



Awesome

ADDIE

UFCW Minority Coalition
Trailblazer



The UFCW Minority Coalition is an organization made up of United Food and Commercial Workers International (UFCW) union members dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion within the labor movement. It strives to be a viable asset to the UFCW, labor and communities in need. The Coalition exists to increase diversity and bring about equality through solidarity.



The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union is America's neighborhood union – 1.3 million members standing together to improve the lives and livelihoods of workers, families and communities.

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Rev. Dr. Addie L. Wyatt

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UFCW Minority Coalition Trailblazer

PREFACE

The *UFCW Minority Coalition Trailblazer Series* is an educational resource that commemorates the work and life achievements of UFCW union leaders of color who helped build the American labor movement and led the way in the struggle for justice and equal rights.

Awesome Addie is the first in the *UFCW Minority Trailblazer Series*. This account of the life of the late UFCW International Vice President Addie L. Wyatt is presented here through fictional characters sharing highlights of historical events she experienced and influenced.

UFCW Minority Coalition President Donald L. Cash, Sr. is a dedicated union leader and advocate for working people. He is committed to passing torch to the next generation of union activists by sharing the stories of labor's unsung leaders of color upon whose shoulders the American labor movement now stands.

The author of *Awesome Addie* is Yvonne Syphax, a labor educator and writer.



strong beginnings, hard times, moving up

Our grandmother used to talk about when Addie was born. She said it was an especially hot, bright day for early spring. "Addie's coming, Addie's coming!" I bet that's what the angels sang that day. Grandma, my daddy's mama, was a mid-wife and she helped deliver my sister. No soft hospital bed to greet little Addie, only the skillful hands of a mid-wife, just as it was for most little black babies born in Brookhaven, Mississippi at that time. Those angels I'm sure smiled and said, "Addie looks to be in a rush, no waiting around to come into this world." It was March 8, 1924, the day Addie Loraine Cameron was born.

Addie isn't a common name. But it's very special to our family. My daddy's mama was named Adeline and my grandmother on my mama's side was named Addie. So to celebrate them both, my parents named their first daughter, Addie.

She was born just a few years before The Great Depression and the Stock Market Crash of 1929. I wanted a baby brother so we could tussle, climb trees and do stuff together. I soon forgot about that pretty quickly because Addie was a firecracker and a fearless little girl from the time she could walk.

Addie and I grew up poor. But we had a loving family which was the most important thing to us. Back then family extended to almost everyone who lived nearby. In Brookhaven, we knew just about everybody. We were all doing about the same—working hard, caring for family, just living. The small houses we lived in all looked like, with one or two tiny bedrooms, a small kitchen with a wood-burning stove and a living room next to an open area with a family table where we ate our meals. The bathroom, well, it was outside. It was the 1920s in the rural south.

Each Spring Addie and I helped Mama with her vegetable garden. And most days Addie would follow me around while I tended to the family's chickens and a couple of cows. We were

getting by. You're not going to starve living like this, but we surely weren't living high-on-the-hog. Like most black families during the Depression, we were broke, out of work most of the time, and living with Jim Crow and the fear of lynching. Those were some awfully scary times. Living through such desperate times molded us. I think it's what made Addie strong before she even knew she had to be that way. It was all in God's plan from the very beginning. I bet the angels would attest to that.

Back then racism and discrimination ran deep in America. On top of that, black people added to their own problems by getting hung-up on light versus dark skin. Most in my family had light skin like Mama—all except Addie that is. As kids we would hear the neighbors say something stupid like, "There goes little Addie ... the black one." But my sister Addie didn't take stuff from anyone. She would sass them, even though she knew there would be a price to pay. When we were growing up, children didn't disrespect grown-ups, no matter what they said. If you did, you would feel the pain of regret on your bottom.

Addie would take her spanking, but not without questions. I remember once Addie asked Mama, "Why do people have to call me 'the black one'?"

Mama pulled Addie close, hugging her tightly and said, "God gave you to me as a very special child. Besides, you look just like your Daddy, and you know I love you both with all my heart."

Over the years, Addie loved telling that story about being the so-called black one because of the important lessons she learned from Mama as a result. After Mama told Addie she was special and should never feel like she was not good enough; Addie believed it, felt it and lived it, always having great self-confidence from that day on. And special, Addie was surely that. I think she was only about four when she gave her first recitation in church. Addie was outgoing, a natural leader. Heck, she was a public speaker even as a child.

Compared to most in Brookhaven, we Camerons were doing alright. Daddy worked as a tailor in a pressing shop. Mama was a teacher. They always provided for and protected the family as best they could. But, no matter how hard they worked, it just wasn't enough. So, Daddy decided we should try up north. It was 1930, when the Cameron family—Grandma Adeline, Mama, Daddy, our baby sister and brother, Addie, and me—heeded to Chicago.

We weren't the only southern black family that headed north. Millions did during The Great Migration. They left the rural south and moved to northern and mid-western industrial cities like Detroit, Washington, DC and Chicago—looking for a better life, better jobs and less segregation.

Sometimes Addie and I would reminisce about our days in Mississippi. Even though she was a young girl when the family left Brookhaven, Addie vividly remembered some of our older neighbors moaning, crying, and praying because someone had gotten lynched. She also said she remembered how whites mistreated blacks and how we feared them.

When our family left Mississippi, Addie and I were so excited and happy. We were kids and thought we were headed to the promise land like they talked about in church. But Chicago was no promise land for the Camerons. When we first got to Chicago, we had to move in with

Daddy's kinfolk. They were kind, but we hated living with relatives, moving from house to house because the rent was due and no money to pay it. We hated looking at our plates that usually had nothing more on them than some beans and maybe some bread. Poverty in the big city tasted just as bad as poverty in the south. Maybe worst, since Chicago didn't have any gardens or chickens to fill our empty plates.

