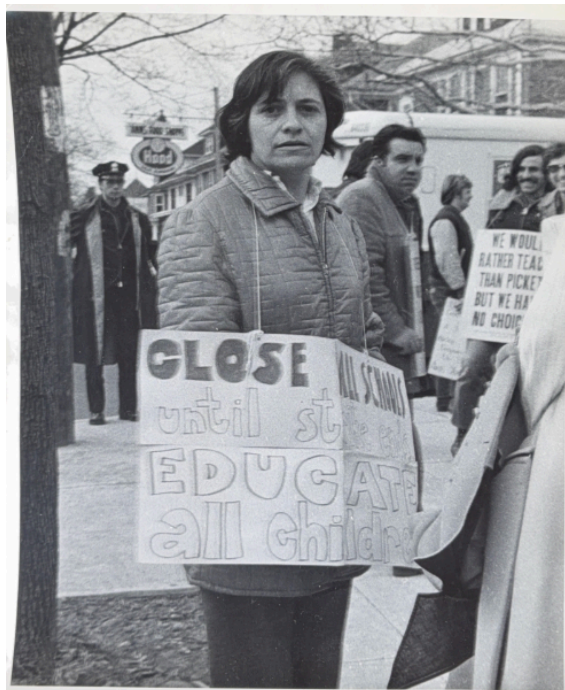


## **“A Wonderful Struggle”: Local Jewish Women in the Labor Movement**

**“A Wonderful Struggle” explores the often-overlooked role of Jewish women in New Haven’s labor movement, particularly in white-collar and “pink-collar” professions such as social work, clerical labor, and teaching. While public memory often focuses on industrial workers, these women organized, struck, negotiated, and built unions that reshaped their workplaces and expanded labor rights. Their activism reflected both their professional experiences and their broader commitments to social justice.**

### **Social Work**

Social workers in New Haven organized to protect both their clients and themselves. Leaders such as Irmgard “Irm” Rosenzweig Wessel demonstrated how professional care and labor activism could reinforce one another. As a refugee from Nazi Germany, Irm’s personal history shaped her lifelong dedication to helping vulnerable people. She became a union leader, the first non-CEO on United Way’s board, contract negotiator, and mentor, advocating for fair treatment of her colleagues while also supporting broader labor and social justice causes.



Irm Wessel on the picket line for the 1975 New Haven Federation of Teachers strike.

## City woman feted with Reagan

# New Haven resident honored

By BILL LAZARUS  
Staff Reporter

When Irmgard Wessel returned to Eureka College recently to receive an Alumni Award of Merit, dozens of top reporters came along, too. There also were nearly 20 television cameras.

When the New Haven clinical social worker visited an old friend in a nearby nursing home there, special agents had secured the parking lot and guarded the doors — as they had for almost everything near the college.

Unfortunately, her speech to 800 people at the May 9 banquet went unrecorded. In fact, her entire visit was omitted from the local newspapers. The media seemed more interested in one of the other three award winners.

That was understandable. Ms. Wessel shared the banquet podium with President Ronald Reagan, who was inducted into the small college's sports hall of fame as he commemorated the 50th anniversary of his graduation.

The president also spoke at graduation exercises, where he introduced the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks concept to the 200 seniors and their families and to the rest of the world who read the detailed reports.

Ms. Wessel's quiet return with her husband was completely lost in the hoopla surrounding Eureka College's most famous alumnus. She didn't mind. "It was overwhelming," the 1947 Eureka graduate said.

A New Haven resident, Ms. Wessel said she stayed in the same hotel as the president and the first lady. "It was like an armed camp," she said. A clinical social worker at Family Counseling of Greater New Haven and president of the Connecticut Society for Clinical Social workers, Wessel was searched coming and going.

She said she was also impressed with the "awareness of aggression in society." That idea was reinforced not only by the pervasive presence of the secret service, the New Haven resident noted, but also by Reagan's speech.

"It was overwhelming to hear about world aggression in such a peaceful farming community," Wessel said. Eureka is located in central Illinois about 20 miles north of Peoria.

