Humphrey, a progressive who would later become a U.S. senator and vice president, was a strong labor supporter who formed his own aversion to racial discrimination while attending graduate school in the Deep South. Humphrey's participation helped draw notables such as World Heavyweight Boxing Champion Joe Louis, Women's Open Golf Champion Betty Hicks, NAACP President Walter White and others to the committee.

Soon, the UAW and other organizations decided to hold separate All-American Bowling Tournaments in major cities to compete with the ABC. The first was held in Detroit at the Eastern Market Rec Center and was the hardest to organize because many bowling proprietors, pressured by the Bowling Proprietors Association of Greater Detroit, refused to let the union use their lanes. Our union established the UAW International Bowling Championships and held the first one in January 1948 at Herbert Fenton's Dexter Recreation Center. Pressure began to build on the ABC as more tournaments were held and other prominent individuals and organizations joined the cause.

In March 1948, the ABC had an opportunity to rescind its racist policy, but declined. Humphrey and the UAW were undeterred.

"Despite this decision, many of the organizations and people who have worked with us are now more determined than ever to guide our program to a successful conclusion, and they feel that, in so doing, victory will be ours," Oliver wrote to Humphrey, who wrote back:

"I am particularly encouraged when I read about the successful tournaments we are holding," Humphrey said in his letter. "It is very important to destroy by concrete action the myths and stereotypes and rationalizations which are used to defend discrimination."

In December 1948, the UAW, along with numerous other organizations, took legal action against the ABC, based on a New Jersey law outlawing discrimination. It delayed legal action until March of the following year, when the ABC again refused to lift the "whites only" clause. With Humphrey recently elected to the Senate, it was the UAW's Oliver who guided the effort to win the campaign. After a full year of legal wrangling in many states, the state of Illinois found that the ABC had violated its anti-discrimination law, fined it \$2,500 and threatened to void its Illinois chapter. In August 1950, the ABC finally relented and its competitions were now open to all. The WIBC soon followed.

Desegregation in bowling came along slowly outside the UAW. Local 6000's Kirk remembers when she started bowling in the late 1970s, there were still bowling proprietors in non-UAW affiliated leagues that practiced discrimination. She's proud of her union's role in desegregating the sport.

"I think if it wasn't for people in the UAW who put some of those ideas out there and got people to accept them, nothing would have changed," Kirk said.

*Editor's note: Some of the historical background in this piece can be attributed to "More than Sports: How Hubert H. Humphrey and the United Auto Workers Union helped to achieve the Desegregation of Bowling in America 1946-1950," a 2005 research paper by Malina Iida, then a law student at the University of Hawaii, and John C. Walter, professor emeritus at the University of Washington.*