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## Holding Mardi Gras Hostage: Mayor Ernest N. Morial and the 1979 New Orleans Police Strike

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Holding Mardi Gras Hostage: Mayor Ernest N. Morial and the 1979 New Orleans Police Strike

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
History

By

Gordon Field Chadwick

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## Abstract

In 1979, New Orleans' Mardi Gras celebration was disrupted by a police strike. The strike exposed the new political positioning that had resulted from national pressures such as the realization of black political power and the brief surge in public worker unions. New Orleans' weakening white social elite was forced to assert its remaining power through Mardi Gras, while finding an unexpected ally in Mayor Ernest N. Morial, the first black mayor of New Orleans. This temporary alliance exemplifies an experience that was different than that of other American cities. While strong racial tension persisted, the old establishment's interests coincided with Mayor Morial's when Mardi Gras, a powerful cultural and economic institution, was threatened. This temporary alliance managed to defeat the local police union by galvanizing the citizens of the city against the strikers.

New Orleans; Mardi Gras; police; union; strike; Morial

## Introduction

“It’s Alive! It’s Alive!” a banner headline proclaimed in the February 28, 1979, New Orleans *The Times-Picayune*. The front page reminded readers that, although New Orleans’ major Mardi Gras parades had stayed off of the streets throughout the carnival season, Mardi Gras had not disappeared entirely.<sup>1</sup> The 1979 iteration of the city’s famous pre-Lenten celebration had certainly been abnormal. Most years, locals and visitors would have enjoyed weeks of parades before ostensibly giving up indulgence during the Catholic observance of Lent. However, New Orleans’ Mardi Gras had developed beyond its Catholic roots into a major tourist attraction. Local boosters called Mardi Gras “the greatest free show on earth,” and organizations, called krewes, often touted their parades as gifts to the public. By the late 1970s, the carnival season had developed into a lucrative source of income for hotels, restaurants, and other tourist-oriented service industries. Away from public view, krewes also held lavish balls for the members’ friends and families, though most people’s carnival season centered upon public activity—the parades, carousing, and costuming. But on Mardi Gras Day in 1979, the *Baton Rouge Advocate* quipped that the “most popular costumes in the French Quarter in the early hours of Mardi Gras Tuesday were the green fatigues and riot helmets of National Guardsmen.”<sup>2</sup> The National Guard, and a few people who jokingly costumed as soldiers, patrolled the streets of the French Quarter along with Louisiana State Police because, with few exceptions, the officers of the New Orleans Police Department did not. The Police Association of New Orleans (PANO)

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<sup>1</sup> Molly Moore, “It’s Alive! It’s Alive!,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 28, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> “Green Fatigues, Riots Helmets Popular Mardi Gras Costume,” *Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 28, 1979, morning edition.

had called a strike several days earlier, casting the annual celebration into uncertainty as PANO leadership and Mayor Ernest N. “Dutch” Morial attempted to stare each other down.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1. Revelers on Bourbon Street on Mardi Gras Day followed by National Guards on patrol.

AP photo, *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 28, 1979.

The strike affected nearly everyone because the city’s financial well-being relied heavily on revenue from the tourist industry. However, the strike’s implications stretched beyond business and leisure. The first cancellation of major parades since the Korean War spotlighted a transitional period in New Orleans’ power relations as the black community’s political weight strengthened while white elites were losing control of the city’s government amidst a dwindling white population. The weakening of long-standing political forces meant that several new groups competed for influence in the city, including Morial, traditional black political organizations, and, at least in the opinion of some people, national unions.

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<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, officials referred to PANO by its original name, the Patrolmen’s Association of New Orleans, instead of Police Association. It is also occasionally referred to as the Police Association of Louisiana. For clarity, this paper will use the Police Association of Louisiana.

This paper will explore the strike's political ramifications in a rapidly shifting urban arena. The strike was evidence of an exceptional pattern of urban political growth after the advent of black municipal power in the United States. While it was not unheard of for the interests of black mayors and white elites to coincide, the police strike and the importance of Mardi Gras led to an uncommon relationship between a new black mayor, Morial, and old social elites as well as business leaders. Instead of holding to racial lines, the established white social elite aligned briefly with Morial against a mostly white police force. This is not to suggest a period of racial harmony. In fact, Morial and wealthy white elites would clash over other issues later in Morial's mayoralty. The strike temporarily aligned Morial with the interests of those at the top of the rigid social structure of New Orleans. Opposite this temporary alliance were the unionized police, whose strike experience echoes the undoing of public unions along racial and bureaucratic lines that organized labor experienced throughout the country. The strike exposes the new alignment of local political power in which the established white elites were forced use alternate avenues to assert power while acknowledging surging African-American political power while public unionism was cast aside.

This story will primarily be told using newspapers, letters to Mayor Morial's office, and interviews as primary sources. The newspapers consulted most frequently are the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, the largest newspaper in New Orleans in 1979 which often reflected the conservative views of the New Orleans establishment, and the *Figaro*, an alternative weekly newspaper which spent more time covering the police unions' view. Iris Kelso, who had a complicated and sometimes adversarial relationship with Morial, wrote many of the political news articles for *Figaro*. The *Louisiana Weekly*, which was significant in the African-American community, the *New York Times*, and other newspapers, provided less extensive coverage of the



events. The letters and telegrams featured in this paper were sent to the mayor during the strike and are now kept in the Mayor Ernest N. Morial Records collection at the New Orleans Public Library. Finally, two main sets of interviews consulted: interviews with Dutch Morial conducted by Arnold Hirsch as part of his personal research, and interviews conducted after Morial's death by University of New Orleans professors and students for a project called Contemporary New Orleans: An Oral History Project Concerning Ernest N. "Dutch" Morial.

Transitional periods were not uncommon throughout cities in the United States during the 1960s and 70s. Historian Jeffrey Adler argues that this period saw a realization of African American political power, brought on by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which "produced a sea change in urban society."<sup>4</sup> Much has been written about the history of first black mayors in major American cities, such as Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana; Harold Washington in Chicago, Illinois; and Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Ohio. Mayors of all races and ethnicities had to deal with the problems of shrinking tax bases and national economic decline, but Adler concludes that black mayors faced special challenges as they dealt with racism within local and state governments. Historian Roger Biles echoes Adler's assertion that black mayors faced additional challenges noting that as whites left the inner city, they took tax revenue and years of work expertise with them which left city services in shambles.<sup>5</sup>

Because some cities that elected their first black mayors were still majority white, uneasy political alliances were not uncommon. For example, Maynard Jackson had to consider the interests of Atlanta's white business leaders while also attempting to improve conditions in the

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Adler, introduction to *African American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, ed. David Colbrun and Jeffrey Adler, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Biles, "Black Mayors: A Historical Assessment," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (1992), 115.

city's impoverished black neighborhoods, according to historian Ronald Bayor.<sup>6</sup> But Atlanta featured a different political landscape than New Orleans. Historian Bernard Rice places business leaders at the top of the power structure in Atlanta, an arrangement which he argues meant that decisions on desegregation were made with "business pragmatism" in mind.<sup>7</sup> While business interests certainly existed, New Orleans' power structure was more heavily influenced by a group of social elites which drew its legitimacy more from lineage than business success. Tulane University economics professor Charles Y. W. Chai identified this arrangement of power as a major source of New Orleans' stagnation, both economically and socially.<sup>8</sup> These elites would not be so easily lured by the prosperity of other Sunbelt cities; to them, the possibility of New Orleans becoming like Atlanta or Houston might even be seen as a threat.

Also, as Morial did, many black mayors struggled with their police departments. In Cleveland, Mayor Carl Stokes clashed with police over the reform of the police recruitment process, which was designed to bring more African Americans into the overwhelmingly white police force; in an especially tense moment during a riot, some Cleveland police officers even used racial slurs in reference to Stokes on the police radio.<sup>9</sup> Reforming police departments was important because the police had so often been symbols of repression to the black community, but also because police violence and corruption reflected poorly on cities in the eyes of business interests. In short, there was strong pressure to reform law enforcement.

Historians of this national political shift have tended to focus their studies on cities such as Cleveland, Gary, Detroit, and Chicago, leaving New Orleans understudied. Historian Arnold

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald Bayor, "African-American Mayors in Atlanta," in *African American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley R. Rice, "If Dixie Were Atlanta," in *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II*, eds. Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Y. W. Chai, "Who Rules New Orleans? A Study of Community Power Structure," *Louisiana Business Survey* 2 (October 1971): 11.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard N. Moore, *Carl Stokes of Cleveland* in *African American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, 94-95.

Hirsch's research demonstrates that Morial's struggles in office reflected many of the experiences of other pioneering African American mayors. Hirsch, an urban historian initially trained as an expert in Chicago's politics, has written about Morial in several articles, as well as in the book he co-edited, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*. Hirsch contends that, while there were some similarities shared by Morial and other African American mayors, Morial's distinctly Creole vision of local society's racial structure played an important role in his impact on New Orleans politics. In the radical Creole intellectual tradition, Hirsch says, Morial "pursued neither black separatism nor chauvinism but a single society, open to all."<sup>10</sup> The radical Creole outlook, according to historians Caryn Cossé Bell and Joseph Logsdon, was rooted in French intellectualism and in the "revolutionary movements in the nineteenth-century French world."<sup>11</sup> Nikki Dugar argues in her MA thesis that, during the Civil Rights Movement, some creoles embraced an isolationist "creole" identity while some others, civil rights lawyer A.P. Tureaud included, embraced a "black" identity.<sup>12</sup>

New Orleans' social and economic problems were interconnected. In the controversial report *The New Orleans Economy: Pro Bono Publico?*, University of New Orleans Economics Professor James Bobo identified major problems of the New Orleans economy. He argued that New Orleans' sluggish growth had to do with the huge gap between the city's upper class and its vast impoverished population.<sup>13</sup> This, Bobo said, created a separate "underworld" economy marked by low levels of education, extreme underemployment, and abject poverty, which was not affected by conventional economic development. In short, Bobo argued that these factors

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<sup>10</sup> Arnold Hirsch, "Simply a Matter of Black and White," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* ed. Arnold Hirsch and Joe Logsdon (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992), 305.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, "The Americanization of Black New Orleans," in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* ed. Arnold Hirsch and Joe Logsdon (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992), 203-204.