Ms. Wessel had actually followed the Reagans to Peoria from Washington, D.C. "I had a fantasy of hitching a ride," she said with a smile. She didn't try. They certainly would have had an interesting conversation. Although Wessel said she found the president "charming and amiable," she is opposed to most of Reagan's programs.

She had gone to the Capitol to lobby for increased support for health services along with delegates of the National Federation of Societies of Clinical Social Work.

Ms. Wessel, 57, fled Nazi Germany in 1938, eventually joining her parents in England before coming to this country. Although she is Jewish, she was encouraged to enroll in Eureka College by her Illinois friends and sponsors, even though Eureka was founded in 1855 to train Disciples of Christ ministers and missionaries.

The only reason Ms. Wessel was told she received her award was because she represents the school's "diversity." She also represents success.

After graduating with a degree in sociology, Wessel received her master's degree in social work from the Smith College School of Social Work. She married a local pediatrician and raised four children, including Bruce, 26, a student at the Yale Law School.

In addition, she helped found Citizens for Humanizing Criminal Justice and is active in a variety of professional and community groups.

Throughout the years, Ms. Wessel has remained in contact with Eureka and set up a scholarship to aid other needy students. Ms. Wessel said she had attended school virtually for free and saw the scholarship as "repaying my college tuition, so to speak."

She had a chance to tell Eureka officials how she felt at the banquet. By the time Wessel spoke, however, the president had left before anyone had a chance to meet him personally. The reporters had all gone, too. The camera lights had been turned off.

Everything was back to normal. Eureka is used to the quiet. As an editorial in the Peoria Journal Star's Sunday edition pointed out, "No one seeking exposure travels to Peoria."



MS. WESSEL

HOME/LIVING

# Social worker still has need to 'give back'

Irmgard R. Wessel is a clinical social worker with Family Counseling of Greater New Haven who was a refugee from Hitler's Germany in World War II. She was helped along the way by people and organizations in England and the United States.

Now in the senior citizen category — she won't specify her age any more closely because she thinks that is unimportant — she cites the driving force behind her life:

"I need to give back."

She's been doing that for 30 years at Family Counseling, and for other years elsewhere, and her employer is one of the not-too-many who can surpass that record. Family Counseling has been helping those with family problems for 119 years.

With headquarters at One Long Wharf, New Haven, and offices in Guilford, Madison, North Branford, Orange and Woodbridge-Bethany, Family Counseling states its mission this way:

"How We Can Help: We are a multispecialty agency with a staff of clinical social workers, psychologists, marriage and family therapists and adult and child psychiatrists who provide comprehensive care to our clients."

This care includes individual and group psychotherapy, child evaluation and therapy, adult therapy, couples counseling, alcohol and substance abuse and support groups and workshops.

Wessel's expertise in these



ALVIN V. SIZER  
SECOND ROUND

fields has brought her a unique honor.

A letter recently informed her she had been elected by her peers as a distinguished practitioner in the National Academy of Practice in Social Work. Only 100 people may be elected to this academy.

"Your stature in the field of health practice brings honor to all of us," wrote academy President Ron G. Fair.

The road to such excellence had a shaky start.

At the beginning of the war she was sent as a 13-year-old to England to escape Hitler's Nazi regime. She was alone at first, but her family was able to join her before the war ended.

"The only word of English I knew when I arrived in England was lavatory," she said.

The fact that the English plied her with tea rather than hot coffee or chocolate convinced her of the need for more understanding of different cultures.

"I think that's when I became a social worker," she said.

Toward the war's end, the family came to the United States and taken in at Scattergood, a Quaker hostel in West Branch, Iowa; then resettled in the care of the Disciples of Christ, near Eureka, Ill.

The Wessels appreciated the help, but explained they could not become church members because they were Jews.

Wessel attended Eureka College where she was summa cum laude, then got a master's degree at the Smith College of Social Work and later became a therapist in the Yale Human Sexuality Program. She is also a community activist for a number of causes.