I remember Addie asking Mama, "Why do we have to live like this? Why do we have to struggle so?" Mama said plainly, "Life can be better, but you will have to work hard to make it so." I can recall Mama's words. And, I know Addie did too. She lived her life by those words.

Yeah, we did a lot of moving around just trying to get by. It was hard for Daddy to find work. And even though Mama had worked as a teacher when we were in Mississippi, in Chicago they said she couldn't teach school because she didn't have a degree. Back in Brookhaven, all you needed to do was finish high school and you could be a teacher. To help make ends meet, Mama ended up cleaning the houses of rich white people. Eventually, Daddy somehow found work under the WPA, a special work program in the late 1930s that put millions of people across the country back to work building many of the same highways, bridges and airports we still use today.

After several years, we finally got our own place and settled down at 42nd and South Calumet, in Bronzeville on Chicago's South Side. By now, the family had grown. There were now eight Cameron children: Addie, Edna, Emmett, Willie aka Mickey, Bluett, Audrey, Maude and me, Ambrose, Jr. But, Grandma who came to Chicago with us had passed on and didn't live to see all of her grandchildren.

Though we faced racism, poverty and racial self-hatred, the Cameron family never gave up. Addie and I and all of our brothers and sisters made the best of it. We went to church every Sunday and couldn't miss a day of school. We went to Forestville and Felsenthal elementary schools. As the oldest, Addie and I were expected to help care for the family. I did odd jobs after school and Addie helped around the house and took care of our younger brothers and sisters while our parents were at work.

Often there was little or no money in the house. I contributed, but my little sister Addie was amazing. By the time she was ten, she was cooking. That wasn't all she could do at ten-years-old. Addie started making these little paper or fiber glass flowers and sold them. She also made candy and wrapped it in little papers and sold those too. She sometimes made as much as fifty cents or a dollar. That would be like \$20 or \$25 today. I don't think Addie realized at the time just how much that meant to our family's survival.

Addie had started taking music lessons when she was about six-years-old. When she got older she played for our church choir. She got paid for that, too. The church paid her a dollar at the end of each week. Addie was always on the go. She had choir rehearsal two days a week and then she would be at church on Saturday and all day on Sunday. As the 1930s and The Great Depression were winding down, I got full time work and Addie had become a hard working teenager whose whole world revolved around church and school.



first loves, singing praises, raising kids

Yes indeed, 1938 and 1939 are years I'll never forget. Most every girl remembers her early teen years. Addie and I were best friends then and went to the same high school, DuSable High, and the same church, Langley Avenue Church of God. My favorite Sundays were when Addie played piano and sang. Addie had God-given musical talent and a voice like an angel.

We grew up fast once we hit high school. I remember the day when Addie told me about this good-looking guy she met—Claude Stell Wyatt, Jr. He was 16 and Addie was 15. Claude was all she could talk about. Addie played the clarinet in the school's concert band. Claude's music class was just before hers. So, they saw a lot of each other and in no time they got bitten by the love bug. Addie told me that she knew he was the one. She said Claude was so handsome. And when I finally met him, all I could say was, "Wow!"

Whenever they were together, I could see the sparks. So, it may have surprised some of our high school friends, but not me, when Addie and Claude decided to get married. It was May 12, 1940 and our Pastor, Rev. S. P. Dunn, married them. Claude was raised a Methodist, but he joined our church.

At first, they moved in with Claude's family for a while. He got a job at a local dry cleaning store that was right around the corner. Life was moving fast. Before you knew it, that same year Renaldo Wyatt, their first son was born. And by 1942, Addie had her second little boy, Claude Wyatt, III, but we all called him "DeDe."

Life for the young Wyatt family wasn't easy, but love kept them going and God kept them on the right path. At Central YMCA School, Addie finished up high school, took some additional adult education courses and graduated. I always looked up to Addie and Claude. They were always wiser, always loving and giving, and not just to their family, but to everybody, close

friends like me, church members, neighbors, or anyone in need who crossed their path. It seemed like to me they were on a mission.

Music was always a part of Addie Wyatt's world. Those earlier years playing piano and singing in church were just the beginning of Addie's love for gospel music. Over the years, Addie played for and was the choir director for so many churches, not just ours. Let's see, there was South Park Baptist Church and All Nations Church of God. She was at Greater Hope Baptist Church in Robbins, Illinois, the Englewood Ave Church of God, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and years later, the Vernon Park Church of God where she and Claude became co-pastors.

And wouldn't you know it, the love of her life, Claude, had the gift too. Even with two young sons and working full-time every day, by the 1940s, Addie and Claude had founded a group called the Wyatt Singers. They were so good. Everybody in the group could sing. When Addie and the Wyatt Singers were on the program, they rocked every church they went to. Everybody at our church was proud of them. We kept up on the news of where they were singing, what big-named gospel singers they knew and traveled around with. I, of course, knew most everything about Addie and the Wyatt Singers, because back then, Addie and I, we were like sisters. Yes Lord, the Wyatt Singers were so great they eventually recorded several of their songs.

And get this, Addie occasionally accompanied the late great gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson. It was a sight to see, two phenomenal women, Addie Wyatt on piano and Mahalia Jackson vocals—singing praises from here on earth straight up to the angels in heaven. It still brings tears of joy to my eyes, even to this day decades later, when I think about seeing those two together.