<sup>12</sup> Nikki Dugar, "I Am What I Say I Am: Racial and Cultural Identity Along Creoles of Color in New Orleans," (MA thesis, the University of New Orleans, 2009), 32.

<sup>13</sup> James Bobo, *The New Orleans Economy: Pro Bono Publico?* (New Orleans: The University of New Orleans, 1975), 2-3.

exacerbated and perpetuated New Orleans' existing economic problems. Writing a few years earlier, Tulane University Economics Professor Charles Y. W. Chai's report "Who Rules New Orleans?" found that New Orleans' rigid social structure, which was difficult to break into because it relied on carefully cultivated pedigree not wealth, led to economic stagnation and social problems.<sup>14</sup> These reports were taken seriously by some of New Orleans' leaders in the 1970's and '80's, though some in the business community dismissed their findings as negative thinking and developed publicity campaigns focused on positive news about the economy. Some politicians, especially Morial, used these reports as evidence of the need to restructure the city's political and economic institutions.

Labor relations formed another important theme of the 1979 strike. In *Stayin' Alive: The 1970's and the Last Days of the Working Class*, historian Jefferson Cowie illustrated that 1970's was a tumultuous decade for organized labor. It began, he writes, with the "promise of working-class revival," but ended with the demise of working class solidarity.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, labor historian Joseph McCartin argues that the mid-70's saw a turn for the worse for public sector unions, which had experienced a massive upsurge in activity in the 1960's and early 1970'.<sup>16</sup> Though public sector strikes had gained legitimacy in courts and with the public in the early 1970's, McCartin says public unions were forced into taking unpopular action as they attempted to protect their members from the effects of national financial crisis. This period has been understudied in the context of Louisiana, but what has been written does seem to follow along

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Y. W. Chai, "Who Rules New Orleans?," 11.

<sup>15</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970's and the Last Days of the Working Class*, (New York: The New Press, 2010), 18.

<sup>16</sup> McCartin's work also contains a detailed account of the important legislation and judicial decisions that accompanied the trends discussed here. Joseph McCartin, "Unexpected Convergence: Values, Assumption, and the Right to Strike in Public and Private Sectors, 1945-2005," *Buffalo Law Review* 57.3 (2009): 749; Joseph McCartin, "Turnabout Years: Public Sector Unionism and the Fiscal Crisis," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970's*, eds. Bruce J. Shulman and Julia E. Zelizer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 211-213.

the same lines. In *Louisiana Labor: From Slavery to Right-to-Work*, Bernard Cook and James Watson argue that the latter half of the 1970's was a difficult time for organized labor because Louisiana had a strong anti-labor movement embodied by the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI).<sup>17</sup> Governor Edwin Edwards, who had received support from unions in his gubernatorial campaigns, sensed the growth of anti-union sentiment and allowed anti-union "Right-to-Work" legislation to be passed in 1976.<sup>18</sup>

All of these different currents collided during the 1979 police strike, a pivotal moment in Dutch Morial's tenure in office, but little has been written about it.<sup>19</sup> One master's thesis by Preston C. Rodrigue, argues that the administration successfully used paramilitary force to break the strike.<sup>20</sup> Viewing the strike through the lens of military history, Rodrigue argues that the city "won" the strike because it successfully developed and implemented a well-organized plan while PANO's disorganization doomed its efforts. Frank Bovenkirk has also written about the strike in a short article.<sup>21</sup> Bovenkirk downplays the racial tension that the strike evoked and argues that the strike was mostly about money. The strike also generated interest from legal scholars because it produced a significant ruling in Louisiana labor law which held that public employees had no right to strike.<sup>22</sup> Neither military nor legal history is the focus of this thesis, which explores the strike's political ramifications in a changing urban arena.

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Cook and James R. Watson, *Louisiana Labor: From Slavery To "Right to Work,"* (Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1985), 296.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Cook and James R. Watson, *Louisiana Labor: From Slavery To "Right to Work,"* 298.

<sup>19</sup> While the strike has been understudied, the intersection of Mardi Gras and politics has been written about. Two prominent examples include Reid Mitchell's *All on a Mardi Gras Day: Episodes in the History of New Orleans Carnival*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and James Gill's *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Preston C. Rodrigue, "The New Orleans Police Strike, 8 February to 4 March 1979" (MA thesis, Southeastern Louisiana University, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Frank Bovenkirk, "The Year Without Mardi Gras," *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 20 no. 1 (1993): 54.

<sup>22</sup> Donald A. Hoffman "The New Orleans Police Strike." *The Municipal Attorney* (July-August 1979): 121-3.; *City of New Orleans vs. Police Ass'n*, 369 So.2d 188 (La. App. 4 Cir. 1979); *City of New Orleans vs. Police Association*, 376 So.2d 1269 (La. 1979)

## The 1977 Mayoral Election

The man under the most pressure leading up to the strike was the recently elected mayor, Ernest Nathan “Dutch” Morial. At age 48, Morial had been sworn into office on May 1, 1978, as New Orleans’ first black mayor. A self-identified member of the Creole of Color community, his light complexion would have allowed him to be mistaken as a white man, but he embraced his African-American identity and built a career as a civil rights lawyer. Working alongside civil rights lawyer A.P. Tureaud, Morial had inherited a legacy of Creole legal activism. That legacy stretched as far back as the eighteenth century and included Creole luminaries such as Rodolphe Desdunes and Louis Martinet.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 2. Ernest N. “Dutch” Morial, Photograph #1252, “Mayor Ernest N. Morial” by H.F. Baquet, Portraits/Head Shots, Mayor Ernest N. Morial Photograph Collection

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<sup>23</sup> Arnold Hirsch, *Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South*, (New Orleans: College of Urban & Public Affairs, University of New Orleans, 1990), 6-7.

Morial had been an active member and president of the local NAACP, which he saw as a political training ground, according to historian Raphael Cassimere.<sup>24</sup> Having served on the local NAACP Youth Council during the same period, Cassimere remembered working with Morial to protest segregated businesses and register voters after the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In 1969, Morial took a shot at running for an at-large seat on the city council. He was narrowly defeated by Joseph V. DiRosa DiRosa, an ally of Mayor Victor Schiro, had previously served on the city council.<sup>25</sup>

To win the mayoralty eight years later, Morial defeated two moderate white candidates in an open primary and Joe DiRosa in a runoff election. Despite his meritorious career as a lawyer, state representative, and judge, Morial's election worried many people because he did not reach the mayor's office through traditional channels. There were unfounded, racially fueled worries that a black mayor would bring ruin to the city. In response to these attitudes, *Figaro* ran a report before the election about other cities that had successful black mayors.<sup>26</sup> But a real concern for local politicians was how Morial would change New Orleans' political system. As professor and political analyst Charles Chai observed, Morial seemed to be outside of the local political mainstream.<sup>27</sup> He did not arise through a patronage-dealing political machine. Furthermore, he was uninterested in the political practice of accommodating white leaders in the way that black politicians done had in the past. Established local politicians wanted to know if Morial would cooperate with them. Would he abide by their rules? Morial later observed that his independence had made him enemies, but was proud that he "was fairly successful...without making all those

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<sup>24</sup> Raphael Cassimere, interview by Connie Zeanah Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, video recording, November 20, 2003, "Contemporary New Orleans: An Oral History Project," Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>25</sup> "Councilman Joseph V. DiRosa," New Orleans Public Library, accessed June 10, 2013, <http://nutrias.org/inv/council/dirosa.htm>

<sup>26</sup> "What's happened in L.A., Atlanta, Newark, Detroit," *Figaro*, October 17, 1977.

<sup>27</sup> "A Peek at Dr. Chai's Blockbuster," *Figaro*, November 8, 1978.

obligations and compromising myself on anything.”<sup>28</sup> This remark understated Morial’s level of achievement, but reveals his pointed rejection of the path of machine politicians.

Even local black political leaders, as historian and civil rights activist Raphael Cassimere remembers, entertained the idea of throwing in their lot with a white candidate who would return their favor in the form of patronage rather than support Morial.<sup>29</sup> Patronage had long been a powerful political mechanism in Louisiana. In late 1960’s and early 1970’s, the patronage system was strengthened as federal Great Society funds flowed into what historian Kent Germany calls the “Soft State,” a public/private partnership that came to be controlled by a few political organizations that received gifts in exchange for delivering voters.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, according to Morial, some other black political leaders worried that the election of a black mayor would reduce their power because a black mayor could deal directly with the black community instead of using black leaders as liaisons.<sup>31</sup> As Cassimere described the situation, “a lot of black politicians were kind of caught” in a dilemma. Even though Morial’s supporters were rewarded, Cassimere continues, “they weren’t going to get the same things from Dutch that they were getting from white politicians.”<sup>32</sup> Dismantling the old system could produce political casualties on all sides.

According to Arnold Hirsch, Morial’s opponent, Joe DiRosa, “conceded the black vote and rooted his campaign in the city’s white, working-class neighborhoods.” In fact, a few days before the election, DiRosa campaigned door-to-door in black neighborhoods following a damaging newspaper article. However, in light of the publication of DiRosa’s use of the terms

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<sup>28</sup> Ernest Morial, Interview with Arnold Hirsch, June 20, 1987, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>29</sup> Raphael Cassimere, interview with Connie Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, Video Recording, November 20, 2003, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>30</sup> Kent Germany, *New Orleans After the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2007), 16, 246-252.

<sup>31</sup> Ernest Morial, Interview with Arnold Hirsch, May 17, 1987, New Orleans, LA

<sup>32</sup> Raphael Cassimere, interview with Connie Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, Video Recording, November 20, 2003, New Orleans, LA.