Her career, her affiliations and accomplishments would take far more space than this column has. She married Morris A. Wessel, now a retired pediatrician. They live in New Haven, and have four children and four grandchildren.

She began part time with Family Counseling when she was bringing up her children. "I am fortunate that I could stay at home with my children when they were small," she said. She called that "a privilege" and it made her sensitive to those who can't stay at home now because they must work at two or three jobs to support their families.

"Since we live longer, though," she amplified, "in many cases we can have the best of two worlds. For those who can't stay home we have an obligation to help them deal with the situation."

The agency will see anyone in Greater New Haven with personal and emotional problems. "We can give professional help," she explained. "You can't always get that."

Besides Medicare and Title 19, the agency participates in many insurance programs and its flier points out, "Fees may be adjusted to income and number of dependents."

Wessel and her colleagues find

themselves dealing with many older people. According to Wessel, there are more seniors with depression and anxiety problems because they are often isolated and lonely.

She sees many cases of abuse and violence and is in charge of a program for the state's Office of Victim Services for those robbed, assaulted or who have lost loved ones to homicide.

One of her cases was an 85-year-old widow, repeatedly mugged after leaving a bank. "She developed acute anxiety and could not eat or sleep. She needed psychological help and had become traumatized by her experience because it reactivated memories of childhood abuse. We were able to work it out so she could function better."

Other problems involve alcohol, drug and medication abuse and both young people concerned about their parents and older people concerned about their children and grandchildren.

She has no thought of retiring. "It is a challenge to meet each person's needs. I don't have all the answers but in our mutual work together those who suffer can find the strength to go on."

Al Sizer is the former associate editor of the Register. His column appears here each Sunday.

## FOR MORE INFO

To contact a Family Counseling office near you, call one of these numbers: New Haven 203-495-7431, Guilford 203-453-2925, Madison 203-245-4498, North Branford 203-488-5579, Orange 203-795-6662, and Woodbridge-Bethany 203-387-6780.

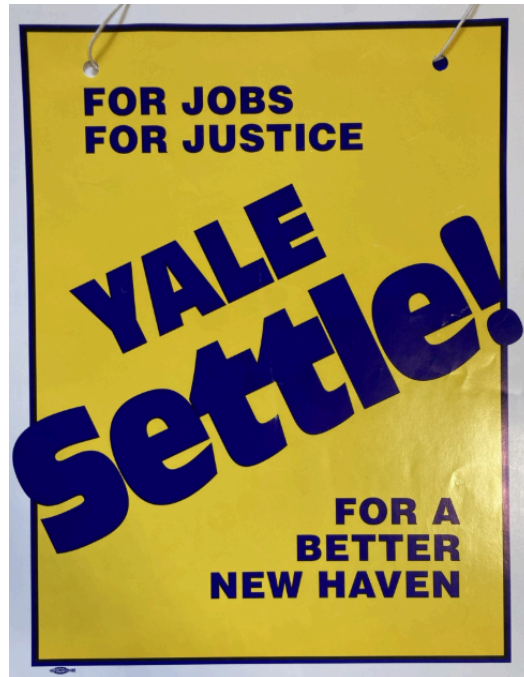
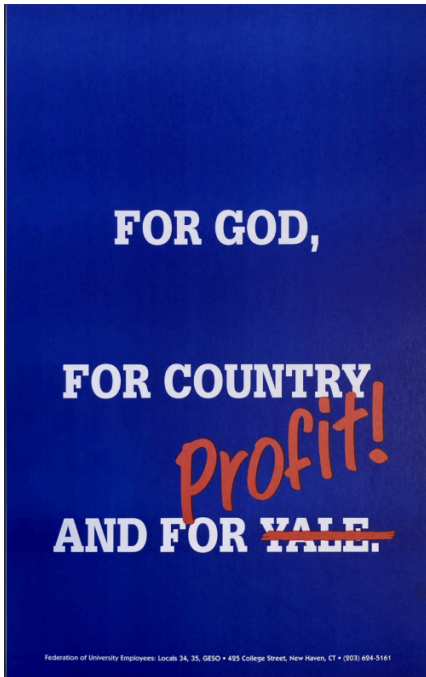
## Clerical Workers and the Creation of Yale's Local 34

In the 1970s and 1980s, Yale University clerical workers organized to challenge low wages and inequitable treatment. Many were women supporting themselves or their families, yet administrators dismissed their labor as unimportant. After years of organizing, Yale clerical and technical workers narrowly voted to form Local 34 in 1983.