During the 1940s, life kept rolling along hard and fast for Addie and her husband. But 1944 was probably the toughest year. That year Addie's mother died. She promised her mother she would keep the family together and take care of her younger brothers and sisters. Addie's father was living, but he was facing his own challenges. So, Addie and Claude took them in. Addie was only twenty-years-old. And as life always does, when things are hard, there's still more rain to fall. Claude got drafted into the Navy. That left Addie alone to take care of their two young sons and her five younger sisters and brothers. Addie made it through though somehow. Her mother-in-law helped some, but I don't know any other twenty-year-old who could have handled so much. But, my old high school friend did it, and did it well. Thankfully, Claude returned from the Great Lakes Naval Academy after only one year.

With their growing family, Addie and Claude needed more space. It took a while, but they finally moved into one of Chicago's public housing projects on the South Side, the Altgeld Gardens at 130th Street and Evans. Addie and Claude, who always were willing to help others, quickly became community leaders at Altgeld Gardens.

By 1947, they had formed another gospel singing group. They called it the Wyatt Choral Ensemble. The group was for teenagers and young adults who lived in and around Altgeld Gardens. I remember how rough those housing projects were back then. There weren't a lot of little saints to be found there, that's for sure. Some were former drug addicts or alcoholics. But, it didn't matter. In fact, that made Addie and Claude more dedicated to these young people.

The Choral Ensemble made a big difference and changed the lives of ‘most every single one of them. Thanks to Addie and Claude these forgotten youngsters were introduced to music, life outside the housing project, and the word of God. The Choral Ensemble stayed together and performed for over ten years.

Life put Addie and me on separate paths. I became a secretary, and I’m proud to say, my high school buddy Addie became a Chicago legend! When I ran into Addie downtown a couple of years ago, she told me how proud she was of those young people who were part of her choral group. Many of them she said had gone on to become university professors, ministers, marriage counselors and a lot of other kinds of successful professionals.

The years I spent with Addie are unforgettable. She was living an incredible life back then. Addie was in her early twenties. She was a wife, mother of seven, a gospel singer and piano player, and all the while working in a Chicago meat processing plant.



sloppin' stew, joining unions, building churches

Let's see. I met Addie Wyatt in 1941, the year we both started working at Armour & Company, a meat processing factory in Chicago. This was right around the time the country entered World War II. There were lots of young black men like me, not fighting overseas. As a matter of fact, Claude, Addie's husband, also worked at Armour for a short while. We were all struggling to feed our families, doing hard labor, many of us on the production lines of the city's slaughterhouses. And let me tell you this, working down at the Chicago Stockyards in a meatpacking plant was difficult, dangerous and sometimes deadly.

Yep, Addie Wyatt, I remember. Short, just a little over five feet, four inches tall with smooth dark caramel skin, with dark brown eyes and hair. Confidence is her eyes and sweetness in her smile. Addie was a looker, and she was smart too. All of the fellas could see that.

I still get a laugh when I think about what Addie told me about how she started out with Armour. She said she answered an ad for a typist job at the plant. She passed the typing test and was told she had the job. But when Addie reported to work, she said they gave her this thing that looked like a nurse's uniform—that was the white work clothes all line workers wore. Addie said they then promptly ushered her to an assembly line to pack stew in a can! Addie never typed as a single word at Armour.

She was just a teenager when she started. She didn't really know then how racist the company was, especially when it came to hiring and paying us. Didn't matter how fast you could type or how smart you may be; it was the color of your skin that mattered the most.

Addie learned quickly about Armour's discriminatory wage scale. There was a time when a white typist might earn around about \$17 or \$18 a week while fair-skinned blacks working on the factory floor would get about \$12 per week and those with dark skin got \$8 or \$10.

Addie said at first she was angry about the discrimination and unfair wage scale. But, as it turned out, by the time Addie started working, she ended up better off not being a typist and instead working on a production line packing stew. You see, line workers got a higher wage

than the clericals. Addie and I started at around about \$24 a week. We got higher wages because of the meatpacking union. I could see it right away that Addie Wyatt, just like most of us, realized we would get more money in our pockets if we worked a union job. So, we all joined the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA); we just called it the packinghouse workers union.

Like I said, Addie and I started working at Armour right around World War II. We were now fighting two wars. Like all Americans, we fought against the Japanese, Hitler, fascism and communism. And at home in the good ol' U.S. of A., Addie, me and every other black person, we were fighting our ongoing war against racism on the job and everywhere else we went.

At Armour, canning stew or as we called it "sloppin' stew" was tough and tedious work, but Addie was young and knew how to handle it. She worked long hours, stayed on whatever production line she was assigned to. Mostly women were on the canning or packaging production lines and men were on more manual, heavy-lifting jobs. I had a bad knee which kept me out of the war and put me on all kinds of production lines. I sometimes was "slopping stew" with Addie. Of course, I don't have to tell you that the black line workers got treated a lot worse than whites on the line.

Working in a meatpacking plant can break some people—just aren't built for it, I guess. They see it as too hard or they can't wrap their minds around doing the same thing hour after hour, over and over again. But getting a job and keeping a job especially during the war years wasn't easy. I got laid off lots of times, just like Addie and everybody else we knew. Layoffs, poor working conditions and discrimination, that's what life was like for us in the 1940s. If you had a job, you were one of the lucky ones.

Another thing I remember about Addie was how she was different, in a good way. She was strong-willed, much more so than most all of the women, and some of the men, too. She was always a fighter, stood up for herself. Addie was special alright, but I surely didn't know at the time that she was going to do so many great things in our union and for others. Between the war and layoffs, it was hard to keep in touch with coworkers. I lost track of Addie for a lot of years.

