



ArchivesSpace

Guide to the Mary Ellen Riordan Papers LP001682

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English

Describing Archives: A Content Standard

Walter P. Reuther Library

5401 Cass Avenue

Detroit, MI 48202

URL: <http://reuther.wayne.edu>

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Summary Information

Repository:	Walter P. Reuther Library
Creator:	Riordan, Mary Ellen, 1920-
Title:	Mary Ellen Riordan Papers
ID:	LP001682
Date [inclusive]:	1920-2004
Physical Description:	64.5 Linear Feet (4 MB, 58 SB, 5 OS)
Physical Location:	
Language of the Material:	English
Language of the Material:	Material primarily in English. Some material is in Spanish or Hebrew.
Abstract:	Mary Ellen Riordan (1920-2010) was president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers from 1960-1981. In 1965, teachers and the school board signed their first contract, only the third teacher contract in the country. Riordan also guided the Detroit Federation of Teachers through three strikes, the Detroit Public Schools desegregation case <i>Bradley v. Milliken</i> , and agency fee case <i>Abood v. Detroit Board of Education</i> . In addition to her work with DFT, she served on the AFT Executive Council as Vice-President, the AFT Executive Committee, and on the boards of many state and local organizations. The Mary Ellen Riordan Papers contain correspondence, meeting minutes, notes, reports, newsletters, clippings, court documents and legal briefs, contracts, pamphlets, lesson plans, reference material, and ephemera. Topics of note include collective bargaining and strikes; desegregation in the Detroit Public Schools, race relations generally, and especially surrounding the 1967 unrest in Detroit; fair share and agency fees and related court cases; teaching materials from the 1930s through post-World War II in the subjects of math, science, and home economics; and teacher retirement.

Citation Style

"Mary Ellen Riordan Papers, Box [#], Folder [#], Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University"

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History

Mary Ellen Riordan (1920-2010) was president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers for more than 20 years. She guided the union through a many transformative events, including the introduction of collective bargaining, multiple strikes, and Supreme Court cases related to agency fees and segregation in Detroit schools.

Born Mary Ellen Hanlon in 1920 to Samuel and Cecilia Hanlon, Riordan grew up in a Catholic family. She married Daniel B. Riordan at Camp Gruber, Muskogee, Oklahoma, where Daniel was stationed. Daniel fought in WWII, and died at the Battle of the Bulge in 1944. He received a silver star as a posthumous honor.

Mary Ellen Riordan earned a bachelor of science degree from Marygrove College and a Masters Degree from Columbia University in New York. Her first teaching job was in White Cloud, Michigan. She taught English, math, science, and home economics. She then taught in the Detroit Public Schools for 14 years, with a two-year break to teach in West Berlin, Germany, in the early 1950s. Riordan's last teaching job was as science instructor at Isaac Cray Elementary in Detroit, for grades 5 through 8.

Riordan became an active member of the Detroit Federation of Teachers early in her career. She served on the union's executive board starting in 1954. In 1960, DFT members voted her in as president, a position she held until 1981. In February 1961, Riordan became the union's first full-time president. Following the United Federation of Teachers' success in gaining collective bargaining in New York, Riordan and the DFT fought for the same rights for teachers in Detroit and Michigan. In 1964, the school board allowed the teachers to hold an election for a sole representative. DFT beat out rival Detroit Education Association. The following year, the state of Michigan legalized public employee collective bargaining, and the union had its first official contract.

In addition to the initial collective bargaining success, Riordan guided the Detroit Federation of Teachers through strikes in 1967 and 1973, the Detroit Public Schools desegregation case *Bradley v. Milliken*, and agency fee case *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education*. She became an expert on pensions and social security in order to help fellow teachers navigate the retirement process, and continued to do so after her own retirement.

In addition to her work with DFT, Riordan served on the AFT Executive Council as Vice-President, the AFT Executive Committee, and on the boards of the Michigan Federation of Teachers, the Michigan AFL-CIO, Metropolitan Detroit AFL-CIO, Michigan Labor History Society, League of Women Voters, the United Foundation, the NAACP, the Detroit School Employees Retirement System, and many other national and local organizations. Riordan was invited to the White House multiple times for education conferences. She was inducted into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame in 2001.

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Scope and Content

The Mary Ellen Riordan Papers contain correspondence, meeting minutes, notes, reports, newsletters, clippings, court documents and legal briefs, contracts, pamphlets, lesson plans, pamphlets, reference material and ephemera. Topics of note include collective bargaining and strikes; desegregation in the Detroit Public Schools, race relations generally, and especially surrounding the 1967 unrest in Detroit; fair share and agency fees and related court cases in which the DFT was involved; teaching materials from the 1930s through post-World War II in the subjects of math, science, and home economics; and teacher retirement.

