FROM THE FRONT

"Mama cried, "Little daughter," disappointed when she caught her sneakin' out the window pane."
MEMORY LANE ZARA LARSSON

How unions have dominated New Haven alder elections

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themselves as union workers, had taken to following would-be Theodore voters on walks to the polls, trying to persuade them to change their minds.

"It has been intimidating at times these past few days," Theodore told the crowd at La Cocinita. "I know that there are a lot of people with a lot of power and a lot of money who are against us, which is funny to say, because these are traditionally, I think, the groups that get seen as grassroots. We are the ones running the grassroots campaign."

In the last days of the race, Theodore bumped up against one of the most influential forces in New Haven politics: the coalition of Yale's UNITE HERE unions and New Haven Rising.

"The union really wants this seat, and that has become abundantly clear this past week," Theodore said in September. "I want to be an alder who solely acts and votes on behalf of my constituents."

Three days after the event at La Cocinita, Theodore beat Laughter by 125 votes.

The unusually competitive race to represent the downtown ward that encompasses part of Yale's campus on the Board of Alders offered a window into the unions' role in New Haven's electoral politics. In a rare setback since their rise to political dominance, the unions' organizing efforts fell short in swaying a local election.

There are four unions headquartered in New Haven that belong to the UNITE HERE national labor organizing network. Local 217 represents hospitality workers across Connecticut. Local 34 represents Yale's clerical and technical workers. Local 35 represents Yale's service and maintenance staff, including dining hall workers. And Local 33, which officially unionized in 2023 after a protracted battle with Yale, represents the University's graduate students.

Together, the UNITE HERE unions represent thousands of Yale workers. And since 2012 — after the unions organized a slate of candidates that won seats on the Board of Alders — their candidates have maintained a majority on the board, the legislative arm of New Haven's government.

"We have 23 out of 30 allies on the Board of Aldermen," Local 35 president Bob Proto said at a 2017 meeting of Locals 34 and 35, according to the New Haven Independent. Local 35's chief steward, Ward 23 Alder Tyisha Walker-Myers is the board's president.

A machine

Before their candidates won a majority on the Board of Alders in 2011, Yale's unions spent decades building out their grassroots organizing power, according to Zachary Schwartz-Weinstein '04, a historian of university labor. Then they made their push for City Hall.

"You had regular, everyday, run-of-the-mill people running for political office to be able to make changes that people can feel," Ward 22 Alder Jeanette Morrison, who was first elected as part of that 2011 slate, said. Since then, she has represented a district that includes a significant portion of Yale's campus, including six residential colleges.

Together, the unions spent around $200,000 on the 2011 effort, the New Haven Independent reported at the time. Union candidates won 14 of the 15 races against establishment Democratic candidates.

In election cycles since then, political action committees associated with Locals 34 and 35 have contributed money to elect and reelect candidates to the Board of Alders. Many candidates have also received money from the Connecticut arm of the UNITE HERE TIP State and Local Fund, which is a "nonfederal" PAC, according to its website. Nonfederal PACs are not subject to federal campaign finance regulations.

In fall 2025, the Connecticut TIP State and Local Fund spent $9,125 on local races. Much of that money went to political committees like "Eastside Dems United" that do not disclose the candidates they support. The Local 34 PAC spent $9,875 that fall.

Both the Local 34 and the TIP PACs gave $1,500 to New Haven's Democratic Town Committee, according to state campaign finance disclosures.

Vincent Mauro Jr., who chairs the committee, said that it solicits contributions from "all kinds of PACs" but that it gets a "significant portion" of its funding from UNITE HERE. That money goes towards registering voters and turning them out on election day, Mauro said.

He added that the Democratic Town Committee is "politically aligned" with the local unions.

"There's a symmetry between good jobs, fair work, fair wages, a coalition built around not just the short term, but the long term future of the city of New Haven, its residents, its workers," Mauro said.

There are currently six first-term alders on the board, and three of them — Ward 8 Alder Mandy Martinelli, Ward 16 Alder Magda Natal and Ward 18 Alder Leland Moore — received money from union PACs in their campaigns, disclosures show. Of the 24 other alders, at least 16 have received financial support or endorsements from UNITE HERE unions.

Two alders — Ward 2 Alder Frank Douglass Jr. and Ward 29 Alder Brian Wingate — are vice presidents of Local 35. That union's chief steward is Walker-Myers, the ward 23 alder who is the president of the Board of Alders. Ward 25 is represented by Adam Marchand GRD '99, the chief steward of Local 34.

Over the years, union issues have come to dominate local politics, local experts say.

David Schleicher, a Yale Law School professor and an expert on urban politics, said that "on the core things 35 and 34 care about" — the relationship with Yale — union-backed alders don't have "too much range to do anything else."