The campaign required persistence, creative organizing, and community support. Workers endured a prolonged strike in 1984-85, relying on solidarity from other unions

and the public. Through picketing, protest, and negotiation, they secured contracts that improved wages, established grievance procedures, and promoted pay equity.

The struggle transformed participants into lifelong activists and reshaped labor relations at Yale, demonstrating the power of collective action even among workers who had not previously seen themselves as organizers.



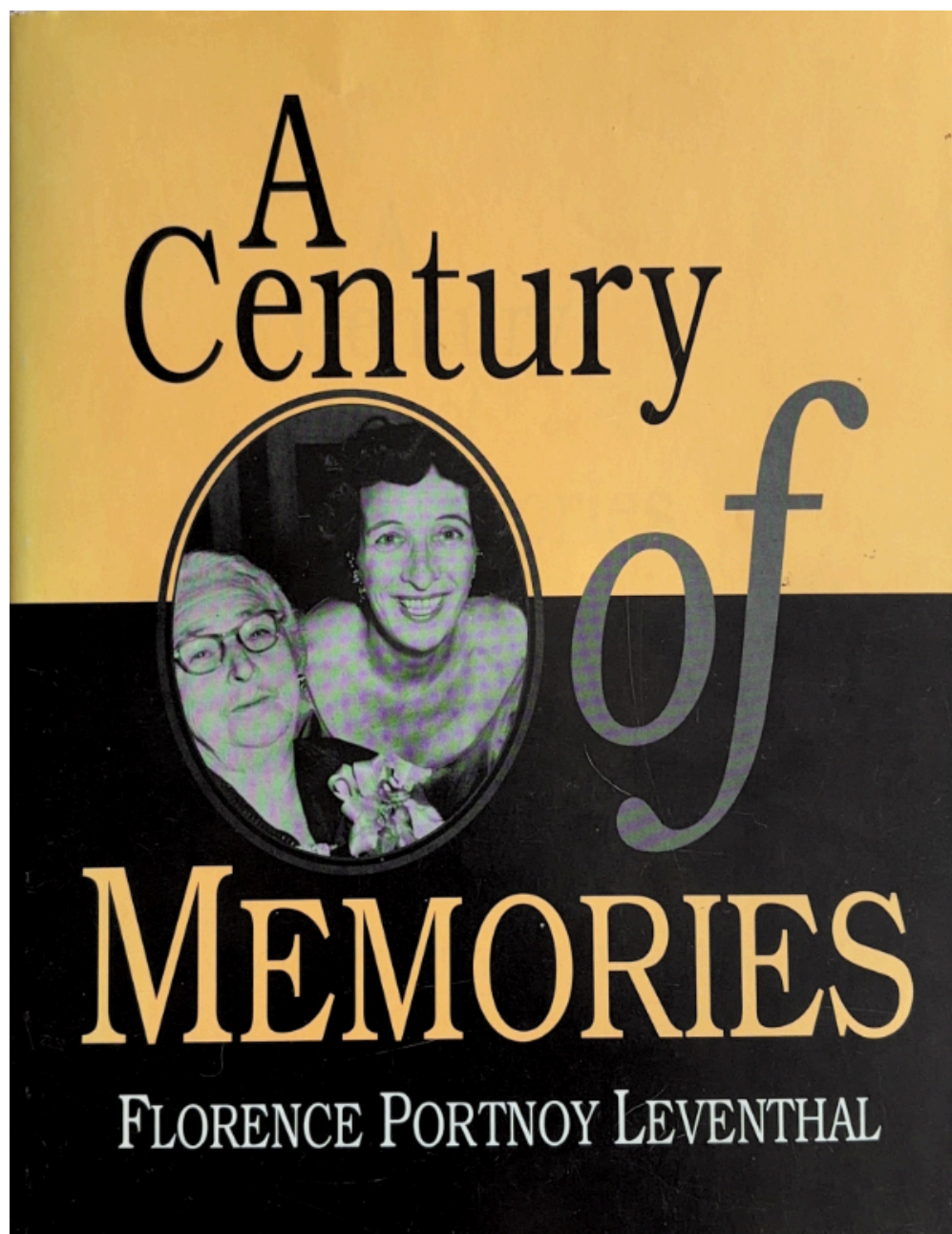
## Teachers and the Historical 1975 Teachers Strike

