



POLICING POLITICS

Labor, Race, and the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, 1945-1972

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ON JUNE 10, 1949, just days before the upcoming mayoral election, Minneapolis mayor Eric Hoyer fired the city's police chief, Glenn MacLean. Chief MacLean had publicly declared that the mayor's opponent would "be a greater guarantee that we will continue to have proper police administration and law enforcement." Hoyer insisted on the chief's departure in order to "prevent . . . any political clique or party taking control of our police department." William Joyce, president of the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, agreed with

the mayor. In a story published on the front page of the *Minneapolis Star*, Joyce noted that any time policemen "attempt to influence government or the outcome of elections . . . we have the makings of a police state."¹

In the decades that followed, the Police Officers Federation rejected that position. Far from staying out of politics, between 1945 and 1972 the federation became a powerful force in Minneapolis. Postwar efforts to eliminate racial prejudice, attempts to professionalize policing, and an ongoing struggle for better compensation

all shaped an emerging political identity for Minneapolis policemen. Like other public sector workers around the country agitating for labor rights, members of the city's Police Officers Federation began directly participating in municipal politics.²

While the federation advocated for the city's police officers, its rank-

ABOVE: In 1946, the Minneapolis Police Department was the first force in the nation to receive race relations training. Here, MPD candidates show their stuff on the Memorial Stadium gridiron, 1947.

and-file members enforced racial hierarchies in Minneapolis. By the mid-1960s, when civil rights organizations successfully challenged racist policing as a long-standing problem in Minneapolis, the Police Officers Federation began obstructing attempts to reform the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD). Denying charges of police brutality and bias, the Police Officers Federation deployed its newly earned political power to protect the interests of the mostly white rank and file serving on the city's force.³

Labor advocacy proved to be a potent way to defend racialized policing. The combination fostered the racial tumult that shook Minneapolis in the late 1960s, forging a base for the political career of Charles A. Stenvig. The Police Officers Federation president from 1965 to 1969, Stenvig garnered national attention as Minneapolis's law-and-order mayor in the early 1970s. Labor advocacy and racialized policing became the foundation for the federation's widely recognized influence in city politics that persists to this day. The Police Officers Federation conflated workers' rights and whiteness, which ultimately led to decades of division, inequity, and grief in Minneapolis.

LABOR, RACE, POLICING, and politics converged in Minneapolis as early as the mid-1940s with the election of Hubert H. Humphrey as mayor in 1945. Humphrey pledged to root out crime, corruption, and racism in the city—goals that depended on organized labor's support. The city's first Democratic mayor in decades, Humphrey empowered unions as well as the African American and Jewish communities. Overhauling the MPD stood out among the new mayor's initiatives. He paired a "cleanup job on underworld operations" in a city well known for its criminal element with

a human relations advisory committee made up of prominent citizens. Humphrey hoped the committee would mitigate the city's reputation for racial and religious discrimination. Besides unfair employment and housing practices, the city's new human relations committee also took on racial bias in the almost entirely white police force.⁴

In March 1946, Humphrey announced that the MPD would be the first force in the nation to receive race relations training. That training—proffered by a former Milwaukee police chief—proceeded from the principle that "fair [law] enforcement is merely applying good sound public relations policies to all people in the community, regardless of race, creed, or color." Part of a broader national effort to simultaneously reform and professionalize policing, such training presumed to suppress racial prejudice among white officers. In Minnesota, where according to a 1947 study 60 percent of whites openly favored residential segregation, this was a tall order. Though a December 1948 article in the *Saturday Evening Post* on the race relations effort in Minneapolis helped burnish the city's reputation nationally, the attempt to reform Minneapolis policing by focusing on patrolmen's racial bias changed little. Indeed, just a few months later two African American teenagers found themselves arrested by Minneapolis policemen without cause.⁵

The Police Officers Federation—which, though it did not possess formal bargaining powers until 1972, represented officers in contract negotiations with the city—did not formally object to Humphrey's call for racial bias training. After all, the federation appreciated Humphrey's other proposals: give officers a raise and hire more cops. The mayor's efforts to improve police wages, backed by the



Minneapolis mayor Hubert H. Humphrey speaking in support of revisions to the city charter, the legal foundation for the organization of city government, 1948.