Yale's unions have long pushed for the University to give more to New Haven, and Mayor Justin Elicker — who beat a UNITE HERE-backed incumbent in 2019 but has since forged a sometimes uneasy alliance with organizers — consistently thanks the unions for their efforts on that front.

In January, Walker-Myers joined other union leaders in front of Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall, which houses Yale President Maurie McInnis' office, to call for Yale to pay $110 million to New Haven each year.

In March, Elicker and McInnis stood on the second floor of City Hall to announce a new voluntary contribution deal in which Yale will pay New Haven around $230 million over the next seven years. Walker-Myers, who did not respond to repeated requests for comment, did not attend the announcement.

The UNITE HERE-New Haven Rising coalition is "somewhere between" a local political party and an interest group, Schleicher said. The unions make endorsements and develop a platform on a variety of issues — some of which are directly related to their interests and some of which are not, he added.

A major source of the unions' power in aldermanic elections is simply the fact that there are not other organized groups that get involved, according to Schleicher, "which makes sense, because it's a very small city." In a Democratic-dominated urban context, the unions fill a void that competing political parties would otherwise occupy, Schleicher said.

New Haven Rising and the unions largely operate in tandem, often hosting rallies together. The group is also financially tied to the UNITE HERE unions. The 501(c)(4) organization's 990 filing from 2024 — the most recent year available — shows that it spent $378,078, most of which went toward compensation for officers and directors. Data from the United States Department of Labor shows that New Haven Rising received $326,950 from Local 34 that year, plus $348,985 from Local 217.

As of publication, the Rev. Scott Marks — the director of New Haven Rising, vice chair of the Democratic Town Committee and a UNITE HERE union employee — has not agreed to an interview or responded to repeated requests for comment.

The resistance

Efforts to disrupt union dominance emerged not long after 2011. A slate called Take Back New Haven — spearheaded by then-Ward 7 Alder Doug Hausladen '04, who now heads the city's parking authority — coalesced in 2013, though it quickly fizzled out. Hausladen and several other alders in 2014 formed a coalition called the People's Caucus that aimed to counter union influence on the board. The effort appears not to have gotten very far.

In 2023, Frank Redente Jr. won the Democratic primary in Ward 15 against a UNITE HERE-backed incumbent.

"Obviously, it's public knowledge that they campaigned against me during my election," Redente said, referring to the unions. He added that before that election, he had felt frustrated by the unions' "blanket endorsement" of candidates.



Elijah Hurewitz-Ravitch / Contributing Photographer

Ward 10 Alder Anna Festa, who was elected in 2013 after an uncontested Democratic primary, was part of both the Take Back New Haven slate and the People's Caucus, and she is the longest-serving member of the Board of Alders who was elected without union backing.

"Every institution in the city, whether it's labor or large employers or developers or government itself, should have a seat at the table, but no one should control the table," Festa said. "At the end of the day, our responsibility is to the public, to make decisions that are fair, fiscally responsible, and in the best interest of the entire city."

Festa supports labor organizing but is skeptical of union hegemony, she said.

"Their influence has to be balanced," she said. "And our job is to make sure that no single group has so much influence that it limits our transparency and our accountability and our good decision making."

Leslie Radcliffe, a longtime civic leader and the former chair of the City Plan Commission, has been a frequent critic of the Yale unions. She is also a former steward of Local 34.

"Every citizen in New Haven is not a Yale employee," she added. "And when the focus of those alders are Yale, Yale, Yale, for me, it's like, you're ignoring the non-Yale employees."

There's been another battle brewing in the Hill's Ward 3, a district that includes Yale-New Haven Hospital and the Schools of Medicine and Public Health.

Miguel Pittman, a businessman and restauranteur, has spent the past few years trying to disrupt UNITE HERE's hold on Ward 3. After Ron Hurt, a close ally of the Yale unions and of New Haven Rising, resigned in 2024, Pittman faced off in a special election against Angel Hubbard, a community organizer backed by several local elected officials. Pittman lost by just 16 votes.

He lost again to Hubbard in the Democratic primary in the fall and, running on both the Independent and Republican lines, in the general election.

Each of those races has been highly competitive, driving up voter turnout in a ward that has had low political engagement in recent history.

Hubbard said that the Yale unions have a strong influence on the board, particularly "because a lot of us are union workers. And you know, for any job, you will want a union."

She added that the UNITE HERE unions stay engaged in local politics at all times — not just during campaign season — and hold alders accountable.

In Ward 3, Hubbard said, "when I hold community meetings, they are there. When the CMT has meetings, they are there. So they're not just around when it's campaigning time. No, they are always present."

In that sense, Hubbard said, the Yale unions are involved in "basically" all realms of city governance.

Reflecting back on his primary, Theodore feels he underestimated how much it was shaped by larger forces.