After the war I started working at the Post Office and stayed there until it was time to collect my pension. A couple of my Armour buddies told me that Addie got steady work with Illinois Meat & Company. Addie was always a fast worker. So I wasn't surprised when they told me that Addie started in the potato canning section. In those days, we didn't have machines doing the peeling, so they needed fast hands like Addie's to do some fast peeling. They also said she moved up quickly and worked in the sliced bacon section.

It had been over twenty-five years since I had seen Addie Wyatt. This was the early 1970s. So, you can imagine how shocked I was on one Sunday morning when I was visiting the Vernon Park Church of God and there was my ol' coworker and friend, Addie. My church program listed Addie and her husband Claude as the co-pastors of the church.

After the service, I went up and talked with Addie. She told me that back in 1955 she and Claude had been asked to lead and help a fledgling Baptist church. She said they took that small church with just a few members that used to hold services in a garage, kept bringing in more

and more members, converted it to a Church of God and eventually co-founded the Vernon Park Church of God that I was standing in that day. She said Claude was ordained in 1958 and two years later she became an ordained minister. Their church had become highly recognized, which is why I was visiting that Sunday. Now that's a Sunday I will never forget.

You know, I consider it a blessing to have known somebody like Addie. She was destined to do great things. Of course, none of us who slopped stew at Armour had any idea just far she would go. But that Sunday, I knew for sure that Addie would always be like a shining star everywhere she went—in churches, on the job, in unions, all across the city of Chicago and who knows the whole country.



Rev. Claude Wyatt and Rev. Dr. Addie L. Wyatt married for 69 years, served as co-pastors for more than four decades of the Vernon Park Church of God on Chicago's South Side which they founded in 1955 and has now more than 1,200 members. To the right, Addie and Claude in their early twenties in 1940s after Claude was drafted by the Navy.



Addie Wyatt was the first woman of color to serve as a UFCW International Vice President from 1976-1984 and the first African-American woman to be given the Department of Labor's highest honor—an induction into the Labor Hall of Honor. To the left, Addie shares a moment with Dorothy Height, president emerita of the National Council of Negro Women.



Above, Addie Wyatt greatly admired civil rights icon Rosa Parks while America's first African American President Barack Obama was counseled by civil rights and community activist Rev. Addie Wyatt, seen here with son Claude Wyatt, III (left).

Below, Addie Wyatt, gospel singer and choir director, pauses while at the piano with one of her church choirs.





Above, from the 2010 CLUW Tribute to Addie Wyatt video, Addie at age 30, addressing the 3,000 attendees of the 1974 founding CLUW conference. To the right, Rev. Dr. Addie Wyatt at age 86 from the video's opening frame.



To the left, placard of the 1975 Time magazine Woman of the Year cover featuring Addie Wyatt (bottom left) and eleven other women.



moving forward, leading workers, building unions

Ever meet someone and right away you have a lot in common and know you will be friends for life. That's how it was when I first met Addie Wyatt at a union meeting. We worked for different unions, but we both faced the same kinds of problems. I always thought of Addie as a sister rather than just a friend. Addie and I spent many, many long hours talking about women and unions, and all of the extra weight we carried as we tried to move our unions forward and at the same time struggled to become leaders in our unions.

Addie was a natural when it came to being a union leader. She was always one to demand respect for workers and spoke up for them. And somehow, she could remember everybody's name. She'd meet you once and she'd keep that name. It was amazing given all the people she knew from the many different unions, churches, and organizations that she belonged to. It seemed to me that she and Claude knew everybody in Chicago, from elected officials to the kids on the block.

I always believed union work and Addie were like bread and butter. They go together. Addie first became active in the union after she started working at Armour & Company, a meat processing factory in the Chicago Stockyards. She worked there for six years. For a short time, Addie took a job at a hatpin factory. She tried to help workers there do what we call union organizing, meaning, getting the workers united and ready to start a union. Unfortunately, things didn't work so well and Addie got fired for organizing. It didn't matter, because Addie had union organizing in her blood. She was going to work union or not at all.

In 1947 she got a job at Illinois Meat & Company and re-joined the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA). Addie fondly called the packinghouse workers union her "home union" because it was the first union she joined.

All of us union activists have their "first-time-I-needed-the-union" story. One day Addie told me hers. She was working for Armour, a meat processing company, during World War II. She

was assigned a line job of putting pins on the tops on the cans. She said she liked it much better than packing stew in cans or “sloppin’ stew” as they called it then. She said the foreman told her she was doing a good job. But in a few days they took Addie off the job and put a newly-hired young white woman on it. Of course, Addie wasn’t going to accept going back to “sloppin’ stew” without asking a lot of questions.

Addie said a young black woman on another production line nearby saw her getting into it with the foreman. The woman was a union steward who handled the line workers’ grievances or problems. To get the situation resolved, the steward and Addie met with the plant superintendent and the foreman. Addie said she was feeling nervous but confident about the meeting. Here they were, two young black women sitting across the table from two white men who controlled the plant. Addie said she didn’t fully understand unions or job seniority at the time, but she was surprised and impressed when she won her grievance. As a result, she got back the job she liked. This was Addie’s first taste of a sweet union victory.

Addie was a staunch union supporter at Armour & Company and continued to be active in her packinghouse workers union when she later worked at the Illinois Meat & Company. It was here, Addie’s rise to union leadership sped up, even though this rising star got off to a shaky start to say the least.