Minneapolis Central Labor Union (the umbrella organization for all unions in the city), succeeded, but his efforts to increase the number of sworn officers fell short.⁶

Brimming with energy, Humphrey used his second two-year term as mayor to target the city's charter, the legal foundation for the organization of city government. The charter's clear limits on mayoral power meant that Minneapolis mayors—then and now—could do little more than appoint the police chief and other officials (such as city engineer or city assessor). Through referenda, voters could change the charter. The popular politician began a campaign to give the mayor more power by relegating the city council to legislative duties.⁷

Though staunchly behind Humphrey, the city's unions opposed the effort to change Minneapolis government. They worried that corporate leaders could use more mayoral power to undo labor's hard-earned gains in what had, until recently,

been a notoriously anti-union city in which the police protected businesses instead of workers. For their part, business leaders who backed Humphrey in his 1947 reelection campaign also hesitated to expand the mayor's powers, fearing a challenge to their own. Additionally, Humphrey's 1948 campaign for the US Senate—which proved successful—absorbed most of his attention. Consequently, the proposed charter changes were defeated at the polls that same year.⁸

In 1951, Humphrey's successor as mayor, Eric G. Hoyer, turned again to changing the city's charter. He had a more targeted change in mind. Hoyer hoped to protect the appointed police chief regardless of who was mayor. He sought a charter amendment establishing a fixed tenure of six years for appointed police chiefs. Because the proposal focused on the police department, the city's charter commission requested that Carl G. Johnson, the new president of the Police Officers Federation, get involved. Johnson, a former electrician who served as a deputy license inspector in the MPD, conducted a ballot of the rank and file. Almost three-quarters of all policemen opposed the idea. Without the

support of rank-and-file policemen, Hoyer's effort to change the city charter went nowhere.⁹

Even as Hoyer attempted to create tenure for the police chief, the Police Officers Federation proposed a different charter amendment. Because underpaid and increasingly overworked policemen could not legally strike, police federation president Johnson argued that the city's voters should change the charter to provide for the "compulsory arbitration of pay and working condition disputes" between the city and public safety employees. Noting the growing professionalization of policing—"a high school diploma is a prerequisite" and "we have on our force today a number of college men"—Johnson argued that recognition of the labor rights of police officers mattered.¹⁰

Johnson's proposal (which went largely unnoticed by Minneapolis voters) reflected a national push for the formal recognition of organized public sector workers. Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, city, state, and federal employees across the United States advocated for the right to unionize. Public employees facing legal limits on formal organizing

turned to "politics, behind-the-scenes deals with officials, lobbying, appeals to the public, and other kinds of informal activities." This proved true for the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis, which represented police officers in negotiations with city hall but did not possess legally recognized collective bargaining privileges.¹¹

Furthermore, as elected officials and police chiefs embraced police reforms in the 1950s and 1960s, policemen often dissented. They looked to strengthen their own federations and associations in response to new expectations and perceived restrictions in their workplace. The Minneapolis Police Officers Federation was no exception. The push for public sector unionism offered a way to do exactly that. One new expectation that strengthened police officers' resolve to unionize emerged in 1952. MPD Chief Tom Jones announced the creation of a new "training course for officers" in "racial tensions" as well as the establishment of "an 'incident' file to help control and prevent race disturbances." Some Minneapolis policemen balked. Nonetheless, Chief Jones insisted the two new initiatives, gleaned from a recent seminar at the University of Chicago, would "mean improved police protection to all residents" in Minneapolis.¹²

Though the federation did not publicly comment on the initiative, in April 1953 delegates from across the nation elected Carl Johnson vice president of the National Conference of Police Associations (NCPA). The 100,000-member organization aimed not only to strengthen police associations but also to "combat efforts to discredit police officers through false charges of brutality." Johnson soon



Humphrey's successor as mayor, Eric G. Hoyer, sought to shield appointed Minneapolis police chiefs from politics by creating a fixed tenure of six years, 1948.



