

Temporary Workers and the Turn to the UAW: Clerical Organizing at Eastern Michigan University

Drawing on newly opened archival materials from the United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1975 records at the Walter P. Reuther Library and additional UAW collections, this paper examines clerical organizing at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) in the 1970s, focusing on conflicts over the growing use of temporary labor. During this period, clerical and technical employees at EMU were represented by the independent Clerical and Technical Association (CTA), but as inflation, tightening university budgets, and shifting employment practices made bargaining increasingly difficult, clerical workers increasingly confronted the university's reliance on temporary employees who fell outside the bargaining unit. Administrators used temporary clericals to meet staffing needs while avoiding contractual obligations to unionized workers, a practice that full-time employees argued undermined job security, weakened the bargaining unit, and threatened negotiated workplace standards. In response, union members sought to limit the length of temporary appointments in an effort to prevent administrators from substituting temporary labor for permanent positions. By examining internal union correspondence, bargaining records, and organizing materials, this paper argues that conflicts over temporary labor became central to clerical organizing at EMU and played an important role in the decision of the CTA to affiliate with the UAW. The case demonstrates how clerical workers in higher education confronted emerging forms of precarious labor and turned to union affiliation as a strategy to defend job stability and strengthen collective bargaining power.