

'ANGUS BARKS'

By Jeff Francis
AEG Executive Board
LOCAL 201 HISTORY

Home Town Hero

Seventy-five years ago, Al Coulthard was a patternmaker working in West Lynn GE. He had a wiry build, strong Scottish brogue, and lucky for us, a genius for organization.

1932 was the depths of the Depression. The world's largest electrical manufacturer (guess who) laid off half its workforce. Vacations and NSB were eliminated. Wages were cut 10%. Patternmakers, some of the most skilled workers at Lynn GE, made 50¢/hr. Desperation was at our parents' doorstep.

With working people taking the worst beating of the century, Al Coulthard did a strange thing. He lump-summed his pension and quit his job. Took the money into downtown Lynn and rented space for a union office, a desk and some chairs.

ORGANIZATION

There was *not one* independent union with bargaining rights in existence anywhere in any GE plant nationwide. There were Company unions set up by GE. The foreman was your representative. Obviously no protection. There were many small secret crafts unions, but they couldn't get along with each other and considered production workers too stupid to organize. Many attempts to unionize had failed. An outside organizer would call a plant gate meeting. Thirty workers show up—20 spies and 10 honest Joe's. Next day 10 honest Joe's are fired. Where could working families find protection during an economic meltdown?

Al Coulthard knew the answer. He had been in craft unions for years and knew they couldn't work. We needed an industrial union – every GE worker welcome – to battle a corporate octopus. The fundamentals were simple. Democracy needed each member's participation: *"Attend your union meeting"*. Solidarity needed shop-floor unity: *"An injury to one is an injury to all"*. Coulthard worked one by one signing up members. He called a public meeting at the old Lynn Arena, expecting a couple hundred members. Over 1100 workers packed the hall. Inside the plant, GE foremen held meetings to warn workers to steer clear of union sympathizers. But after each meeting, more workers wanted to sign a union card. In 1934 they asked for a representation election. Coulthard's union won, Local 201 was born. Lynn was the first GE location organized.

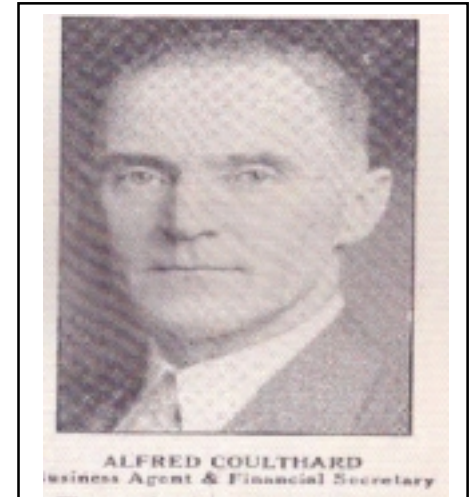
UNITY

What next? A mass union meeting on the Common. The demand: standardize piecework pricing. In April 1936, Coulthard negotiates rules for standard, temporary, and special prices, establishes 'C' rate and 'A' rate. To this day, these rules protect Lynn pieceworkers on-the-job. In December 1936 Local 201 also wins the fight to reinstate night shift bonus. What's next?

Wages. Whoa, one local is too small to win a wage increase. Coulthard's been looking for allies since 1933. He tried affiliating with an independent NRA 'Blue Eagle' union during Roosevelt's first term; didn't work out. In March 1936 there's something new: the UE. Lynn goes to the founding convention and Coulthard writes the national constitution and the preamble. His words ring true today:

"We realize the struggle to better our working and living conditions is in vain unless we are united collectively against the organized forces of the employers. We dedicate this organization to uniting all workers in our industry regardless of craft, age, sex, race, nationality or creed."

In 1937 six brave new GE locals try negotiating wages with the corporate octopus. GE scoffs at these upstarts and sees no reason to respond. Except a miracle had happened. In January 1937 the Autoworkers staged a sit-down strike against GM and won. Corporate board rooms went spastic. This was revolution in their eyes, seizure



of their personal private property, forcible recognition of unions. How could corporations head this off from happening again? GE decided negotiation might be the better part of valor, and signed on the dotted line in 1938. This first national contract was modest, recognizing the national union, establishing a grievance procedure, and recognizing local agreements. The wage increase (10%) would wait until 1941, when Lynn, Schenectady and Erie were joined by 15 other locals.

During 13 years as the first Business Agent of Local 201, Al Coulthard built our local from 3,000 to 23,000 members. He was the only full-time paid officer, and often kept the Union hall open on Saturday mornings for group meetings. Despite always playing a leading role in national negotiations, Coulthard encouraged younger men and women to run for national office. He stayed put close to home. 75% of our national contract was won in these early years.

YOUR HERITAGE

In his weekly newspaper column, the 'Prying Prowler', he repeatedly stressed the Union's successes depended not on one man, but on broad membership support. An early enemy of Hitler, Coulthard believed democracy without participation can turn into one-man tyranny. He demanded respect for Local 201 as the organization responsible for improving the living conditions of all the citizens of Lynn.

You will not find a plaque on a wall, or a name in the hall to commemorate Al Coulthard. But with each paycheck we cash, every holiday we enjoy, we owe him something back. We owe him our support for Local 201. Seventy-five years later, we can take pride that one of the finest labor leaders to come forth when times were toughest was one of our own.