Carl G. Johnson, head of the Minneapolis Police Officers Federation, advocated for policemen's rights at the local and national level, 1956.

also found himself organizing the National Police Officers Association, serving as the advocacy group's first president. Leadership experiences in these national organizations pushed Johnson to further promote policemen's interests back home in Minneapolis. That meant direct involvement in Minneapolis politics.¹³

Police federation enters politics

Weeks after Johnson returned from the NCPA meetings, the Minneapolis Police Officers Federation publicly endorsed city council candidates for the first time. All but two won their June 1953 election races. By openly supporting politicians, Johnson and the federation sought to place allies on the city council. The presence of these allies would improve their negotiating position with the city. The government structure enshrined in the city's charter meant that the city council not only held a great deal of power but often opposed the city's mayor. Because the police chief served

at the pleasure of the mayor and often represented the mayor's interest, policemen struggling for better wages and control of their own workplace allied themselves with those that often opposed their boss's boss.¹⁴

Immediately after the 1953 election, the city council established a committee that proposed pegging police officers' and firemen's wages to 85 percent of the salaries in eight local building trades. The Police Officers Federation backed the plan because it meant police salaries would begin catching up with those of private sector wageworkers in the city. In June 1954, the city adopted the formula. Heartened by this victory, the federation tried to address another concern—understaffing. Carl Johnson and the federation again

police attracted “vicious and professional criminals” to Minneapolis. Given the political impossibility of raising taxes, however, the report recommended enrolling volunteers and one-man squad cars. The *Minneapolis Tribune* agreed with the report's suggestions. The Police Officers Federation, though, publicly rejected the recommendations, claiming they were “against the best interests” of Minneapolis policemen.¹⁶

In 1957, when *Fortune* magazine chose the eight “best-run” cities in the nation, Minneapolis failed to make the list. City leaders challenged “the miserable showing,” but admitted that an understaffed police department and ongoing crime loomed as problems. For its part, the Citizens League saw this issue as only one

In 1955, a Citizens League report cited a “frightening” increase “in major crime” across the city and suggested “the undermanned condition” of the police attracted “vicious and professional criminals” to Minneapolis.

proposed a charter amendment. This one set the workforce requirement for city police at “1.6 per 1000 inhabitants.” An editorial in the *Minneapolis Tribune* admitted that MPD faced a “manpower pinch.” Nonetheless, the proposal, sure to raise taxes as well as the number of sworn officers, did not move forward.¹⁵

Even so, the influential Citizens League—a local, nonpartisan, non-profit policy group that counted politicians, businessmen, academics, and union leaders (including federation head Carl Johnson) as members—agreed the city suffered a shortage of police officers. In 1955, a Citizens League report cited a “frightening” increase “in major crime” across the city and suggested “the undermanned condition” of the

of many in Minneapolis municipal politics. The league used the bad publicity to advocate for a complete overhaul of the city's charter. Like others before them, league members hoped to transform city government by strengthening the mayor's office and weakening the city council.¹⁷

The Citizens League claimed that a transformed city government would better serve the changing city. Those changes included Minneapolis's racial demography. As late as 1950, African Americans made up less than 2 percent of city residents. But many migrated to Minneapolis in the ensuing decade, even as whites fled to nearby suburbs. By 1957, the city's African American population had increased by nearly 60 percent. One of those migrants,

Toyse Kyle, remembered that when her family arrived at their new lodgings on the city's south side, "white neighbors came out of their houses and apartments to watch" while their children shouted racial epithets. Black residents of Minneapolis, newly arrived or not, faced racism in nearly every venue—especially housing. Indeed, ongoing residential segregation attracted much of the attention of Minneapolis's civil rights movement.¹⁸

Though racialized policing rarely made headlines, African Americans routinely encountered police bias in Minneapolis. In 1951, the *Minneapolis Tribune's* only Black reporter, Carl Rowan, reported that when he called a Minneapolis police captain for information related to a story, the officer, "unaware that I was a Negro," referred to another African American with a common racial slur. Rowan, who eventually found fame as a deputy secretary of state in John F. Kennedy's administration and as a prominent syndicated columnist, suggested that the incident illustrated that the "inequality of treatment of Negroes at the hands of the law" continued unabated in Minneapolis.¹⁹

Restricted to specific areas of the city by real estate covenants, the rapidly growing African American community experienced unequal policing in new ways. During the 1950s, increasing numbers attracted inordinate police attention. As early as 1953, Black civil rights leader Cecil E. Newman protested that African Americans faced arrests disproportionate to their presence in Minneapolis. The MPD's own annual reports bore out his claim. In 1950, 14 percent of all those arrested in the city were African American. By 1960, 21 percent of all those arrested in the city were Black—though by that year they made up only 8 percent of the city's population. When

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Newspaper publisher and civil rights leader Cecil E. Newman.