“junglebunnies” while complaining about black voter registration, the attempt to win black votes seemed like a token effort.<sup>33</sup> Hirsch also argues that DiRosa “employed anti-establishment rhetoric that...struck fear into the local business community.”<sup>34</sup> This was important because DiRosa could not afford to lose white voters. To his voting core, he “played on fears of a black ‘takeover.’” Interestingly, while some whites didn’t want to vote for Morial because of his race, some upper class whites hesitated to back DiRosa because of his Italian ethnicity.<sup>35</sup> Given the choice between DiRosa and Morial, 97% of black voters chose Morial, as did 20% of whites, including many wealthy uptown voters.

The small, yet significant, number of white votes received by Morial garnered a lot of attention. Hirsch contends that many of the whites who voted for Morial envisioned themselves as “kingmakers” because Morial could not have won based on black votes alone since black voters made up a minority of registered voters.<sup>36</sup> Frank Friedler, the city councilperson for a district that included the wealthy uptown neighborhoods around Audubon Park, sent Morial a thinly veiled message. The same week that Morial was sworn in as mayor, Friedler told journalist Iris Kelso that Dutch should “admit the debt he owes to Moon,” in reference to Moon Landrieu, the previous mayor of New Orleans.<sup>37</sup> Friedler had supported Morial in the election and had high praise for him. However, he repeatedly remarked to Kelso that the new black mayor should be grateful for political groundwork laid by Landrieu, who had introduced many African-Americans into city government. In one instance, Friedler added that Morial would never be able to be a better mayor than Landrieu had been. Friedler bluntly conveyed the idea

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<sup>33</sup> Iris Kelso, “Iris Kelso on Politics,” *Figaro*, October 19, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> Arnold Hirsch, *Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South*, 10-11.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> Iris Kelso, “Iris Kelso on Politics,” *Figaro*, May 3, 1978.

that Morial owed a debt to the established white politicians who believed they had helped him get elected.

Even though some established politicians wanted to dictate to Morial, the notion of taking a back seat to anyone was not the new mayor's style. Morial thought he had his own coalition of voters. Furthermore, despite some concerns about the loyalty of parts of his coalition, he felt that since the people elected him, he held a mandate to be a powerful, active leader.<sup>38</sup> Several months later, Kelso was noting that Friedler had "gotten scarcely a thank you" from Morial and had taken to opposing the mayor in the city council.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Morial did not want anyone to tell him how to do his job, even if it would cost him an ally on a city council in which seven of nine members were white.

Morial enjoyed overwhelming support amongst the general black population, but after his election, Morial also received criticism from black political leaders for keeping many white department heads from the previous administration. Tom Dent, a writer and figure in the Black Arts movement, complained that Morial "didn't act like a black man."<sup>40</sup> Carl Galmon, an African American civil rights activist, resigned his post in disgust over Morial's appointments. In Morial's own view, he opened the doors of all city offices to black officials, but he refused to simply appoint black officials for the sake of their skin color. Historian Arnold Hirsch sees his emphasis on qualification, not skin color, as an attempt "to transcend race by sheer force of his own will."<sup>41</sup> In contrast to Moon Landrieu's attempt to "make up for past unfairness," Morial's personal secretary and long-time City Hall employee Alicia Davis characterized Morial's

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<sup>38</sup> Arnold Hirsch, *Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> Iris Kelso, "Morial Wearing Boston Club Stipes, Colors," *Figaro*, November 29, 1978.

<sup>40</sup> Tom Dent, "New Orleans Versus Atlanta," *Southern Exposure*, 7 (Spring 1979), 68.

<sup>41</sup> Arnold Hirsch, *Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South*, 17-18.

approach as “let’s be fair, but let’s be fair to everybody.”<sup>42</sup> This idealistic, egalitarian approach disappointed both black and white politicians in a system steeped in patronage.

Many wondered whether Morial might be a one-term mayor. Hank Braden, leader of a local black political organization called Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP), opined that he saw “Dutch Morial tearing this community apart in every way imaginable.”<sup>43</sup> Braden was seething because he felt Morial had deliberately removed COUP members from City Hall. Worse, COUP leaders felt Morial had publicly embarrassed them when police raided a reading center run by COUP, charged 27 employees with payroll fraud, and led arrestees away in handcuffs in front of the media.<sup>44</sup> Walking into an already difficult situation, Morial found that his ties to many of his political allies were tenuous, and he had no shortage of enemies. It wasn’t clear that Morial had the backing to get anything done.

### **A Tumultuous First Year: A Budget Crisis and a Strike**

Compounding Morial’s issues, he had inherited a difficult situation from Moon Landrieu. For one, the city possessed a particularly dour financial situation that loomed over the debate regarding the 1979 city budget, which the mayor had to get approved by the city council. The city sorely lacked the funds required to provide basic services. Morial told the council that the city needed \$43 million to maintain its 1978 service level or, as Morial put it, “just to stand

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<sup>42</sup> Alicia Davis, interview by Connie Zeanah Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, video recording, December 4, 2003, “Contemporary New Orleans: An Oral History Project,” Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>43</sup> Iris Kelso, “Iris Kelso on Politics,” *Figaro*, November 1, 1978.

<sup>44</sup> “Morial Harassing COUP?,” *The Times-Picayune*, October 24, 1978.

still.”<sup>45</sup> Squarely placing the blame on the mayors and council members who had come before him, Morial summed up the budget situation in an address to the council:

To those who ask why this crisis came upon us at this point in time, I respond that it has been with us for years. New Orleans has been in a state of perennial crisis because it is the most underfinanced of all Southern cities. Almost alone among Southern cities, we have allowed the legend to flourish that we can run a modern city at little cost to ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

Federal funding, Morial noted, had kept the city afloat in previous years, but that funding had begun to disappear in 1978 under the Carter presidential administration. The mayor suggested that the city would have to “rid the government of wasteful and inefficient practices.”

<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, he added that he wanted to increase the salaries of the police and firemen to reflect national averages. City Hall was soon embroiled in a vigorous debate over budgets, salaries and benefits packages, and the Mayor found himself under attack.

Just as Morial had warned in his address to the City Council, funding city services became the major issue as he and the city council attempted to finalize the city budget for 1979. The largest debate was over a lingering issue: changes in city employee pay. The employees received comfortable benefits but very little pay. However, pay raises during the previous Landrieu administration had made “the benefits begin to look like abuses,” in the eyes of some citizens.<sup>48</sup> The need to reform the pay structure had long been known, but until Morial took office, the city’s administrations had avoided significant action on the issue.

Two plans for employee raises were submitted to the Civil Service Commission and were subject to approval by the city council. Theoretically, the mayor’s office did not possess the

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<sup>45</sup> Budget Message to the City Council 1978, Ernest “Dutch” Morial Papers 2003 Addendum, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Iris Kelso, “Morial Proposes Cutting Benefits for City Workers,” *Figaro*, October 25, 1978.

power to change pay plans although public discussion often focused on the mayor's stances. The administration's plan proposed raising employees' salaries by 5%. The City Employee Commission, a coalition of city workers, blasted Morial's plan as deceptive because the 5% pay increase was overshadowed by a proposed increase in work hours per week, from 35 to 40.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the employees complained that Morial's plan reduced the rate at which they could accrue sick and annual leave and abolished a tenure award program. Unsurprisingly, they proposed a larger increase than the administration, arguing that city workers should receive a 15% pay raise. The city simply lacked the funds to meet employees' pay increase demands without firing workers.

That fall, Morial introduced a set of revenue measures to attempt to alleviate some of the pressure. Morial's plan had to win the approval of the city council. The taxes, which featured a number of small service charge increases and increases in property taxes, were met with skepticism. Some felt the taxes were misguided because, as councilman Sidney Barthelemy pointed out, a one-cent sales tax increase would have accomplished the same goals.<sup>50</sup> An editorial in the *Louisiana Weekly* accused Morial of using the tax plan to hedge his bets. Although the taxes appeared to be an effort to fix the city's problems, the *Weekly* suggested that "whatever the council does with the proposals, Mayor Morial can always fall back on the cliché, 'I tried.'"<sup>51</sup> Despite criticism, Morial campaigned for the measures in public meetings around the city and even gained endorsements of his plan from city civic groups such as the Metropolitan Crime Commission.<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, the city council wound up approving the lean budget as well as three of the proposed taxes, which earned Morial praise. In the eyes of the *Louisiana Weekly*,

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<sup>49</sup> *Louisiana Weekly*, December 2, 1978.

<sup>50</sup> "The Tax Proposals," *Louisiana Weekly*, November 11, 1978.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Joe Massa, "We Won't be Another Cleveland," *The Times-Picayune*, November 26, 1978.; Paul Atkinson, "Employment Tax 'Best of Package,' Morial Tells Group, *The Times-Picayune*, November 15, 1978.

“the Mayor’s public campaign to get people to put pressure on their councilmen...apparently worked.”<sup>53</sup> Morial had angered some city officials and media members, but the combination of his campaigning and the support of established groups proved to be sufficient. Even a hostile city council had not been able to derail his budget plans.

Public service workers thought they were getting a raw deal from city administration, and various city departments began to discuss the possibility of striking. This discussion was not an uncommon one for public workers in the seventies. In fact, Morial’s administration had already dealt with a three-day sanitation strike in July 1978, when sanitation workers, unsanctioned by their Teamsters’ affiliated local, walked off the job because Morial’s sanitation director had fired a union steward.<sup>54</sup> Observers knew that conditions were ripe for a strike, and in December 1978, Firefighters’ Union Local No. 632 kicked off public discussion of a strike during Mardi Gras. Though they never struck, the firefighter’s union’s threats foreshadowed later police union action. The Firefighters’ demands were similar to those issued by PANO a few months later. Chapter president Clarence J. Perez demanded a 15% pay increase and a 40-hour work week and threatened to strike during carnival season.<sup>55</sup> When asked about handling grievances in court, Perez responded “To hell with the courts, we’ll just hit the bricks.”<sup>56</sup> This attitude reflected a shift in the 1970’s in internal union philosophy from diplomatic styled negotiations controlled by the union hierarchy to rank and file control and action.<sup>57</sup> Later on, PANO leadership would show a similar distaste for contractual litigation, instead favoring job action.