Although this happened a long time ago, back in 1948, I can’t forget the day Addie and I were talking on the phone and she told me this great story about how she became a union leader. She said her local union sent her and a few other union members to a two-day anti-discrimination conference. She said she walked into the room and saw what she called a rainbow of workers, blacks, whites, Hispanics, men and women, all working together. Addie said she was shocked and had never seen so much camaraderie among such a diverse group of workers. It was well known how the meatpacking bosses and most employers did everything they could in those days to keep up racial tension. Addie said the workers were discussing ways to demand and gain equal treatment not only on the job, but in their unions also. They all agreed they would have to stay united if they were going to succeed. Addie said she knew immediately that this was the wonderful force of change that she had been looking for. She said during the conference they emphasized how important it was to fight for leadership roles in their white-male dominated unions.

Ironically, shortly after the conference, her local union happened to be holding an election for a vice president position that had been designated to be filled by a female union member. None of the women wanted to run, including Addie. One of the older woman told Addie that as a young member she should run. The other women also pressed Addie and promised they would support her. Addie told them she couldn’t do it because she was already active in her church and working with young people in her community in addition to raising her big family. Addie said she finally gave in to them. She would run, but she didn’t really mean it. Addie said she went home and didn’t even vote. When she came back to work the next day, everybody was congratulating her, telling her she had won. Addie had been elected vice president of her home union, the packinghouse workers Local 56. After I hung up the phone, I just smiled and shook my head, absolutely proud of my friend’s success. This was first time a black woman had been elected vice president of a packinghouse workers local union.

One year after her ‘surprise’ vice president election at age 25, Addie Wyatt was making history again. Addie became the first woman president of her local union after the president, who was a white guy, resigned for personal reasons. This wasn’t a token rise to a top leadership role; Addie had earned it. As always Addie was focused and ready. She learned quickly, took charge and led her local union forward.

It wasn’t long before her excellent work as a local union president got noticed by top union officials at the regional level of the packinghouse workers. The union’s District 1 Director was Charlie Hayes, a rising black union leader in the predominately white union. He was the first black person to become a district director. He had been in his position for only six months when he hired Addie to be on his regional staff. It didn’t take Charlie long to see that Addie was a natural leader and totally committed to the labor movement. He knew she could help more workers by working full time on the union’s regional staff with him instead of continuing to work in a meatpacking plant as a local union president, serving a smaller number of union members.

Addie worked tirelessly on the packinghouse workers staff for nearly twenty years, from 1954 to the mid-1970s. The union staff job was demanding. Addie was an organizer, contract negotiator, grievance handler and leader of a variety of union activities. As a union organizer she helped workers get together, or organize as we call it, so that they could form a local union at their factory. As a contract negotiator, Addie would bargain with the meatpacking industry bosses to get a contract that guaranteed workers’ wages, benefits and working conditions. She also filed grievances on behalf of union workers who had disputes with management. On top of all of this work, Addie was a leader of countless union activities as well as a spokesperson for the union.

Charlie Hayes and Addie Wyatt were exceptional people. During the 1940s and 1950s, many AFL-CIO labor unions had clauses in their constitutions that said blacks could not be members. Surely, Addie couldn’t let this go on. In 1959 along with other black labor activists, Addie and A. Philip Randolph, who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, founded the Negro American Labor Council to try to end racial discrimination inside labor unions.

During the 1950s when Addie began working for the packinghouse workers union, many didn’t think a black woman could do this kind of work, negotiating union contracts and handling workplace grievances. It didn’t matter to Addie what they thought. She knew she could do it.

Many times factory managers tried not to take her seriously. But she fought to make sure that the company followed the provisions of the union contract. Addie also made sure workers were paid according to federal regulations and weren’t forced to work excessive hours or under inhumane conditions. Addie consistently got the job done.

Addie believed in unions. She knew that with a union there was a better chance for fairness on the job, and higher wages and more benefits. It was the only a way to face the boss on equal ground to state your concerns. Addie told me and others that a union contract made it possible for all workers to be treated right and be heard on issues about the job. She said this was especially true in the meatpacking industry where negotiating safe working conditions meant saving lives.

As the meatpacking companies were shutting down or downsizing in the late 1950s, Addie often negotiated with plant managers to save the jobs of blacks and women, who were usually the last hired and first fired. Addie told me about a meatpacking plant where all the women were fired. She not only negotiated with the company, but she also met with the men working there, too. She told the company it was not fair for all of the women workers to lose their jobs. Addie never hesitated to ask the tough questions and negotiate fairly, no matter who she bargained with. Addie persisted and challenged the company managers to redefine the work structure to make sure all of the blacks or women would not be laid off.

Addie even urged women to take on jobs usually held only by men. She told them to get qualified for skilled jobs like butchering hogs. Sure those types of jobs were more dangerous, but they paid higher wages. Addie had no doubt women could do this kind of work safely, get higher pay and suffer fewer layoffs.

Addie was just beginning the fight for women and union workers. But as the 1950s brought new union challenges for Addie; she and Claude, and millions of us were about to be swept up in the tidal wave of change that would transform America forever—the civil rights movement.



marching for civil rights, working with kings, getting jailed

I was sure that what Rev. Wyatt had learned from the labor movement and on the factory floor, she took it straight to the civil rights movement. I'm proud that I'm one of the few members of Rev. Wyatt's church who grew up in the same South Side Chicago neighborhood as she did. We didn't pal around when we were kids, but we knew each other and had several mutual friends. It was always fun for Rev. Wyatt and me to talk about the good and not so good ol' days of our old neighborhood. Our shared past and our love for singing gospel music, made Rev. Wyatt and me very close friends at church and during our civil rights work together. She could call on me day or night and I would be there to help, and vice versa. She told me years ago I could call her Addie. But, I was always respectful and called her Rev. Wyatt in public. But, most of the time during the civil rights days I did call her Rev. Addie.