Lester Granger, national director of the Urban League, visited the city in 1954, he rightly noted that "he could name many cities more deserving of an award for good race relations than Minneapolis."²⁰

White residents thought otherwise. When *Fortune* magazine's 1957 list of best-run cities snubbed Minneapolis, a local reporter claimed that the magazine "completely ignored" the city's strong record on race relations. The journalist cited the lack of formal discrimination in parks and employment, as well as the long-standing "police training" programs which helped to "minimize the abuse of racial minorities" by officers. Official regulations first issued to Minneapolis police officers in 1945 enshrined some of that training in writing. By 1955, the regulations insisted that "coarse, profane or

insolent language" be avoided and instructed officers to "only use force as may reasonably be necessary."²¹

Other reforms further suggested all was well with Minneapolis policing. In 1959—just one year after the founding, in Philadelphia, of the nation's first police review authority—the Minneapolis chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union pushed Mayor P. Kenneth Peterson to create a citizens' police review board. He did so, but it had "no legal status" and filed no complaints. Just months later, the police watchdog quietly "disbanded" itself.²²

Instead, community conflict came from a fight over the city's charter. The Citizens League's 1957 proposal for fundamentally transforming Minneapolis city government had picked up steam. The creation of a



At the urging of the Minneapolis chapter of the NAACP, Minneapolis mayor P. Kenneth Peterson created what turned out to be a short-lived citizens' police review board.



Spectators viewing display, "Know Your Police Week," July 1959.

Joint Committee on Charter Review in 1958 and the Charter Improvement Volunteer Information Committee in 1959 led to the presentation of significant reforms to Minneapolis voters in 1960. Mayor Peterson, the League of Women Voters, the Jaycees, the Chamber of Commerce, the *Minneapolis Tribune*, and both major political parties endorsed the scheme. It looked to centralize administrative power in the mayor's office, reduce the city council's reach, and streamline the city's byzantine tax structure—which levied specific taxes for specific services and agencies.²³

Organized labor—and, in particular, the Police Officers Federation—strongly opposed the charter revision. Unable to legally strike and lacking formal arbitration processes, policemen looked to defend their allies on the city council, which stood to lose most. Protecting the council meant protecting the federation's political influence. The federation encouraged members and city residents alike to reject the reforms. Carl Johnson announced that the proposed changes would result in "constant conflict" between the mayor

and the city council. Furthermore, the new structure would force the federation "to take part in mayoralty campaigns."²⁴

In May 1960, reporters learned that policemen used the MPD's offices in city hall to "enlist Minneapolis policemen in the campaign against" what the federation called the "dictatorship charter." Controversy ensued. Mayor Peterson proclaimed that the Police Officers Federation did not violate city rules barring political activity during working hours. He admitted, however, that it was "a close call." The federation continued to publicly oppose the changes. In the June special election, Minneapolis voters decided against the massive charter reform.²⁵

In 1961, a thankful city council rewarded the Police Officers Federation by pushing the mayor to resuscitate the federation's 1954 proposal for a charter amendment requiring a set number of sworn officers. The Chamber of Commerce also backed the plan. They wanted more police to limit crime in a downtown shopping district challenged by the rise of suburban malls. This iteration

of the amendment would fix a ratio of 1.7 police officers to every 1,000 city residents. In turn, the federation sent a letter to all its members with clear instructions. They were to support all the incumbents on the city council—"the policemen's friends"—in the upcoming elections and to actively campaign for the amendment.²⁶