While any strike by emergency responders was sure to put the Morial administration in a tough position, the firefighters sought to press the city’s leaders by threatening to endanger one

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<sup>53</sup> “Council Approves 3 of Morial’s Tax Proposals,” *Louisiana Weekly*, January 6, 1979.

<sup>54</sup> “Garbage Settlement Reached,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 21, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Atkinson, “Mardi Gras Fire Strike?,” *The Times-Picayune*, December 5, 1978.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive*, 8-9.

of the city's best known cultural and economic events. By 1979, Mardi Gras "supported a year-round industry of manufacturing or importing supplies and accessories."<sup>58</sup> Business people and their employees had come to rely on an uptick in revenue during Mardi Gras as tourists poured dollars into local hotels, bars, restaurants, and anything else they might need to pay for during their stay. Many business owners counted on the revenue boost provided by visitors seeking the carefree indulgence and spectacle of Mardi Gras. While the carnival season may seem chaotic on the street, the parades actually require a coordinated effort by public services and private organizations known as krewes. Firefighters, but more importantly the police, are integral to the success of parades that travel for several miles past thick crowds lining both sides of the street. Monitoring vehicle traffic and enforcing street closures along the lengthy parade routes as well as ensuring that spectators avoid getting too close to floats and bands required almost all police personnel to work overtime hours, especially in the last two weeks of the season. The potential danger of fire during one of the parades would require the police and fire departments working in tandem. The firefighters knew, as did all emergency personnel, that their value was highest during Mardi Gras, so that would be when they could enjoy the most leverage.

This tactic had been tried before by a different group of workers connected to Mardi Gras. In the late 1940's, flambeaux carriers, African-American men who carried torches to light the night parades, walked out in protest of poor treatment by the white-dominated carnival establishment who hired them.<sup>59</sup> The strike merged civil rights activism with economic protest. Though not public servants, their resistance proved the tactic to be fruitful. They managed to force the parade organizations to, in some cases, double their wages, as krewe captains and local Mardi Gras boosters worried the flambeaux presence was part of the experience that visitors had

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<sup>58</sup> J. Mark Souther, *New Orleans on Parade: Tourism and the Transformation of the Crescent City*, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2006), 156.

<sup>59</sup> J. Mark Souther, *New Orleans on Parade*, 138.

come to expect. The flambeaux had successfully used Mardi Gras to accomplish a political goal. Three decades later, Mardi Gras had been further cultivated as a tourist attraction, so targeting it was a logical choice. One officer would later describe the threat of striking during Mardi Gras as the police union's "four aces."<sup>60</sup>

Soon the Police Association of New Orleans (PANO) began to echo the Firefighters' Union's ominous talk about job action during carnival season. Founded in 1969, the Police Association was a relative newcomer compared to the 40-year-old Firefighters' union and the 50-year-old local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP). PANO had, in part, been founded because some officers felt that the FOP did not represent the needs of younger members of the force. Exposing a sense of tension between FOP and PANO, in 1969, spokesperson Judge Joseph R. Bosetta dismissed officers who were unsatisfied with the FOP as "a little on the greedy side."<sup>61</sup> This was, in part, because the FOP was prohibited from striking by its constitution. PANO reflected a trend in labor in the 1970's towards stronger, more active public worker unions. A few years later, in 1973, 23 of the department's 83 black officers created the New Orleans chapter of the Black Organization of Police, affiliated with the National Black Police Association, which advocated for fair treatment for black police.<sup>62</sup> During this period, unions experienced a strong push for control by rank and file members. PANO's creation stemmed from frustration with the existing order. Furthermore, as Jefferson Cowie demonstrates in *Stayin' Alive*, American union members during this period were pulled from many different directions. This was true for New Orleans' police unions as their 1979 strike experience would prove that racial and bureaucratic conflicts distracted from working class consciousness.

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<sup>60</sup> "N.O. Police Union to Resume Negotiations; Carnival Still in Doubt," *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 19, 1979.

<sup>61</sup> "Can't Raise Pay Now—Petre," *The Times-Picayune*, October 21, 1969.

<sup>62</sup> "Black Policemen Set Community Relations Effort," *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, October 6, 1973.



PANO grew rapidly, from fourteen original officers to 750 members in just four months. According to the PANO's website, "PANO was founded out of frustration due to poor working conditions, substandard pay, low morale, and lack of attention to the backbone of the New Orleans Police Department, the patrolmen and sergeants." Their claims were not unfounded; the NOPD's working conditions were very poor and officers often moonlighted or worked exorbitant amounts of overtime. A 1976 study showed NOPD officers were working an average of 500 to 600 overtime hours per year—more than twice the next leading department in the nation — to make ends meet.<sup>63</sup> Their earliest list of demands consisted of a number of equipment upgrades, pay upgrades and civil service reforms.<sup>64</sup> In 1973, after "three years and over 100 bargaining sessions," PANO signed a three-year collective bargaining agreement with the city.<sup>65</sup> Originally an AFL-CIO affiliate, PANO decided to join the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in 1976, citing the AFL-CIO's reluctance to pressure the city.<sup>66</sup> According to PANO president Vincent Bruno, this change did not reflect the AFL-CIO's weakness but it appeared to observers that PANO sought a national organization that was willing to negotiate more aggressively with the city.<sup>67</sup> The decision came just a week after the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's deputies had also opted to join the Teamsters, though it took PANO until January 1978 to officially become a member of the Teamsters.<sup>68</sup>

Some citizens had been sympathetic to the police department's low pay and poor morale, but others also saw the police through a different lens—that of police brutality. Sociologist Joseph Fichter's 1964 report on the NOPD's treatment of arrestees described a history of racial

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Atkinson, "N.O. Police Rank First in Overtime," *The Times-Picayune*, June 22, 1976.

<sup>64</sup> "History," The Police Association of New Orleans, <http://pano1544.com/history.html> (accessed March 1, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> "City, PANO Sign Police Union Bargaining Accord," *The Times-Picayune*, September 16, 1973.

<sup>66</sup> "PANO Votes to Drop AFL-CIO, Switch to Teamsters," *The Times-Picayune*, April 25, 1976; "Police Group Joins Teamster's Union," *The Times-Picayune*, January 27, 1978. The Teamsters officially recognized PANO as the Police Association of Louisiana Teamster Local No. 253, but they were still almost always referred to as PANO.

<sup>67</sup> "PANO Votes to Drop AFL-CIO, Switch to Teamsters," *The Times-Picayune*, April 25, 1976;

<sup>68</sup> "Police Group Joins Teamster's Union," *The Times-Picayune*, January 27, 1978.

prejudice and illegal police behavior.<sup>69</sup> In the 1970's, reports of police brutality still surfaced frequently. The victims mostly consisted of black citizens whom police harassed, beat, and even sexually abused.<sup>70</sup> The officers were mostly white, though it wasn't unheard of for black officers to be accused of brutality. Furthermore, on average between 1975 and 1979, NOPD officers killed more civilians per officer than any other American police force.<sup>71</sup> Morial had personally experienced abusive police officers when NOPD officers had arrested him for "refusing to move on" while standing in front of his home in 1968.<sup>72</sup> The NOPD clearly stood in the way of the kind of open society Morial envisioned, and he had sought to reform the police as one of his first orders of business.

First, the mayor needed to find a replacement for the outgoing police superintendent. The search began before Morial's inauguration when he assigned a 29-person task force to select candidates from which the mayor could choose. Morial intended to send a positive message about the future of the NOPD by conducting the search openly and with representation from all over the city. The selection of James Parsons, from Birmingham, Alabama, wound up angering NOPD officers who had expected one of their own to be elevated to superintendent instead. Parsons had helped reform the Birmingham Police and had, according to Morial, a "reputation at that time for being one of the outstanding police administrators in the country."<sup>73</sup> Parsons had been instrumental in the reformation of a police force in Birmingham that had become legendary for its racism and brutality under police chief Bull Connor. To Morial, Parsons seemed like the right kind of person to help Morial take on one his biggest challenges, but Parsons was

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<sup>69</sup> Joseph Fichter and Brian T. Jordan, *Police Handling of Arrestees: A Research Study of Police Arrests in New Orleans*, (New Orleans: Dept. Sociology, Loyola University of the South, 1964).

<sup>70</sup> George Winston, "'To Protect and Serve?' Police Brutality and Attempted Reform in New Orleans During the First Morial Administration," (master's thesis, University of New Orleans, 2004), ii.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>72</sup> "Settling Issue Giarrusso Aim," *The Times-Picayune*, January 21, 1968.

<sup>73</sup> Ernest Morial, Interview by Huey L. Perry, March 26, 1987.

immediately labeled as an outsider by many NOPD officers. Morial and Parsons set out to try to reform the department's crime reporting, behavior, and racial makeup. These major changes were unpopular with many officers. This was especially true for "a core of veteran white officers who did little to hide their distaste" for someone that they described as the "nigger mayor."<sup>74</sup> A conflict was lurking and the pay problems, while not illegitimate, provided a pretext to challenge the new mayor.

Threatening to strike was nothing new for NOPD officers. Almost immediately after its creation, PANO began to experiment with strike tactics. In 1969, PANO and the Firefighters' Union collaborated in a sick-out, or "Blue Flu" and "Red Flu," during the general election to which the city responded by sending doctors to police officers' homes in the middle of the night to check the officers' health.<sup>75</sup> The police were met with angry words from police superintendent Joseph Giarrusso who accused the officers of breaking their commitment to the public. By 1979, the officers in PANO had experience with union activity and had threatened to strike in 1976.<sup>76</sup> However, they had never carried out a strike of the length that union leaders began to publicly talk about in late 1978 and early 1979. PANO's opposition to Morial was known since it had supported DiRosa in the 1977 mayoral race.<sup>77</sup>

The most visible member of PANO was Vincent Bruno, its 31-year-old president of PANO, Bruno was born in July 1946 and he became a police officer at 20 years of age. He was related by marriage to reputed New Orleans crime boss Carlos Marcello and the two apparently kept in close touch; Bruno visited regularly at Marcello's home in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans. Bruno became the PANO president after the organization's first president, Irving Magri,

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<sup>74</sup> Arnold Hirsch, "Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South," 21.