Public school teachers in New Haven faced overcrowded classrooms, low pay, and limited bargaining power. In 1975, more than 80 percent went on strike, supported by parents, clergy, unions, and community organizations. 90 teachers were jailed for refusing court orders to return to work, highlighting their commitment and the high stakes of the struggle.

The strike resulted in improved wages, smaller class sizes, grievance procedures, and stronger legal protections for teachers statewide. Equally important, it shifted the balance of power, proving that collective action could win meaningful change. Many teachers became lifelong activists, shaped by the experience of solidarity and resistance.



An excerpt from Florence Leventhal's memoir. Florence was a steward in the NHFT Union, and in the pages below she shares her memories of the 1975 teachers strike.



A Century of Memories

by

Florence Portnoy Leventhal

as told to  
Kay Reid  
assisted by Susan Murche

This book of reminiscences is  
dedicated to the memory of

Celia Gishman Portnoy

who is found often, if not everywhere, in these pages.

## Teachers' Strike 1975

Teachers' strikes dominated front pages of our country's newspapers during the fall of 1975. Reflecting this October 1996 on that turbulent season 21 years ago, I am distressed reading the paper and watching the television. Oh, there they are, some politicians and talk show fools attempting to make teacher unions the butt of poor student scores. Al Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers was with us in our strike of 1975. It's heartening to have him out there today still battling misinformation. He has recently set the truth before those who would hold teacher unions responsible for low scores, pointing to the evidence that students from states with strong teacher unions are scoring higher on proficiency tests.

My dedication to the teaching profession is as bold now as it has ever been. I'm concerned about those people who would splinter our country's commitment to public education, and pit parents against teachers. I received a rich education in the state of Connecticut where I applied "how to live and how to make a living." I believe that I gave back richly. Now, as a grandmother of 23, and a great grandmother of 15 children, a teacher who's stood with and before many hundreds of children, I feel qualified to speak out. Furthermore, what harm can I do at this late date!

Our strike involved 1,500 teachers at a

time when teachers' strikes were illegal in Connecticut. On the surface, we struck out of basic bread and butter issues, to be accorded a level of salary and working conditions of at least a decent middle income level. But for me it was much more than that. The teacher's mandate is not a casual one. As members of the profession that touches children's lives on a daily basis, where our stance with the child has a mighty impact on that child forever, I struck also for the dignity and respect that should be due such persons. The attitude of some people that "anyone can fill your place" I found damaging then and find it so now.

A surge of pride and warmth fills me when I recall the strike. By the time it came around, I had long been a teacher—my first job at rural Collinsville was almost 50 years earlier. I think I had the rights of working people in my bones, partly from Papa, the tailor shops and unions. Also, in my jobs with the garment industry I was accustomed to teamwork and the way good performance, including my performance, was regarded. I was given a supervisory role in the cutting room at Junior Accent, a position previously held by men.

As a child, whether I showed it or not, I had to combat "what does an immigrant know?" So in this strike I brought my personal history to battle "what does a teacher

teacher, the climate of disrespect and even danger in so many classrooms—these concern me a lot.

But the disrespect for children, the rolling back of integration, the retreat of the well-off from the disenfranchised—these are matters that fill me with sorrow.