Police union openly advocates for charter reform

The open politicking of the Police Officers Federation again sparked controversy. The *Tribune* opined, "the Minneapolis police force . . . should be a non-political body." If it became "an instrument of ward politics," the federation would be no more than a "partisan tool." The *Star* shared these concerns, calling the endorsement letter from the Police Officers Federation a "crude maneuver." Indeed, Johnson had pointed out that "the aldermen give out the salaries and fringe benefits. And we feel they've done a good job." The Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) candidate for mayor, University of Minnesota political scientist Arthur Naftalin, called the letter "highly improper" and declared, "we must remove the department from politics." But Mayor Peterson and the city's civil service commission did little more than warn police officers to obey standing regulations regarding political activity. For his part, Carl Johnson pointed out that the Police Officers Federation "keeps its nose out of the mayor's race. After all, the mayor's sort of the police chief." Worried about losing the support of organized labor, Naftalin withdrew his objections. In fact, Naftalin and Peterson both supported the effort to embed a required number of sworn officers in the city charter. By an almost two to one margin, voters approved the charter amendment (despite a tax increase to

fund the measure) in June 1961 even as they put Naftalin in the mayor's office.²⁷

The federation's victory attracted national attention. Less than two months later, the National Conference of Police Associations again elected Carl Johnson as a vice president. The success also steeled the Police Officers Federation for more politicking. The federation quickly proposed another charter amendment. This time, they sought wages (at a minimum) equal to those of eight local building trades. Their proposed amendment also gave the city council the right to levy a tax to that end (as long as it was not a property tax, sales tax, or income tax). Most importantly, the federation contended that its proposed charter amendment would eliminate yearly struggles with the city council over compensation, and thus altogether "remove" the police "from politics." They rolled out the initiative with a news conference at the Radisson Hotel.²⁸

The city's charter commission rejected the idea. Policemen and firemen successfully petitioned to put the charter amendment on the ballot anyway. Then they put up thousands of yard signs, handed out bumper stickers, threw "coffee parties," and opened a pro-amendment campaign office. Most on the city council refused to publicly comment. The new mayor, Arthur Naftalin, opposed the amendment. He thought it "improper" for a "group of city employees" to hold a "special wage status" in the charter. Unable to legally strike, the Police Officers Federation responded that their only way to gain leverage in negotiations with the city was "through backing certain candidates" for city council. The amendment would eliminate that problem and ensure that police salaries would not "be a political football."²⁹



Arthur Naftalin served as Minneapolis mayor from July 1961 to July 1969.

The Citizens League issued a scathing response. They noted that officers already received wages "in excess of the maximum" outlined in the 1954 ordinance. The response also pointed out that the proposed power granted to the city council to levy unspecified taxes in the amendment would be unprecedented and dangerous. Finally, the Citizens League argued that the amendment would intensify the presence of the Police Officers Federation in municipal politics because the language identified only a minimum for police salaries. From their perspective, the federation's need to raise wages via skillfully applied political pressure on city council members would continue unabated even if citizens approved the amendment.³⁰

This public critique of the Police Officers Federation brought amendment opponents together in a new coalition. Led by the Chamber of Commerce and the League of Women Voters, a "vote no" campaign emerged just weeks before the election. A battle of brochures, newspaper ads, telephone calls, and door knocking ensued. On November 7, 1962, the federation's proposed amendment went

down to defeat. Despite endorsements from the city's labor unions, less than 30 percent of voters—and not a single city ward—supported it. The loss was a crushing blow for the federation. At the end of the year, they negotiated little more than a small raise.³¹

Chastened, but not defeated, the Police Officers Federation announced a renewed charter amendment effort in February 1963. Their proposal stipulated equal pay (not just a minimum of equal pay) with the building trades and specified the taxes to be levied by the city council. The *Tribune* responded that the "bitter and divisive" campaign of the previous year problematically pitted many citizens against their own public safety agencies. Thus, the newspaper again opposed the amendment. Nonetheless, the federation believed its modifications proved an adequate response to critics and would attract more support from voters.³²

Police commitment to bias-free policing questioned

That belief was soon tested by emerging questions regarding police officers' commitments to bias-free policing. Just days after the *Tribune* editorial, a white patrolman stormed out of a training session "on dealing with the problems of minorities" led by the director of the city's Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). The officer claimed he was "being brain washed." The department briefly removed the FEPC's Louis Ervin, a longtime African American labor and civil rights leader, from the sessions. After the incident became public knowledge, Ervin was reinstated. The police chief then suspended the offending officer. One observer opined this counted as "progress in the handling of minority group situations in the city." Further events soon undercut such claims.³³



Merton W. Palmer aims revolver at the camera, police department shooting practice, East Side Police Station, 1950.