It was around 1956 when Rev. Addie and I first met the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I always loved that name, don't you? Rev. Addie's union, which called themselves the packinghouse workers, was one of the first to invite Dr. King to the city of Chicago to help with our fight for equality in the schools and in housing. Chicago may be up north, but there were times it was a carbon copy of the segregated south!

But before Dr. King came north, Charlie Hayes, Rev. Addie's supervisor at the time, asked her to go to Montgomery, Alabama, to help out with the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. A new group called the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed right after Rosa Parks got arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person and move to the back of the bus. That was around 1955, and our work to stop segregation was just beginning.

Shortly after Rev. Addie went to Montgomery to help Dr. King, she got deeply involved with his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC grew out of the smaller Montgomery Improvement Association and kept on growing and is still powerful today.

Throughout of the 1960s when the civil rights struggle really gained momentum, Rev. Addie was right there in the middle of it all. She was organizing community folks around civil rights just like she was organizing workers in the factories. Rev. Addie said it was all the same struggle. It was all about justice, freedom and equality.

She knew first-hand about discrimination. She told me there were times when she was working for the union and had to go to down state Illinois to negotiate union contracts. Sometimes those negotiations would last all day long. And when they finished up, there was no place to sleep at night or a place to go in and have a hot meal. She said they usually had to buy lunch meat and crackers and cookies then eat their lunch in the car.

Rev. Addie said that over time, white union members saw that it didn't matter what color the union organizers were, because black or white, they were negotiating contracts that helped all the workers. Eventually most the members came around to that understanding. They could finally see that Rev. Addie was dedicated and would go all the way to help them get a good contract that would protect their jobs, get them higher pay and safer working conditions in their meatpacking factories. Rev. Addie was accepted and supported by most of her union members. But, of course, some of the white members never accepted blacks no matter how hard they worked.

White union members in Illinois weren't the only whites who had problems with black people. Once I went south with Rev. Addie to march. And my Lord, I looked out the bus window and saw the Klu Klux Klan. I was terrified. Along with us on that trip was Rev. Willie Barrow, another female Chicago minister, and six white women who were dedicated civil rights activists who had traveled south many times. Nobody seemed to be as shocked as I was at seeing the Klan. I guess it was because I was a first-timer to marching in the south. But, everybody was nervous, that's for sure.

It was late night when we got to Selma, Alabama. We called our contacts. They told us that they didn't have anybody who could pick us up right away. So we had to wait. That was no short wait. We stayed the whole night in a bus station. That too was unsettling. I didn't know what to expect or who might be riding by with sheets on their heads that night. But, we prayed and tried to get a little sleep on those hard wooden bus station benches.

The next morning, they picked us up. We pitched in right away, meeting at churches and making sure we had enough people for the march. I was proud to be marching as Dr. King and Dr. Abernathy led the way. Those two kept all of us going. As Rev. Addie said, "If they keep on stepping, we do likewise." And, that's what we did. We were cursed at and spat on while we marched, but we kept going because we were all determined to stand up for freedom.

Well, our marching in Selma got Rev. Addie, me and a lot of people locked up in jail. And I can tell you, being locked up in an Alabama jail is an experience I'll never forget. Packed in there, we were hot and tired from marching. I was always waiting for something bad to happen. But Rev. Addie reminded me that our faith in God and our righteous struggle for justice would get us through not only this night, but all the way through, until our battle was won. As always, she was strong and spoke the truth.

When we got back home to Chicago, we all went to church on Sunday and thanked the Lord for returning us safely back to our families. We also prayed for Dr. King and everyone still down south, marching, praying and demanding to be treated as equals.

The civil rights movement was nationwide. There were a couple times when Rev. Addie invited Dr. King to come to Chicago. He would always complement Rev. Addie. Once I heard him say, "Addie, I'm coming because you called me, and I know you wouldn't be calling me for just anything. You know how busy I am." That was so true. Dr. King fought for freedom every day of his life until he was killed for doing so. He was a great man and he held Rev. Addie in high regard.

Rev. Addie and my other pastor, Rev. Claude Wyatt, kept up the struggle for civil rights in Chicago throughout 1960s and beyond. Rev. Addie organized protests and served on the Action Committee of the Chicago Freedom Movement. Just like me, both my reverends worked with Rev. Jesse Jackson. They helped him found Operation Breadbasket, which distributed food to underprivileged people in about dozen cities across the country. This was around 1962. They also worked with Rev. Jackson's Rainbow P.U.S.H. (People United to Serve Humanity) organization.

We made America change quite a lot in the 1960s and 1970s. Change can be slow but people like my pastor and friend, Rev. Addie, never stopped. She just kept praying, working and fighting. She fought not only for civil rights, but women's rights too.



fighting for women's rights, leading women forward, building organizations

As women leaders in our respective unions, Addie and I shared a lot and learned a lot from each other. We worked often on labor projects. But, we also spent a lot of time together throughout the civil and women's rights movements. All three movements occurred around the same time and often each movement supported the other. All started to gain real power in the early 1960s. Of course, Addie was a leader in all three. And, even though *Solidarity Forever* is the labor movement's anthem and the song Addie ended every union meeting with; she would often close out some of our women's meetings with at least with the verse. Addie would blast out that last line—"Solidarity forever, for the Union makes us strong," then switch it up and sing: "Solidarity forever, for we women are always strong." Even if you didn't know all the words, everybody could hum along because it's set to the same tune as the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

Addie said that as a black woman she knew she had to fight on three fronts—the worker's front, the black front and the female front—all while trying to overcome the different kinds of pressures each brought. We both believed it was much more difficult for black women, because we had the burden of all three. At times white men, black men, and white women would look down at us. Black women were on the bottom rung of society at the start of the 1960s. But, this didn't sadden Addie, me or millions of other black women. It empowered us. Back in the day, we used to say confidently: "The struggle continues!" We knew we would prevail.