"I hadn't realized that this race could be so imbued with city-wide dynamics and union dynamics," he said in an interview this month. "There were a bunch of people in Local 34 and Local 35 out canvassing. And I think I was naive, but I didn't think of this race much beyond the few hundred stakeholders who live in these downtown apartments and Yale undergrads."

After his win, Theodore said he had to work hard to repair ties the election had strained. Theodore said his campaign was not meant to affront union power, but he acknowledged that his outsider status created tension with one of New Haven's strongest political forces.

"I don't want my campaign to seem — it was not one that was anti-union, and it was never meant to be one to degrade their power. But, yeah, I mean, I think, I think that dynamic was at play."

Now, seven months after that election, Theodore is a member of a board built in large part by the unions, and he is navigating relationships with the same people whose volunteers followed his supporters to the polls.

"I'm just still, like, trying to be very conscious of — like, union relationships are good, but I think I still feel very, kind of, anxious about saying something that will be misconstrued," he said.

When pressed, Theodore declined to say why he is anxious about what he says.

Schleicher thinks union power may be waning.

"There was a period when everyone understood them to be the most powerful force in local politics," Schleicher said. "It's not clear that's true anymore, and it's also not clear that the place where they're powerful, which is in the board, is not the center of politics, right? "

Factions? Or fantasy?

John DeStefano, New Haven's mayor from 1994 to 2013, pushed back on a narrative of union dominance. For DeStefano, it is inaccurate to define alders elected to the board with union support as "purely UNITE HERE alders."

The former mayor said that the unions have had a much larger impact on the local Democratic party than they have had on city governance.

"For sure, UNITE HERE in 2011 decided to, in quotes, take control of the Board of Alders. But I don't think it was to some purpose," DeStefano said. "Maybe we all imagined this to be a bigger thing than it was."

Morrison, the Ward 22 alder who is a steward at a state employees union, agrees. She said that UNITE HERE-affiliated alders check their union affiliation at the door. But she said they never stop thinking "about their role as an advocate, regardless if they're a union steward or a legislator."

"It's about making sure that the needs of the people are met," Morrison added. "That's why I say it's kind of blurred. It's the same goal."

Mauro, the chair of the Democratic Town Committee, referring to the unions, said: "I think sometimes people make them out to be the big bad wolf. And I think that's an unfair criticism."

For Douglass, the Ward 2 alder and Local 35 vice president, concerns about tension between union interests and constituent interests are unwarranted.

"No, we're gonna shut that down right there," he said. "They can keep their opinion. I know why I'm here. I'm here for my community."

Ian Dunn, the UNITE HERE unions' spokesperson, said that he was "a little reluctant to engage overall."

"We don't want to engage in this story," Dunn said, clarifying that he was referring to the Locals 33, 34, 35 and 217 and New Haven Rising coalition. He questioned whether speaking about that coalition's approach to politics was part of its current "message" or "program."

"The zeitgeist in New Haven has often been, like, 'The unions are bad. What the unions are doing in politics is bad.' We're like, 'Why? Why? Why?' It's working people representing working people. What's wrong with that?" Dunn added.

Dunn framed the Yale unions' political involvement as self-evident rather than strategic. He rejects the premise that unions need a formal rationale for political engagement.

The mayor and the Board of Alders before 2011 were much more closely aligned with Yale than they are now, Dunn said.

"Is that good for New Haven to have the billion dollar company — the company town controlling everything?" he asked.

Dunn said that he could not answer questions about the political engagement of Locals 34 and 35 without approval. He said that Marks, the New Haven Rising director, was "totally the right person" to answer questions about the Yale unions. Marks did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

"The beauty of a union, right, is it's not any individual's choice to do anything," Dunn said. "We collectively decide what we're going to do. It makes things really slow and painful sometimes."

When it comes to the Board of Alders, some say the split between alders that are aligned with Yale's unions and those that are not is overstated.

For Redente, walking into his first board meeting with a president who had actively campaigned against him was "weird, to say the least" — but he said that those dynamics quickly evaporated.

"I don't think there's camps. No, I would have thought that going in, but being there, no, I think everybody's been very welcoming," Redente added.

Ward 7 alder Christine Kim '99, who was sworn in just last month, agreed that there are not distinct camps and said she has not observed "this kind of conspiratorial type of work going on."

"I had heard that there's like a UNITE HERE and non-UNITE HERE," Theodore said. "And I just — I think it's not that black and white."

Theodore, who beat the unions' candidate, is now backing an effort to name a street corner after John Wilhelm '67, formerly an influential Local 35 employee, a founding organizer of Local 34 and a longtime president of UNITE HERE itself.

The signpost would stand at the corner of Elm and College streets. That's where Old Campus faces First and Summerfield United Methodist Church, the headquarters of New Haven Rising and the Yale unions.

Contact
ELIJAH HUREWITZ-RAVITCH
at elijah.hurewitz-ravitch@yale.edu.