<sup>75</sup> "Action Vowed by Giarrusso," *The Times-Picayune*, November 10, 1969.

<sup>76</sup> Ed Anderson, "Police Agree to Hold off Strike," *The Times-Picayune*, July 2, 1976.

<sup>77</sup> J. Douglas Murphy and Pierre Dugruy, "More Marcello Clout if Teamsters Win?" *The Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1979.

lost his police job in 1975 for publicly calling the police superintendent at the time, Clarence Giarrusso, a “liar” and a “coward” during a squabble between PANO and the city.<sup>78</sup> Bruno would also express himself bluntly to the media, which would eventually lead to Morial describing him as a “rabble rouser.”

With pressure to negotiate mounting and only three weeks before Mardi Gras Day, Morial chose the FOP, not PANO, as the only bargaining agent the city would recognize. Morial appeared at a press conference with FOP’s William Roth, who skirted reporters’ questions about his organization’s aims, to announce the administration’s decision.<sup>79</sup> That night Bruno denounced Morial’s selection of the FOP as a “deceptive and insulting public relations ploy.”<sup>80</sup> He pointed out that the FOP lacked the ability to strike according to its constitution. Morial had argued that negotiations between the administration and the police would not touch wages or working conditions because those issues fell under the jurisdiction of the Civil Service Commission. Bruno interpreted Morial’s actions as an attempt to add a veneer of good faith bargaining while declawing angry PANO members. PANO had been recognized by the city as an official bargaining agent just a few years earlier. Furthermore, PANO had 710 members while the FOP had 647, though many officers belonged to both organizations. As journalist Paul Atkinson pointed out, the power to strike still lay in the hands of individual police officers who could make a choice to strike regardless of which organization was deemed the official bargaining agent.<sup>81</sup> In other words, taking job action might be a way for officers to short circuit the city’s negotiating tactics.

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<sup>78</sup> “Quick Hearing in Magri Case,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 20, 1974

<sup>79</sup> Mayor Morial Press Conference February 6, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records. New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>80</sup> “Bruno Calls FOP Selection Deceptive Ploy,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 7, 1979.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Atkinson, “Policeman, Not Union Hold Key to Strike,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 7, 1979.

Dutch Morial's attempt to dismiss PANO by choosing to negotiate with the FOP was an important turning point. While the police had initially been concerned about issues that affected all city workers, they now felt like the mayor had betrayed them. It appeared that Morial's recognition ploy had been a blunder. Bruno said the police and the Teamsters felt they had been pushed "to the wall" and threats began to fly.<sup>82</sup> Sanitation workers, also angry over the loss of fringe benefits, had agreed on February 7 that they would strike on Monday, February 12 at 12:01 AM if the city had failed to reinstate vacation and sick leave benefits which had been cancelled.<sup>83</sup> Bruno claimed that PANO leadership already possessed the authority to call a strike but would still wait until a meeting could be held. After a hearing in which the Civil Service Commission made it clear that those benefits would not be restored, a strike seemed inevitable. The night of February 8, about 300 of PANO's members met to formalize a strike effective immediately. At this stage, with less than two weeks to negotiate before the real tourist bonanza began, the strike certainly did not mean that Mardi Gras was doomed. Nonetheless, the decision to strike showed that PANO was willing to back up its threats.



Figure 3. Striking officers speak to Superintendent Parsons (far left) during the first strike, photo by Gerry Lodriguss, *The Times-Picayune*, February 10, 1979.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Bill Grady, "Sanitation Union Votes Strike Date," *The Times-Picayune*, February 8, 1979.

Unlike Superintendent Joseph Giarrusso during the Blue Flu of 1969, Superintendent Parsons communicated his sympathy for the striking officers and even visited a picket line while encouraging officers to end their strike.<sup>84</sup> Despite this mild response from the police chief, striking potentially exposed officers to a major risk: the administration had threatened that failing to show up for work may lead to job termination. Officers faced a tough decision. Linda Strata, the wife of an officer, sent a letter to Morial's office describing the choice that her husband faced. Actually addressed to Mayor Morial's wife, Sybil, Strata wrote that her husband was "torn between the Oath he took and the 11 years of frustrations and the belief in what he is doing."<sup>85</sup> Mrs. Strata complimented Morial, but made it clear that previous mayors had mistreated the police. Sitting alone while remaining at work at central lockup, Sergeant John Taylor III, told a reporter, "I want to be out there...but I don't believe police should strike. My heart's out there but my body's in here...It tears you, it really tears you."<sup>86</sup> To add to officers' fears, rumors suggested that Morial's administration might jump at the chance to clean house in the NOPD and attempt to build a more racially diverse force with new recruits.<sup>87</sup> This rumor was unsubstantiated, but it certainly would have played on some white officers' fears of a black "takeover." Joining the strike posed less of a problem for others; as one anonymous officer told reporters, "I ain't got nothing now, so why should I worry about being fired?"<sup>88</sup>

The February 8 strike order no doubt concerned Morial, but city officials publicly championed a contingency plan that went into effect when PANO struck. The plan, hatched with

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<sup>84</sup> "Parsons Sides with Strikers," *The Times-Picayune*, February 10, 1979.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Linda Strata, February 15, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box B8, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>86</sup> Ed Anderson, "Sergeant Torn Between Loyalty, Personal Beliefs," *The Times-Picayune*, February 11, 1979.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Atkinson, "Policeman, Not Union Hold Key to Strike," *The Times-Picayune*, February 7, 1979.

<sup>88</sup> Woody Baird, "N.O. Police Go On Strike," *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 9, 1979.

the help of Governor Edwin Edwards, sent the Louisiana National Guard as well as State Police to New Orleans to serve with the officers who had chosen not to strike.<sup>89</sup>

After just two days, on February 10, the police were back on the job. Despite professing confidence in the contingency plan, the administration agreed to recommend that the Civil Service Commission restore the lost fringe benefits to city workers. This move mollified sanitation workers whose February 12 strike deadline had not yet passed. PANO received even more concessions. Mayor Morial agreed to recognize PANO as the official representative for rank-and-file police officers after the FOP voluntarily relinquished its role as bargaining agent.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, the administration agreed that it would not take revenge on strikers. The agreement ended the strike temporarily, but nothing was finalized as the city entered into emergency negotiations with PANO. At the 1:40 a.m. announcement of the agreement on February 10, Iris Kelso noted that Morial looked exhausted, “his voice was wooden,” and he “was not the cocky, arrogant man he had been.”<sup>91</sup> PANO and Teamsters leaders seized the offensive; Mitchell Ledet, secretary-treasurer of Teamster Local No. 270 and one of the main negotiators, warned “We don’t play for fun – we play for keeps.” Bruno, in his typically colorful style, celebrated: “Man, we done brought ‘em to their knees, man, you understand that?”<sup>92</sup> He was right; the union had forced Morial to retreat.

As city officials acquiesced to a list of demands, the police and their Teamster negotiators began to appear greedy to local politicians. Councilman Mike Early pointedly asked after a week of fruitless negotiations: “Where does the ante stop? The ante started out with two demands, it

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<sup>89</sup> “100 Guardsmen on Duty,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 10, 1979.

<sup>90</sup> “Parsons Sides with Strikers,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 10, 1979.

<sup>91</sup> Iris Kelso, “The Mayor Miscalculates,” *Figaro*, February 12, 1979.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Atkinson, “‘We Play for Keeps’—Ledet,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 11, 1979.

went up to three, it went up to four, it went up to five. Where do we draw the line?”<sup>93</sup> One of the mayor’s top aides, Reynard Rochon, insisted “We’ve been telling them that there’s no more blood in the turnip.”<sup>94</sup> Opposition to the police union had brought Morial’s administration and the city council—two usually antagonistic forces—together, if only temporarily.

With the police back at work pending an agreement, PANO asked for assistance from the Teamsters. In a move that would have far-reaching ramifications, Teamster officials sent Joseph Valenti of Detroit to New Orleans to help negotiate with the city. One scholar speculated that PANO preferred to deal with a white Teamster official rather than local teamster leader Mitch Ledet, who was black.<sup>95</sup> However, Bruno and Valenti remember wholly different reasoning behind the decision. According to Preston Rodrigue’s thesis, Valenti recalled that PANO felt Ledet was too friendly with Morial while Bruno reported that Ledet and Morial had a strong dislike for each other.<sup>96</sup> Regardless, Ledet’s replacement had established a successful record in negotiating on behalf of public sector union locals. Despite such credentials, Valenti proved incapable of surpassing Ledet’s earlier victory over the mayor and his staff.

Valenti, from Teamsters Local #214 in Detroit, presented a resumé of helping public workers unionize around the country.<sup>97</sup> He had worked with sanitation workers in Detroit and he had helped unionize a small-town police department near Tampa. *The Times-Picayune* introduced Valenti to the public in a short article, calling him a “tough negotiator who will travel

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<sup>93</sup> Joe Massa, “Council Vows ‘No Surrender’ to Union Leader,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>94</sup> Woody Baird, “Edwards Asks N.O., Police Union to Wait Until After Mardi Gras,” *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 15, 1979.

<sup>95</sup> Arnold Hirsch, “Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South,” 22.

<sup>96</sup> Vincent J. Bruno, telephone conversation with author, October 6, 2000; Joseph Valenti, telephone conversation with author, September 26, 2000 quoted in Preston C. Rodrigue, “The New Orleans Police Strike, 8 February to 4.” March 1979,” 25-26. Rodrigue does not appear to have placed his interviews in a repository. Bruno’s account also includes a somewhat dubious story about a midnight showdown between Ledet, Bruno, and Morial where Ledet apparently humiliated Morial.

<sup>97</sup> Efforts have been made to contact Valenti through his union, but there has been no response.



anywhere, anytime to help any group organize, as long as the group talking is the Teamsters.”<sup>98</sup>

The *Picayune* also underscored the fact that in 1975, Valenti had provided crucial testimony in the investigation of the disappearance of Teamster leader Jimmy Hoffa. Though Valenti had not been accused of anything, the article seemed more intent on exploring his relation to organized crime than his relation to the strike at hand. The police found that they had acquired more than just Valenti’s expertise.