I told you earlier about Addie's work life and her rise to top leadership positions in her union. Now, let me tell you about how she was a major force in the women's movement. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy asked Eleanor Roosevelt to lead a Commission on the Status of American Women. Mrs. Roosevelt was an outstanding first lady and a strong supporter of women's rights. She was well aware of Addie's civil rights work and advocacy for women. Mrs. Roosevelt didn't hesitate to appoint Addie to serve on the Commission's Labor Legislation Committee.

Addie and the other Commissioners conducted a study on the treatment of women particularly regarding employment and pay. As part of the study, Commission members, who were women from unions, religious and political groups, traveled from state to state and held meetings where women from all walks of life. They described the inequality and prejudice they faced on the job and in society in general and the impact this had on them.

The Commission's report focused on these challenges and offered recommendations. Well, Addie and other women activists did not want this groundbreaking report to be shelved and any opportunity for progress to be lost. So, we doubled our efforts to keep women's issues in the public's eye.

Some of the women who worked on the Commission went on to found the National Organization of Women (NOW). Addie and I attended the founding meeting of NOW in 1966. We supported NOW's work. But, we felt a union-based women's organization was needed to focus on issues working women faced.

I remember we had a series of regional women's conferences during the mid-1960s. And finally in 1974 in Chicago, Addie's hometown, we held the founding conference for the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), which is pronounced as "clue." Addie did a lot of the coordinating to make sure the first CLUW conference was a success. And, it was. We were planning on 1,500 people and over 3,000 attended. Addie was elected CLUW's first Executive Vice President.

It took us over ten years to launch CLUW. We're lucky it didn't take even longer, since we all had a lot going on during the late '60s and '70s. Change and protests were happening everywhere, on college campuses, throughout the mid-west, and from California all the way to the east coast, even in the northern cities like Boston. On top of that, in 1968 the whole country was turned upside down when Dr. King was killed. Immediately afterwards, riots broke out in over 100 major cities, including the Nation's Capital and in Addie's beloved Chicago. The death toll was over two dozen people from cities across the country where the riots had occurred. Addie told me that rioting went on for two days in Chicago and ten or eleven people were killed there. The cities looked like a war zone as fully armed National Guard patrolled America's largest cities.

In the early 1970s, Addie and I also were involved with pushing for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The point of the proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution was to guarantee equal rights for women. Thousands of women across the country worked diligently to try to get the ERA ratified. We lobbied Congress, marched, picketed, and petitioned. Some women even went on hunger strikes.

Addie and I have often reminisced about that summer of '78 in Washington, DC when NOW led a march of over 100,000 supporters to pressure Congress to pass the ERA. The march was a success. We did get an extension, but unfortunately, the ERA was never ratified.

Around the same time we were pushing for passage of the ERA, Addie also was active in the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU). It was 1972 when CBTU held its founding conference in Chicago. More than 1,200 black union leaders and members from three dozen different labor unions attended the two-day conference. At the time, it was the largest such gathering of black

unionists in the history of the American labor movement. We met to discuss how to become a formidable voice for minorities in our unions and to declare that we would be full leadership partners in the labor movement. Addie spearheaded the development of the CBTU Women's Committee and became its first chairperson.

Addie was going non-stop in the 1970s with the black trade unionists and the ERA battle in full swing. The year she helped found CLUW, 1974, was the same year Addie became director of the newly formed Women's Affairs Department of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen union, commonly called the Amalgamated. Addie was proud of her union. She joined the UPWA (packinghouse workers union), in the 1940s. It later merged with other meatpacking unions and became the Amalgamated. The packinghouse workers union was always ahead of its time, hiring and promoting blacks and women. That tradition continued with the Amalgamated. Committed to women rights, the Amalgamated created a women's affairs department. I know Addie's union was progressive. But, I also know one reason why it was that way. It was because Addie was on the scene, always advocating for women and black people.

Throughout the '70s and '80s, Addie continued her work on her four callings, the labor movement, the struggle for civil rights, the women's rights movement, and of course, her church. She was unstoppable. As the old timers would say, "They broke the mold when Addie was made."



spreading wings, gaining recognition, traveling abroad

By the mid-1970s with nearly four decades of service to others in the U.S., Addie was now traveling the world, helping women and union members stand up for their rights. Working with CLUW she traveled to Israel, to Stockholm, Sweden and to Paris. Addie and about twenty union women from the U.S. went to these European countries to study their child care programs. There were many such trips for Addie. She had moved up the ranks in her union to a top leadership position. She had the honor of being “first ever to...” in so many different areas. In fact, there are just too many firsts, awards for excellence and honors to name. But, here are just a few. President Jimmy Carter appointed Addie to the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year. She was named one of *Time* magazine's Women of the Year in 1975. In 1977, she received a Woman of the Year Award from the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Universities also recognized Addie. From the University of Michigan in 1975 she received an International Women's Year Award. Addie was the recipient of four honorary degrees. In 1976 she received an Honorary Doctor of Law Degree from Anderson University, Anderson, Indiana, and an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree from Chicago's Columbia College in 1978. The North Park Seminary in Chicago and the Chicago Theological Seminary also bestowed Addie with honorary degrees.