On the night of May 18, 1963, two policemen stopped Charles Daniels, a young Black man, on the city's north side. They accused Daniels of "using obscene language," and a scuffle ensued. One officer used a racial slur.

"We have long known . . . that there is a serious lack of understanding . . . of racial problems among many Minneapolis policemen."

Daniels responded by grabbing one of their service revolvers and firing six shots. He wounded one of the cops. Three hours later and just a few blocks away, other policemen stopped a driver, attracting a mostly African American crowd. After exchanging insults, the cops moved to arrest Raymond Wells, the boxing instructor at the nearby Phyllis Wheatley House. Then a fight broke out. One policeman used a blackjack to severely beat Wells. Others in the crowd sprang to Wells's defense. "As more policemen

arrived," noted witnesses, "the disturbance grew worse." Officers arrested three more African American men before restoring calm.³⁴

The next day, the whole city learned that Minneapolis only "narrowly . . . averted" a full-blown "race riot between police and Negroes." The policemen involved denied that they were "abusive, prejudiced, or used poor judgment." More than 30 African American witnesses suggested otherwise. Civil rights groups sprang into action.³⁵

The city's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter, carefully reviewing the incident, demanded change. The NAACP pointed out, "we have long known . . . that there is a serious lack of understanding . . . of racial problems among many Minneapolis policemen." In fact, "many policemen in Minneapolis treat Negroes and members of other minority groups as second class citizens—that is . . . differently than they treat white people." Until this changed, "tensions will continue to mount and someday the city of Minneapolis will reap the con-

sequences." In response, the police chief suspended the officer who used a blackjack to beat Wells.³⁶

Mayor Arthur Naftalin admitted to "tensions" between African Americans and the police but also claimed "there is no serious problem of racial discrimination in the Police Department." In fact, he argued, "there is a tendency to indict our Police Department unfairly." Angry members of the city's Human Rights Commission responded with a "blistering attack" on the mayor. Meanwhile, the Police

Officers Federation took up a collection for the suspended officer. The north side precinct captain who led the fundraiser then found himself suspended. Both suspended policemen began receiving threatening anonymous phone calls and letters at their homes.³⁷

Civil rights groups demanded more from Mayor Naftalin and the police. Wells himself noted that "prejudice in Minneapolis has been hidden for years, and now that it's out in the open, I think the entire situation—not only the police incident—should be brought to a head." The NAACP and the local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) did exactly that. One week later, CORE "announced 'demands for actions now,'" and the NAACP called for the "immediate abolition of every facet of segregation and discrimination in this city."³⁸

Announced on June 25, CORE's specific demands included more police training, an MPD "watchdog committee," and more African American officers. They also called directly on the Police Officers Federation to "adopt a code of fair practices and practices toward minority groups and to condemn derogatory remarks and conduct by officers against minority groups." The NAACP did not expressly name the federation, though its four-point program to "abolish discrimination in Minneapolis" included hiring Black cops.³⁹

Early the next morning, bombs exploded at the Minneapolis homes of the two suspended police officers. No one was hurt or injured. Shocked civil rights advocates immediately condemned the acts. They "warned against assuming" the culprit was African American. Black churches began a fundraising campaign for the policemen and their families even as Black pastors declared the deed "dastardly."⁴⁰

Denouncing the bombings, Mayor Naftalin insisted the perpetrators would be pursued and caught. Governor Karl Rolvaag called the bombings “an attempt to embarrass and frustrate responsible Negro and white community leaders who have been working together to guarantee civil rights and freedom to all citizens.” Angry Minneapolis police officers already upset by the suspensions—including one lieutenant, who told reporters that “the police don’t need to take this kind of stuff”—turned to the federation to raise funds for a reward. Police chief E. I. Walling noted that “his officers” had “been ‘dragged through the mud’” and that he would “back to the limit any arrests—Negro or white—made by his officers.” The investigation went nowhere.⁴¹