Figure 4. Joseph Valenti, staff photo by Bryan S. Berteaux, in *The Times-Picayune*, February 19, 1979.

Negotiations between administration and the union representatives were tense, and both sides used the local media to appeal to the citizens.. Valenti drew heavy criticism as anti-strike politicians depicted him as a crook and an outsider. Interestingly, attacks did not center on Vincent Bruno’s known relation to well-known New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello. Instead, by focusing on Valenti’s status as an “outsider,” anti-strike forces employed an old tactic that had long been used against union and civil rights organizers. In a major show of support for

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<sup>98</sup> Pierre V. Degruy. “Valenti Tough, Active Negotiator,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 19, 1979.

Morial, the New Orleans City Council lashed out at Valenti and the Teamsters. Council President and former Police Superintendent Joseph Giarrusso claimed Valenti “has issued threats to destroy the city and has put himself in a position above the people’s elected officials.”<sup>99</sup> Giarrusso chose to pin the blame almost solely on Valenti, adding that “responsible New Orleans police are being duped and deceived” by an outsider who “has no stake in this community.”<sup>100</sup> Giarrusso, whose political success had stemmed from his decades of leadership in the New Orleans Police Department, seemed especially careful not to directly offend the rank and file officers. Morial also traced a connection between unions and outsiders, saying that union leaders from other places “don’t understand anything about the inner workings of our city.”<sup>101</sup> Later, he told reporter Norman Robinson that agreeing to binding arbitration, which the union demanded, would be “like letting someone from New York, Chicago, or Philadelphia come in and tell you what your taxes should be.” Such rhetoric seems similar to the stance taken by government officials fending off labor and civil rights movement campaigns.<sup>102</sup>

The union negotiators fired back at Morial. Vincent Bruno told reporters that the Morial administration had the ball now, “and once more they’re fumbling.”<sup>103</sup> When pressed to explain why, Bruno said “I think we have, uh, some people in the city that, uh, don’t have the proper attitude...I think that some people in city government have too much pride and they’d rather let that stand in the way of the safety of the citizens.” Bruno’s choice of words echoed the white politicians and political commentators who referenced Morial’s arrogance and pride at his election to needle his independence as a black politician. Some of the negotiator’s statements did

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<sup>99</sup> Joe Massa, “Council Vows ‘No Surrender’ to Union Leader,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Paul Atkinson and Ed Anderson, “1,100 Guard, Troopers Called,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>102</sup> Mayor Morial Press Conference, February 15, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box G27, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

not seem to carry a racial charge, but were simply threats. Morial told reporters after one negotiating session that a union official had told him that a strike would yield “no winners—only a chewed up survivor.”<sup>104</sup> Valenti later told reporters that a strike could be avoided if “the dingbat can come around,” referring to Morial.<sup>105</sup>



Figure 5. Joseph Valenti (left) and Vincent Bruno(right center), AP Photo, *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 17, 1979.

Nonetheless, union officials refused to settle, and on Friday, February 16, 11 days before Mardi Gras Day, the police struck for the second time. Some doubted that the police would get what they wanted. Fifteen-year veteran and PANO member Tom Rainer, though he sympathized with the NOPD, said “You can’t beat city hall. It’s been true for so many years. Now they’re putting on their boxing gloves and they’re going to see.”<sup>106</sup> While Rainer’s reticence seems prudent in hindsight, at the time the strikers appeared to hold the upper hand because of the looming threat to Mardi Gras. Striking officers formed picket lines around precinct headquarters and held rallies. Eventually, police strikers formed picket lines around garbage depots and trash

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Atkinson and Ed Anderson, “Strike Can Be Avoided—Union,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 16, 1979.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Lori Ann Haubenstock, “The View From Inside HQ,” *Figaro*, February 26, 1979.

collection stopped as the sanitation workers, whose union was also affiliated with the Teamsters, honored the police lines.<sup>107</sup> Their rallies were often rambunctious scenes featuring “rock and disco music” where “the beer and hot dogs flowed freely.”<sup>108</sup> More ominously, striking officers held a mock funeral for the officers who did not strike, pinning a list of their names to a casket. One officer told a reporter, “They know their time will come. If they couldn’t come out and support us, we won’t support them.”<sup>109</sup>

Over one thousand National Guard troops and Louisiana State Police headed to New Orleans to assume the NOPD’s duties for a second time. Their previous stint had gone smoothly, with no noticeable change in criminal activity. Still, their ability to handle police duty for a long period of time remained a major concern for city officials and citizens alike, especially if they were called upon to handle Mardi Gras parades. Governor Edwin Edwards conceded “no other group of men and women in the world are as capable of handling Mardi Gras as the New Orleans police.”<sup>110</sup> Mayor Morial decided to cancel the first weekend of parades, but held off on making a decision about Mardi Gras Day and the final weekend when the most prominent parades were scheduled to take to the streets.

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<sup>107</sup> “Orleans Police Reject Offer, Vow Escalation,” *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 23, 1979.

<sup>108</sup> Alan Citron, “‘We’ll Win,’ Bruno Vows to Picketing Policemen,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 26, 1979.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Woody Baird, “Edwards Asks N.O., Police Union to Wait Until After Mardi Gras,” *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 15, 1979.



Figure 6. Members of the Louisiana National Guard who had been called to New Orleans to provide security during the second police strike. Many of the members of National Guard had never seen Mardi Gras before. Photo by Chris Harris, published in *Figaro*, February 26, 1978.

Besides the prospect of losing Mardi Gras parades and tourist revenue, the threat of lawlessness, real or imagined, scared some citizens. Many New Orleanians had already made it clear that crime weighed heavily on their minds even before the strike. Mostly the result of improved crime reporting within the NOPD, crime statistics had jumped during Morial's first year. The striking police officers were happy to use those statistics to fuel citizens' fears, and early in the strike PANO placed a quarter-page warning in *The Times-Picayune*. It read "we feel a sense of duty and obligation to warn you of possible danger to you, your family and your

property” and cited the previous month’s homicide statistics: 30 murders in 31 days.<sup>111</sup> Those in the city’s camp no doubt felt this warning read more like a threat. Further raising tension, David Duke, grand wizard of one branch of the Ku Klux Klan, also added an ominous element of uncertainty when he announced the Klan would send patrols to New Orleans to “report crime and protect citizens” for the duration of the strike.<sup>112</sup> Duke added that the Klan supported the police union’s decisions. Furthermore, cross burnings were reported in New Orleans East.<sup>113</sup> How would a descent into lawlessness and the presence of KKK street patrols reflect on the city while the nation turned its eyes to New Orleans during Mardi Gras?

**New Orleans Police on Strike**

# **WARNING**

**TO ALL  
RESIDENTS AND TOURISTS  
CITY OF NEW ORLEANS**

New Orleans police officers have attempted to reach an agreement with the mayor, certain members of the city council and the city Civil Service Commission. Regrettably however, these administrators continually negotiated in bad faith, which resulted in this work stoppage.

**Because of the city's high crime rate:**

**In January 1979 there were 30  
homicides in 31 days.**

**we feel a sense of duty and obligation to warn you of possible danger to you, your family and your property.**

As professional police officers, we want to perform our job and serve our community. However, it is difficult for us to continue to perform professional police service under these conditions, with substandard wages.

**Please take all precautions while in our unprotected city.**

We wish to publicly apologize for this inconvenience to our residents, merchants and tourists. Forewarned is forearmed.

Figure 7. A warning letter to the citizens of New Orleans from the striking police, published in *The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>111</sup>*The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>112</sup>“KKK Patrol Announced if Police Strike,” *The Times-Picayune*, February 15, 1979.

<sup>113</sup>“Black Officers To Go ‘Back on the Job,’” *The Louisiana Weekly*, February 2, 1979.

## The Court of Public Opinion



Figure 8. "If It Sinks We All Go Down!" *The Times-Picayune*, February 16, 1979.

Public opinion about the strike remained varied. Almost everyone lamented the potential for a year without Mardi Gras, but some people could relate to union demands. One citizen told *The Times-Picayune* "I have three cousins on the force and they need to make more money. But if they love the city they could wait until after Mardi Gras."<sup>114</sup> Another told a reporter "every man has a right to make a decent wage, whether he is in public sector or private."<sup>115</sup> Others had less sympathy of striking officers, criticizing them as "selfish" and going "a little too far...on purpose."<sup>116</sup> Morial drew blame from some citizens who thought he was arrogant and stubborn.

<sup>114</sup> Pat Adams, "Citizen Reaction Mixed on Police, Morial Actions," *The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

Understandably, the business community had much to say about the strike. Seventeen French Quarter business owners started an unsuccessful petition to recall the mayor.<sup>117</sup> Speaking for the group, Alton Tubbs focused on the material losses of a cancelled Mardi Gras. Tubbs told a reporter “I’ve got \$5,000 of inventory for Mardi Gras. What am I supposed to do with it?” Another member of the group, Allan Jones, who owned three massage parlors and seventeen vending carts, told a reporter that he relied on the Carnival revenue just to pay rent every year. Not all outlooks were as dire; tour organizer Harvey MacLean told reporters a week before Mardi Gras that “in short, it’s all systems go” and he complained that national news coverage of the strike was misleading to tourists.<sup>118</sup> Clearly, all of these business people had reasons to invest in a particular view of the strike. Some, such as Jones and Tubbs, wanted to pressure the administration to end the strike while others wanted to keep tourists from avoiding the city. In the end, one of the most important numbers used to assess the success of Mardi Gras would be related to hotel occupancy. But, at least according to local hoteliers who no doubt feared mass room cancellations, the number of reservations remained normal a little over a week before Mardi Gras Day.<sup>119</sup>

Despite attacks on his job performance, Morial still had plenty of supporters as the strike wore on, many of whom saw Morial as a hero of the anti-unionist cause. His office received letters from all around Louisiana and as far away as Nashua, New Hampshire, and Tempe, Arizona, that condemned what they saw as union greed. Morial even received a letter from U.S. Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), who urged Morial to oppose “a relative handful of union bosses

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<sup>117</sup>“Optimism Reigns on Salvaging Mardi Gras,” *The Baton Rouge Advocate*, February 18, 1979.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.



seizing control of America's government."<sup>120</sup> Along with his letter, Helms included a pamphlet for the Americans Against Union Control of Government, an anti-union lobbying group. Ironically, Helms, a Republican conservative who had disagreed with federal enforcement of integration, chose to support Morial, the first African-American graduate of LSU Law School and a noted civil rights lawyer.