Series 1: Detroit Federation of Teachers Files, 1934-2002 Records created by Mary Ellen Riordan and others that document the activities of the Detroit Federation of Teachers. Includes correspondence, notes, meeting agendas and minutes, and newsletters. Includes materials related to collective bargaining, contracts, strikes and strike threats, and grievances. Contains documents related to a variety of legal issues, including agency shop or fair share cases such as the U.S. Supreme Court case *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education*. Also includes materials for Riordan's various campaigns for presidency, such as fliers, mailing lists, and newsletters. Some material relates to the history of DFT prior to Riordan's presidency.

Series 2: Michigan Federation of Teachers Files, 1961-1982 Primarily includes material from meetings, including conventions, of the Michigan Federation of Teachers. Also includes Haven Hill conferences on leadership and collective bargaining, and information on teacher salaries, vouchers, and changes in the Michigan Constitution.

Series 3: American Federation of Teachers Files, 1957-1987 Records related to the activities of the American Federation of Teachers, particularly Mary Ellen Riordan's involvement with the Executive Council and Executive Committee. Includes correspondence, reports, and convention and meeting packets with agendas, minutes, notes, fliers, and clippings. Also includes materials related to the different departments within AFT and related issues and causes.

Series 4: Personal and Family Files, 1935-2002 Personal items, correspondence, cards, notes, family papers, calendars, planners, notebooks and ephemera. Mary Ellen Riordan's notes and other materials from her time as a student and teacher in White Cloud, Detroit and Germany. This includes lesson plans and other teaching materials in the subjects of home economics, chemistry, general science, English, and math. Documents related to traveling, particularly trips to Mexico and Brazil. Also includes honorary degrees, awards, citations, and other honors. Some content was originally housed in expanding files, and the current folder labels refer to their original order and arrangement. Images of plaques and other physical objects also make up this series and are stored in the Reuther Digital Repository.

Series 5: Subject Files, 1939-2004 Correspondence, reports, news clippings, pamphlets, meeting agendas, notes, and minutes. A large amount of material relates to Detroit Public Schools and the Detroit Board of Education, as well as various organizations with which Mary Ellen Riordan was involved in Detroit and

beyond. Includes materials related to the desegregation case *Bradley v. Milliken*, decentralization and recentralization of the school district, community relations, the High School Study Commission, teacher retirement, the White House Conference on Education, other labor unions, and legislation and laws.

Series 6: Audiovisual Materials, 1920-circa 1999 Audiocassette recordings include membership and board of education meetings, media interviews, speeches, and award ceremonies. Photographs, negatives, and slides include portraits of Mary Ellen Riordan, other DFT and AFT members including other presidents of the organization, and Presidents of the United States of America; events including DFT meetings, AFT conventions, and various banquets. Also includes a recording of Al Homburg's "Teacher's Lament" on 45rpm record.

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Arrangement

Arranged in 6 series. Folders in each series are simply listed by their location within each box. They are not arranged, so any given subject may be dispersed throughout several boxes within each series.

Series 1: Detroit Federation of Teachers Files, 1934-2002 (Boxes 1-30)

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Series 3: American Federation of Teachers Files, 1957-1987 (Boxes 33-38)

Series 4: Personal and Family Files, 1935-2002 (Boxes 38-43, 65-67)

Series 5: Subject Files, 1939-2004 (Boxes 43-58)

Series 6: Audiovisual Materials, 1920-circa 1999 (Boxes 59-64)

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

Walter P. Reuther Library

5401 Cass Avenue

Detroit, MI 48202

URL: <http://reuther.wayne.edu>

Acquisition

Mary Ellen Riordan donated her papers to the Reuther on November 15, 2005.

Processing History

Processed and finding aid written by Stefanie Caloia on January 12, 2016.

Access

Collection is open for research.

Use

Refer to the Walter P. Reuther Library "Rules for Use of Archival Materials."

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Related Materials

Related Materials

AFT Local 231: Detroit Federation of Teachers Records, Helen Bowers Papers, Michigan Federation of Teachers Records, AFT President's Office: Albert Shanker Records, American Federation of Teachers President's Office: 1960-1974 Records Part II, Detroit Education Association Records, Merle Henrickson Papers

Transfers

Negatives, slides, a record, and audiocassette tapes (boxes 61-64) have been transferred to the Reuther's Audiovisual Department. Digital images of plaques given to Mary Ellen Riordan (listed at the end of Series 4) are available in the Reuther Digital Repository.

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Controlled Access Headings

- Agency fee
- Busing for School Integration

- Collective bargaining --Teachers
- Community and school
- Segregation in education
- Labor laws and legislation
- Riordan, Mary Ellen, 1920-

Other Access Aids

Finding aid also available as a pdf file. <https://www.reuther.wayne.edu/files/LP001682.pdf>

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- 18 Phi Delta Kappan
- 19 A Study of the Teacher in the Evolution of Administrative
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- 13 Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, WSU
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- 15 DPS Schools in the News, 1969-1972
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- 17 DPS Retirement System
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- 23 My Kind of Fight, Samuel Gompers, B. Rinehart
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