Nonetheless, the bombings blew up more than property. Changes demanded by CORE and the NAACP lost support among white residents, while rank-and-file police officers felt further besieged. The Police Officers Federation began using its political acumen to protect policemen from growing charges of racism and calls for reform. For instance, officers publicly rejected calls for a civilian review board. Instead, they pointed to the deeds of a young white patrolman named Charles Stenvig, who gained citywide attention for performing lifesaving CPR on a dying African American child.⁴²

In the months after the bombings, more and more Police Officers Federation members—now fearing for their personal safety—decided that municipal laws requiring police to live in Minneapolis should be challenged. In November 1964, the police chief suspended two officers for what he called a “willful, deliberate” violation of the long-standing residency ordinance. The federation pledged to defend these officers all the way to

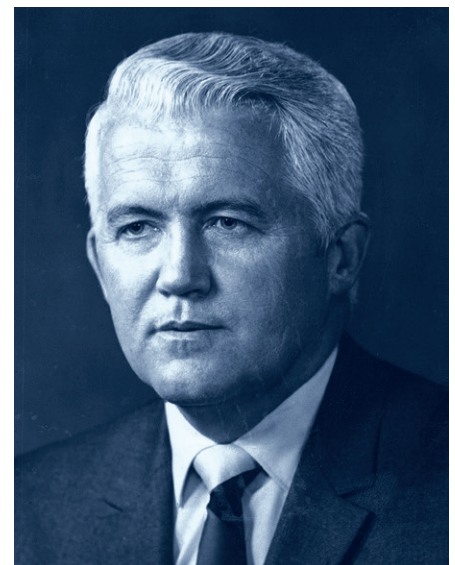
the Minnesota Supreme Court. But within weeks, Mayor Naftalin agreed with the Police Officers Federation, noting, “it is harmful to restrict the residency of city employees.” Though the ordinance remained in place for two more years, strict enforcement ended. Minneapolis police officers began buying homes in the suburbs.⁴³

The rise of Charles Stenvig

In December 1965, after a bitter, nearly yearlong internal struggle between young and veteran officers over seniority and promotions, federation head Carl Johnson announced he would step down. The leader of the younger cops—the acclaimed Charles Stenvig—won the post. Stenvig grew up in south Minneapolis, graduated from Augsburg College, and joined the MPD in 1956. He pledged to secure higher wages and better working conditions, and to improve relations with the police chief, the mayor, and the city council. Two decades of federation work to build political influence meant the association’s new president immediately became a major player in municipal affairs.⁴⁴

The Police Officers Federation began using its political acumen to protect policemen from growing charges of racism and calls for reform. For instance, officers publicly rejected calls for a civilian review board.

Stenvig’s pledge to improve rank-and-file relationships with the chief and elected officials proved difficult to fulfill. A formal report on police-community relations in Minneapolis—begun after the racial unrest in 1963—identified the absence of formal mechanisms for civilian complaints regarding police prejudice and brutality. Despite stated policies and journalistic claims, inves-



Elected head of the Police Officers Federation in 1965, Charles Stenvig led officers into city politics in “unprecedented strength and numbers.” Four years later, he was elected Minneapolis mayor; 1971.

tigators found little actual evidence that Minneapolis policemen regularly engaged in extensive antidiscrimination trainings. Calls for the hiring of Black officers, as well as for the establishment of a civilian oversight body, rounded out the report.⁴⁵

With Stenvig at the helm, the politically potent Police Officers

Federation rejected these recommendations. In fact, one reporter proclaimed that under Stenvig’s “militant leadership,” officers “plunged into city politics” in “unprecedented strength and number.” For example, members of the federation marched through city streets and picketed city hall for higher wages for the first time in January 1967. That same year, the federation also defended officers

engaged in high-paying off duty work as bar bouncers.⁴⁶

But the policemen wanted more than better compensation. They expressed “discontent with department disciplinary procedures.” They demanded legal counsel for disciplined officers and formal federation representation in disciplinary hearings. They also spurned the widespread dissemination of civilian complaint procedures “designed to inform Negroes of their rights to complain about police procedures,” claiming the complaints would “harm police morale and efficiency.” These struggles intensified divides between the Police Officers Federation and the police chief and mayor. They also cemented the conflation of the federation’s effort to protect policemen’s labor interests with racialized policing in the city.⁴⁷