Helms wasn't the only unnatural ally to send Morial words of encouragement. Several members of the old New Orleans establishment wrote to Morial. Darwin C. and Darwin S. Fenner, sent Morial a telegram urging him to maintain his stance vis-à-vis the union.<sup>121</sup> Gerald Andrus, a former King of Rex and successful business executive, wrote that he "would prefer to give up the celebration this year rather than have the city strangled for years by an unreasonable contract with a union."<sup>122</sup> Some citizens who wrote to the mayor went even further. For example, Mr. and Mrs. Borne Boudreaux urged the mayor to "'continue to hold your ground for our sake and do not let the Teamster Mobsters take over our wonderful and great city."<sup>123</sup> Not infrequently, citizens described the strike as part of a larger Teamster, and potentially mafia, push for control of the city and even the country. Morial's friend, social activist Russell Henderson, remembered "the police strike was about...the Mafia, which was running the police union."<sup>124</sup> As the strike remained unresolved, the rhetoric about mobsters began to include reference to local as well as outside sources of organized crime. In addition to Valenti, critics of

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<sup>120</sup> Letter from Jesse Helms, February 16, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box B8, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>121</sup> Telegram from Darwin C. Fenner and Darwin S. Fenner, February 17, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box B8, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>122</sup> Telegram from Gerald Andrus, February 19, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box B8, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>123</sup> Letter from Mr. and Mrs. Borne Boudreaux, February 20, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box B8, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>124</sup> Russell Henderson, interview by Connie Zeanah Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, video recording, February 11, 2004, "Contemporary New Orleans: An Oral History Project," Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, LA.

the police union could also point to the known connection between local crime boss Carlos Marcello and Vincent Bruno. Not only were they related by marriage, but the *Times-Picayune* suggested that Marcello might gain clout if PANO were to prevail.<sup>125</sup> Even conservatives who might have opposed Morial during his election because of racist attitudes could find common ground with him regarding the strike.

In a city sometimes accused of being overly preoccupied with race, newspaper writers conspicuously stayed away from questioning PANO's racial motives. However, when citizens were asked about the strike, some noted Morial's detractors might have racial motivations. Lucille Spears, a house sitter, told the paper that "they are taking advantage of a black mayor."<sup>126</sup> Regina Joseph, a disabled worker, echoed that sentiment arguing that "people are just picking on him since he's the first black mayor."<sup>127</sup> Gustave Thomas, head of BOP and president of the local NAACP chapter, reported that he heard a white officer rejoice in Morial's defeat during the first strike, referring to the mayor by a racial slur.<sup>128</sup> Morial confirmed their suspicions several years later when he told Dr. Huey L. Perry that he felt "very strongly that it was an effort to test the will of a black mayor by a white dominated police department." Speaking in 2003, Russell Henderson, remembered that there were "Klan people in the union."<sup>129</sup> Furthermore, though not a large group, the Black Organization of Police ordered its members to go back to work, and reported that about half of its 80 officers never struck in the first place.<sup>130</sup> The motivation of the black officers who did strike is unknown, but considering the intimidation tactics used at PANO

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<sup>125</sup> J. Douglas Murphy and Pierre Dugruy, "More Marcello Clout if Teamsters Win?" *The Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1979.

<sup>126</sup> Pat Adams, "Citizen Reaction Mixed on Police, Morial Actions," *The Times-Picayune*, February 17, 1979.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> "Policeman Hits Motive for Strike," *The Times-Picayune*, March 6, 1979.

<sup>129</sup> Russell Henderson, Interview with Connie Atkinson, Eric Hardy, George Winston, February 11, 2004, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>130</sup> "Black Officers To Go 'Back on the Job,'" *The Louisiana Weekly*, February 24, 1979.

rallies, it is certainly possible that both black and white officers felt they had no choice but to go along.

The ranks of anti-strikers swelled when Vincent Bruno's colorful speech led to a major public relations gaffe. "If the talks break down," he threatened 8 days before Mardi Gras Day, "cave 'em in, wreck the city."<sup>131</sup> While he later apologized, his statement did major damage to the union's image. Joseph Valenti also botched a public statement, accidentally referring to the replacement police as *Michigan* State Police and National Guards.<sup>132</sup> Many citizens took these mistakes as proof that the union leaders didn't care about the city.

### **Getting Rid of the "Hostage"**

A week before Mardi Gras day, on February 20, the captains of 18 carnival organizations met at the Howard Johnson hotel across the street from City Hall to discuss the future of Mardi Gras in 1979. In what Iris Kelso would later call "the outcome nobody could have predicted," the krewe captains issued a joint statement announcing that they would be cancelling the remaining parades.<sup>133</sup> "It is wrong to use Mardi Gras as blackmail in this dispute," they wrote, "nothing but harm can come to the spirit of New Orleans Mardi Gras through the day-by-day suspense of cancellation, dependent on the final judgment of out-of-town union leaders."<sup>134</sup> Brooke Duncan, captain of the exclusive Krewe of Rex, added that he wanted negotiators "to know they couldn't hold Mardi Gras hostage."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> "City Under Siege," *The Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1979.

<sup>132</sup> Letter from Robert L. Toombs, , February 21, 1979, Ernest N. Morial Records, Box B8, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>133</sup> Iris Kelso, "The Outcome Nobody Could Have Predicted," *Figaro*, February 26, 1979.

<sup>134</sup> "Captains Cancel Mardi Gras," *The Times-Picayune*, February 21, 1979.

<sup>135</sup> Maria C. Montoya, "A police strike 30 years ago stopped Mardi Gras parades, but the pageantry of the masked balls prevailed," *The Times-Picayune*, March 3, 2011.

Parade captains and city officials cited safety as the main concern behind cancelling parades, but the move also drastically changed the balance of power between the administration and the strikers. Not everyone saw the krewe's decision to support Morial coming. According to Alicia Davis, Morial's secretary, the people in Morial's office did not know what the krewe captains' decision was going to be until they came to City Hall in person to tell the mayor.<sup>136</sup> In hindsight, there may have been signs that the krewes would align themselves the way that they did. Alicia Davis connected the decision to an annual luncheon that the mayor first held for the krewe captains in November 1978 which helped the captains get to know Morial. Iris Kelso had covered the event, joking that Morial was turning into an "establishment mayor," because he had worn a tie that matched those of the upper crust of society.<sup>137</sup> More seriously, Kelso noted that this meeting was a sign that Morial and the social and economic elite were building a working relationship, however unsteady. Additionally, Teamster attorney John Ormand had remarked days before the krewe captains' big decision that bad feelings between PANO and the wealthy business community had been "festering."<sup>138</sup> The parade captains' statement made their opposition to the unions clear. Vincent Bruno's remarks about wrecking the city were apparently a major subject of discussion.<sup>139</sup> The captains placed blame squarely with the strike leadership while voicing their support for Morial and the city council.

While the captains blamed the unions for the cancellation of Mardi Gras, they took ownership of the decision. This nuance often missed in accounts of the strike. While Morial had cancelled some of the less prestigious parades early in the parade season, the captains of the remaining krewes voluntarily cancelled their parades. Among these krewes that paraded towards

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<sup>136</sup> Alicia Davis, Interview with Connie Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, December 4, 2003, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>137</sup> Iris Kelso, "Morial Wearing Boston Club Stripes, Colors," *Figaro*, November 29, 1978.

<sup>138</sup> Luba Glade ad Marty Ross, "Krewe of Teamsters Reigns," *Figaro*, February 19, 1979.

<sup>139</sup> Iris Kelso, "The Outcome Nobody Could Have Predicted," *Figaro*, February 26, 1979.

the end of the season were the long-established organizations populated by the highest echelon of New Orleans' society. In interviews, the captains made it clear that they did not act at the mayor's request; one captain said, "We made the decision. We ran it by the mayor but we were not asked by him to do it."<sup>140</sup> While union officials suspected collaboration between the captains and Morial, the mayor's office confirmed that the captains had come to their decision on their own. Local newspapers and the *New York Times* made this distinction in 1979, but the *Wall Street Journal* did not. The distinction was important at the time because the apparently unsolicited cancellation of parades signalled that the social elite still asserted some independence and clout. They no longer controlled the ballot box, but they still owned Mardi Gras.

Though the strike had not ended, the City Council took out a full page advertisement in *The Times-Picayune* to declare its victory over the union. In an open letter directed at Joe Valenti, the councilmembers declared "you have imposed your Detroit Teamster tactics on the people of New Orleans hoping that you would bring us to our knees. But, Mr. Valenti, you miscalculated the courage and toughness of the people of New Orleans."<sup>141</sup> Like many previous statements which distinguished between bad union leadership and good rank-and-file union members, the letter extended an olive branch to the NOPD officers by acknowledging their "many legitimate grievances of long standing" and encouraged officers to reject Teamster assistance.<sup>142</sup> Typical of xenophobic attacks on Valenti and the Teamsters, Councilman Frank Friedler triumphantly announced "what they found out is this city doesn't like outside agitators."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> "Open Letter to Mr. Joseph Valenti," *The Times-Picayune*, February 26, 1979.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Paul Atkinson, "We Don't Like Agitators Here," *The Times-Picayune*, March 5, 1979.