Addie would sometimes call me before receiving an award. She always gave God all the glory and thanks for blessing her with strength and a sound mind to do good work and serve others. Addie was never prideful, just grounded by her faith. From day one, she told her union that she would always do her job, but she would always put church and family first.

Addie told me to always remember: “To be a great leader, you have got to be dedicated, have integrity, compassion for people and a willingness to work for them, to give to them and to receive from them, because it's always a give and a take.”

Unions also recognized Addie's exceptional talents, promoting and electing her to top leadership positions. In 1976, Addie became the first women International Vice President of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen union. She later served as director of the Amalgamated's Human Rights and Women's Affairs and Civil Rights Departments.

When Addie's Amalgamated Union and the Retail Clerks International Union merged in 1979 it became the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW). Addie continued as the Director of Civil Rights and Women's Affairs. She later became the UFCW's first African American woman International Vice President. The UFCW eventually grew to over 1.3 million with members in the U.S. and Canada.

Throughout the 1980s Addie kept moving forward. She served as a vice president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Addie worked closely with NCNW President Dorothy Height and other prominent African American women leaders. Her efforts on behalf of women's rights continued and extended internationally. Addie traveled to the Middle East as a delegate to the 1982 Jerusalem Women's Conference.

In the mid-1980s, women workers competing for jobs in the catfish processing industry in Louisiana tried to form a union. They called on Addie for support. Of course, she didn't hesitate and helped them with their organizing efforts.

From 1981 to 1984 Addie was one of *Ebony Magazine's* 100 Outstanding Black Americans. She also received an Image Award from the League of Black Women.

When Addie retired from the UFCW in 1984 she was one of the labor movement's highest ranked and most prominent African American woman officials. After her retirement she continued to receive recognition for her many years of service and contributions to labor, women and civil rights:

- The *Addie L. Wyatt Award* was established in 1987 by the CBTU, honoring her as the first chair of its Women's Committee and one the most revered women in the American labor movement.
- The Working Women's History Project bestowed her with the *Mother Jones Award* in March 2003, noting her service as Co-Pastor Emeritus of the Vernon Park Church of God and CEO of the Wyatt Community and Family Life Center. That same year she was saluted as a Pioneer at the Chicago Gospel Festival.
- In 2003 Addie was named a Laureate in the Lincoln Academy of Illinois, the state's highest honor.
- At age 81 Addie was still a strong speaker and in 2005 was given the honor of delivering a sermon at the Washington National Cathedral, in Washington, DC. In Atlanta, Georgia that same year, Addie was inducted into the *International Civil Rights Walk of Fame—Brave Warriors of Justice*.
- In 2008 Addie received the Sargent Shriver Equal Justice Award.
- Addie was inducted posthumously in 2012 into the *U.S. Department of Labor's Hall of Honor*, becoming the first African American woman to receive the department's highest honor. During the induction ceremony, the Secretary of Labor praised Addie for "her

patience and persistence and for being a conciliator who built bridges for greater inclusion of women and minorities within the labor movement."

From the early 1980s on, Addie's Vernon Park Church of God grew steadily. In 1985, the church moved to a much larger, new facility at 9011 S. Stony Island. Church membership eventually grew to over 1,200. The ministries of the church continued to expand to include a weekly telecast, "Reaching Beyond the Walls," which began in 1992. By 1997 the church had its mortgage burning celebration. And two years later, The Wyatt Community and Family Life Center was dedicated in honor of church's co-founders. By the end of the 1990s after 44 years, Rev. Dr. Addie L. Wyatt and Rev. Claude Wyatt retired as co-pastors of the Vernon Park Church of God.

The Wyatts inspired many Chicagoans from the famous to the not so famous—from politicians, like a young junior senator from Illinois named Barack Obama who became America's first African American president to the hundreds of young people and seniors who to this day benefit from the Wyatt Community Center. The Center was a great joy for Addie in her senior years. In it she could see the fruits of her many years of service to others.

Through the years, Addie often said that she never separated her family life and church work from her work with the labor movement, women's or civil rights movements. Addie said she didn't separate them because it's the total package that God had given her.

Rev. Dr. Addie L. Wyatt, the one whom the angels announced, whom Claude loved and church members adored, whom colleagues trusted and unions and the nation recognized, and to whom God granted such great gifts, died on March 28, 2012 just twenty days after her 88th birthday. Addie was truly awesome.

Sources consulted:

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- Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW)
- Illinois Labor History Society
- Interview with Addie Wyatt by Elizabeth Balanoff
- National Park Service – U.S. Department of Interior
- United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW)
- UFCW Minority Coalition
- United States Department of Labor – Labor's Hall of Honor
- Working Women's History Project (Interview with Rev. Addie L. Wyatt by Joan McGann Morris)

To see the 2010 CLUW Tribute of Addie Wyatt video, go to:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=AV7CwGpvUwl

UFCW Minority Coalition Trailblazer Series

The UFCW Minority Coalition produced the *UFCW Minority Coalition Trailblazers Poster* in the early 2000s. It was the Coalition's first educational tool to commemorate the African American labor leaders who rose to top leadership positions to become UFCW International Vice Presidents.

In 2012, to highlight the lives and contributions made by UFCW leaders of color, the UFCW Minority Coalition Executive Board commissioned the production of *Awesome Addie* as the first booklet in the *UFCW Minority Trailblazers Series*. The late Congressman Charles A. Hayes from Illinois First District, who served as a UFCW International Vice President and was the first trade union leader elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, will be the next featured UFCW Minority Coalition trailblazer.



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