Questions of civilian oversight amid tense police relations with Black and Indigenous residents rose to the fore in July 1967, following a full-fledged uprising on Plymouth Avenue by young African Americans railing against police mistreatment. Even though the National Guard soon restored order in north Minneapolis, racial discord consumed the city. African Americans created new institutions and organizations, such as the Urban Coalition, to fight racism. Native people, responding to their own frustrations with MPD brutality, formed the American Indian Movement in 1968. Nonetheless, the Police Officers Federation used its considerable power to resist the combined efforts of these civil rights groups along with community organizers, business leaders, and Mayor Arthur Naftalin to fully address intertwined police power and racism in the city. Citing exhaustion, Naftalin chose not to run for reelection in 1969.⁴⁸

Taking advantage of the vacuum in city politics, the Police Officers Fed-



Tense police relations with Black and Indigenous residents rose to the fore in July 1967, following a full-fledged uprising on Plymouth Avenue in north Minneapolis by young African Americans railing against police mistreatment.

eration president—Charles Stenvig—ran for mayor as an independent. He pledged to restore law and order and to “take the handcuffs off the police.” With organized labor’s support, Stenvig won handily. Reporting on his surprise victory, the *New York Times* pointed out that the new mayor was “a policeman, committed to strengthening the power of the police.” As for charges of racism, in his inauguration speech Stenvig claimed color blindness. “Color should not be a cause of harassment, nor a shield for wrongdoing,” he proclaimed, pointing out that “nothing” troubled him more during the campaign than the charges “that I am not sensitive to the problems of the minorities.” His efforts to

empower police and ignore decades of racial inequities proved popular with many voters. Stenvig earned a second term as mayor of Minneapolis by soundly defeating African American civil rights leader Harry Davis in 1971—the same year the Minnesota Legislature legalized public sector unions. In 1972, during Stenvig’s second term, the Police Officers Federation finally earned formal collective bargaining rights and became a full-fledged union. The institutionalization of the police union’s power in Minneapolis was complete.⁴⁹

That same year, after a brief struggle within the Police Officers Federation over “getting out of the business of endorsing political



Police federation president Charles Stenvig successfully ran for Minneapolis mayor in 1969 as an independent on a law and order platform.

candidates in city elections,” the rank and file overwhelmingly voted for a president “that championed the federation’s role in politics.” They rejected the concerns of some union members that “our activities in this area have done little to enhance our public image.” A large majority—some of whom spoke “fondly of our ‘political muscle’”—instead chose to continue “endorsing candidates who will listen to law and order issues and problems.” Given a clear choice—the same one they had faced 23 years earlier—the federation doubled down on policing politics.⁵⁰

IN THE YEARS that followed, the Police Officers Federation of Minneapolis—dedicated to protecting the labor interests of a mostly white police force—used the political clout it first acquired in the 1950s and early 1960s to blunt multiple efforts to reform policing. It fused traditional union goals of wages and job protections with the protection of whiteness in a predominantly white city. Even before the Plymouth Avenue uprising of 1967, the federation’s ability to police city politics had shaped the trajectory of racial disparities as well as Minneapolis itself. When the federation’s former leader became mayor and it became a legal bargaining unit,

the union consolidated its already outsize presence.

Futile attempts to reform the MPD in the 1980s, failed efforts to address soaring murder rates in the 1990s, and the intensifying use of deadly force against communities of color in the 2000s all highlighted the political brawn of the city’s police union. Indeed, in 1985, a *Minneapolis Star Tribune* editorial on racism, policing, and reform openly wondered if “the mayor and council will control the police department or whether power will shift to the police union.” But by then, it was too late. Established in the 1950s and early 1960s, the Police Officers Federation’s ability to police city politics as well as city streets ensured that the MPD continued to enforce deep and painful racial divides in Minneapolis.⁵¹ ■

Notes

The author wishes to thank William Green, Jeff Kolnick, Kirsten Delegard, Annette Atkins, B. Erin Cole, Deborah Miller, Marcia Anderson, Nancy Rosenbaum, and the anonymous reviewer for their insights, suggestions, and support.

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