As Mardi Gras Day approached, carnival season continued on without its biggest spectacle. Parades still rolled in surrounding parishes and krewes that had cancelled their parades still held their balls behind closed doors, guarded by Louisiana National Guard or private security companies. People flocked to the Jefferson Parish parade route, on which established Jefferson parades were joined by a few visiting Orleans Parish parades; a *New York Times* columnist reported that the Jefferson celebration featured more disco than traditional New Orleans music.<sup>144</sup> The *Times-Picayune* still described the activities of the city's social elite in adoring detail, presenting Rex and his queen and recapping the midnight meeting of the courts of the Mistick Krewe of Comus and the Krewe of Rex. Bacchus, a huge, business-oriented "superkrewe," even paraded on the Sunday before Mardi Gras Day inside the Louisiana Superdome, which the journalist William K. Stevens described as a "hermetically sealed megagrass."<sup>145</sup> However, to the surprise of many, Mardi Gras Day in the French Quarter proved to be an exciting experience as thousands of costumed people flooded the streets. In the eyes of some locals, it was the best Carnival ever. Beads rained down on revelers as balconies "act[ed] as replacements for the absent floats."<sup>146</sup> Journalist Jim Polster opined that the joyful scene in the French Quarter was the response of locals who, as he noted they often did, felt that vaguely defined outside forces were trying to take away their cultural traditions.

Despite the spontaneity and fun of Mardi Gras Day, tourism really did take a hit as city leaders had worried. An estimated half of the city's hotel rooms remained vacant during the height of the season as would-be visitors cancelled *en masse* at the last minute.<sup>147</sup> Restaurants, bars, and vendors of all kinds suffered. Philip Guichet, owner of Tujague's restaurant in the

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<sup>144</sup> William K. Stevens, "Mardi Gras 1979: Lots of Spirit but a Little Less Fat," *The New York Times*, February 28, 1979.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Jim Polster, "Mardi Gras '79: An Uncarnival," *Figaro*, March 5, 1979.

<sup>147</sup> Millie Ball, "Cop Strike 'Clobbered' N.O. Hotels," *The Times-Picayune*, March 1, 1979.

French Quarter, found his scapegoat in the labor unions, saying “I blame the Teamsters. Who else can I blame but the police and the union?”<sup>148</sup>

Having lost almost all of their leverage, the police seemed to have little choice but to end the strike. On March 4, the strike officially ended. The police were left empty handed as Morial, who rescinded PANO’s official city recognition, offered nothing more than the restoration of benefits that the police had already won after their first strike. He had little reason to offer them anything and the officers needed to keep their jobs. One major concern for officers was whether or not they would face punishment. Vincent Bruno told reporters that he knew he might face repercussions, “I’ve been told numerous times I’m No. 1 on the list...but that kind of comes with the territory.”<sup>149</sup>

Bruno, however, temporarily retained his position in the NOPD and in PANO though he maintained an antagonistic relationship with the city. He even talked of striking again in 1980 before it became clear that PANO membership had no interest in a second try.<sup>150</sup> At a mid-January 1980 meeting to vote on another strike, fewer than 1 in 10 members even showed up. The same week Bruno and Morial exchanged heated words at a fundraiser while Edwin Edwards and Moon Landrieu “looked on in amazement.”<sup>151</sup> The failure of the 1979 strike had dealt a powerful blow to PANO. Less than two months after trying to call another strike in 1980, Superintendent Parsons fired Vincent Bruno for abusing the department’s sick leave policy and Bruno resigned the presidency of PANO. But Bruno’s political career had just begun. He went on to be an activist in Louisiana’s Republican Party, even running for the United States House of Representatives. Most notably he helped David Duke in Duke’s 1991 gubernatorial race as an

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> “Police Union to Survive Bruno Says,” *The Times-Picayune*, March 5, 1979.

<sup>150</sup> Paul Atkinson, “PANO Members Vote No to Strike,” *The Times-Picayune*, January 24, 1980.

<sup>151</sup> Paul Atkinson, “PANO Chief Bruno Is Fired,” *The Times-Picayune*, March 15, 1980.

unofficial religious advisor. More than once in the 1990s, Louisiana Republican candidates, including Governors Mike Foster and David Treen, used Bruno's connection to Duke to try to access Duke's supporters.<sup>152</sup>

Mayor Morial continued to pursue the improvement of the NOPD with varying results. In 1980, several members of the NOPD brutally retaliated against citizens in the Algiers neighborhood after the murder of an officer. According to George Winston, the police allegedly terrorized the black community where the officer had been murdered and left four citizens dead under suspicious circumstances.<sup>153</sup> Change, where it existed, was slow. Still, Morial later boasted that, despite any resentment over the strike, police leadership could not deny that he had significantly raised their pay.<sup>154</sup> This improvement gave Morial a talking point in his reelection campaign, but the racial issues that plagued the police department in his first term had certainly not disappeared.<sup>155</sup> Morial noted in 1984 that the police, whom he termed "clubby," were the most resistant city department with regard to allowing African-Americans into leadership positions.<sup>156</sup> White officers objected to quota systems intended to encourage the promotion of black officers to better reflect the city's population. PANO, though it had been weakened by the strike, found funds to support officers who had been accused of brutality against black citizens.<sup>157</sup> In one case, PANO helped fund the legal defense of several white officers accused of violence in the Algiers incident, while a group of black officers funded the primary witness against the accused officers. Though Morial never cited the stubbornness of white police officers during the strike, he connected the two while deriding the NOPD's resistance to racial change

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<sup>152</sup> Stephanie Grace, "Aide Urged Treen to Make Deal With Duke-Talks were Fruitless, Both Sides Contend," *The Times-Picayune*, July 23, 1999.

<sup>153</sup> George Winston, "To Protect and Serve?" 38-40.

<sup>154</sup> Ernest Morial, Interview by Huey L. Perry, March 26, 1987.

<sup>155</sup> Arnold Hirsch, "Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South," 22.

<sup>156</sup> Dean Baquet, "Race Issue Divisive in Police Department," *The Times Picayune/The States-Item*, July 10, 1984.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.



during his second term. When asked by a reporter if PANO would have avoided a strike in 1979 if the mayor were white, he responded “no question about it, I’m going to write a book about it.”<sup>158</sup>

Reforming the police department would not be Morial’s only challenge during the rest of his time in office. Morial struggled with a defiant city council that came to be known as the “Gang of Five.” He would also lose the support of many of the whites who had voted for him in 1977. He clashed with wealthy uptown whites over the Audubon golf club and Zoo. Russell Henderson recalled tension at Mardi Gras in 1980 when Morial invited nationally recognized African-American activist Jesse Jackson to view the parades with him on the mayor’s viewing stand in front of Gallier Hall, the former city hall. Jackson’s presence angered members of the old line Mystick Krewe of Comus, according to Henderson. In retaliation, Henderson said, the Comus float riders took aim at Morial and started “throwing shit as hard as they could at his head...They were literally trying to knock his head off.”<sup>159</sup> The open hostility exhibited that night in one of the most visible locations on Comus’ parade route showed that racial tension was still very high after almost two years of Morial’s mayoralty.

After an unsuccessful attempt to change the city charter so he could run for a third term, Morial was replaced by Sidney Barthelemy. Political analysts observed that election of Barthelemy, a Creole with political roots in the organization COUP, represented a “repudiation of Mr. Morial” because Morial had backed Barthelemy’s opponent, William Jefferson.<sup>160</sup> Arnold Hirsch points out that, unlike Morial, Barthelemy, who was elected with 85% of the white vote,

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Russell Henderson, Interview with Connie Atkinson, Eric Hardy, and George Winston, February 11, 2004, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>160</sup> Frances Frank Marcus, “Morial Rival Wins Mayoral Race; Vows to Mend New Orleans’ Rifts,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1986.

offered “a ready smile, an easy going personality, and the promise that he would go along to get along.”<sup>161</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Morial, true to his experience as a lawyer and a judge, once pointed out that part of the strike’s importance was that it produced a significant judicial decision in Louisiana which disallowed strikes by Louisiana public safety workers.<sup>162</sup> To some, the strike was significant because it led to an unorthodox Mardi Gras celebration and a reinvigoration of street celebration. For PANO and anti-unionists, its primary significance may have been that the strike ended in a defeat for public unionism. But, in the context of American city politics, the strike captures a specific instance in New Orleans history that differs from the experience of other cities. The strike was a contest of power in a political scene changed by the civil rights movement and the brief surge in public labor unions with the uncommon addition of Mardi Gras. Looking back 10 years to PANO’s 1969 sick-out, the city’s political landscape had changed drastically. In 1969, Mayor Victor Schiro had been able to simply pressure PANO into submission, but things were different in 1979 because the political landscape had changed with the addition of Dutch Morial, an increase in the aggressiveness of public unions, a budget crisis brought on by disappearing federal funds, and the threat to Mardi Gras. This collision of new forces created, in the words of Iris Kelso, an “outcome nobody could have predicted.”<sup>163</sup> For a short time, a diverse group of interests rallied to the controversial mayor, including the city’s social elite. Racist attitudes had not disappeared, but the weakened old social elite found a momentary ally in Morial against

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<sup>161</sup> Arnold Hirsch, “Dutch Morial: Old Creole in the New South,” 37.

<sup>162</sup> Ernest Morial, interview by Huey L. Perry, March 26, 1987.; *City of New Orleans vs. Police Ass’n*, 369 So.2d 188 (La. App. 4 Cir. 1979); *City of New Orleans vs. Police Association*, 376 So.2d 1269 (La. 1979)

<sup>163</sup> Iris Kelso, “The Outcome Nobody Could Have Predicted,” *Figaro*, February 26, 1979.

insurgent union tendencies and lower class whites. In many ways, this weakening old establishment faced a similar choice vis-à-vis Morial as they had during his 1978 election. As with DiRosa, the elites found Morial more palatable than his working class, anti-establishment opponents. Morial needed the support of the krewes during the strike, too, much as he had needed the support of civic groups during the city's budget crisis. The alignment could not have happened without the existence of the cultural capital of Mardi Gras. Throughout the rest of Morial's tenure in office, the mayor and social elites would never be as unified about another major issue. The beads angrily hurled at Mayor Morial's viewing stand on Mardi Gras Night in 1980 by New Orleans' most prominent krewe demonstrated how fleeting that alliance had been.

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## Vita

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