

“Everyone Was Ready For Unionism”

The Precursors, Promises, and Pitfalls of Industrial Unions in the 1930s

In the middle of the Great Depression, industrial workers across the United States demanded the right to join a labor union. In teaching Americans what this meant, the press focused on such influential labor leaders as John L. Lewis, head of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) and leader of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Cartoonists emphasized Lewis's full head of wavy hair, bushy eyebrows, and solid jaw; editorialists quipped about the dictatorial way he led the UMWA and the CIO. Lewis was indeed central to the 1930s labor movement: he bankrolled organizing drives and made unilateral decisions about which workers to assist. But there is a problem with relying on Lewis to tell the story of the rise of industrial unionism. Focusing on one or two such colorful characters distracts from the reasons why millions of Americans demanded union representation. Workers did not put their jobs and their families' livelihoods on the line because Lewis or any other leader told them to; they demanded union rights because their daily work lives were insufferable and they were newly empowered to do something about it.

Working Hard for the American Dream: Workers and Their Unions, World War I to the Present, First Edition. Randi Storch.

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Press reports also failed to convey the personal sacrifice and act of faith demonstrated every time a person went on strike for union recognition. Strikes in these years were high-stakes affairs. Employers were dead set against allowing unions into their workplaces. In a single year, 1937, in a single industry, steel, eighteen Americans died trying to bring unions to their factories. Workers carefully weighed the cost of losing their jobs, as the price for striking. Without unemployment insurance or union strike funds, workers questioned how they would buy groceries or pay rent. After all, was not any job – no matter how bad the conditions – better than standing on bread lines? They also had to wonder if they could trust workers in other departments and of other ethnic, racial, and gender groups to stick together. In a strike, might one group undermine another by returning to work prematurely? It is no wonder that, at times, the decision to join a union broke lifetime friendships and divided families. Labor educator Jack Metzgar, in *Striking Steel: Solidarity Remembered* (2000), presents these dilemmas and tells how his Aunt Ruth refused to speak to Jack's father for weeks after she learned Jack had signed her husband with the steelworkers' union. To Ruth and others, her husband's signature represented a betrayal of the family's security. Nonetheless, to minds of millions, the time for unions in the industrial workplace had come.

Many of those Americans who did not earn their keep by punching a timecard were perplexed. Why would working people demand union rights in the middle of the worst economic crisis of their lives? The answer is rooted in the hopes, betrayals, and battles that occurred during World War I and into the 1920s, experiences that prepared them for the 1930s drive to establish industrial unions. The fight for industrial unions did not come out of the blue. Changing political and economic conditions, new corporate policies, and creative forms of worker protest between 1914 and the early 1930s pushed government leaders and a generation of industrial workers to look to unions as a solution to their problems. The new unions they built stood on the foundation established during and after the Great War.

Political Prelude: Industrial Democracy Betrayed, from Wilson to Hoover

Woodrow Wilson came to the US presidency in 1912 from the New Jersey governor's office; before that he was president of Princeton University. Trained as a political scientist and historian, most comfortable behind a desk or a podium, Wilson was not to be confused with a labor hero. Still, his wartime policies would benefit those employed in war industries, inspire workers to demand workplace protections, and help grow trade union membership. He also supported some of the harshest policies against civil liberties and First Amendment rights in the twentieth century. The contradictory nature of Wilson's policies played out most dramatically in the world of wartime workers.

On April 2, 1917, Wilson delivered a war message to Congress, arguing that the United States needed to join the war that had been raging in Europe since 1914 "to make the world safe for democracy." In other words, Wilson claimed, US participation in the war was not about self-enrichment; it was driven by America's responsibility to uphold democratic principles worldwide. One arena where this goal was tested was in US industries where workers made or harvested war materials and government footed the bill. With its vast purchasing power and its commitment to fight a war, the federal government was in a strong position to demand that corporate America – at least those companies wanting lucrative government contracts – abide by new wartime federal policies that guaranteed industrial workers new protections.

Previously when workers struck, government generally acted to protect business's property through the use of court orders, mandating workers end their strike. Government officials also approved the use of state and federal force, sending in police or troops to "quell" strikes and get businesses back to business. Politicians agreed with industrialists that the legal and physical force used to end work stoppages was a small price to pay for companies being able to turn a profit. But in 1917, when one million workers

in such war industries as copper, lumber, and meatpacking chose to withhold their labor in 4,500 strikes around the country, Wilson chose not to use the heavy hand of the state to crush them. Instead, he turned to his newly established Presidential Mediation Commission. The charge of the commission was to investigate labor conflicts in industries deemed vital to war production and recommend solutions. It was headed by Felix Frankfurter, a Jewish immigrant who grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, taught law at Harvard University, and took an early interest in trade unionism, socialism, and communism. The commission, in its final report to the president on January 9, 1918, concluded that workers and management needed to develop a "collective relationship." According to Frankfurter, both "autocracy and anarchy" were basic evils. But the "central cause" of war industry conflict was due to unequal power in the workplace when it came to settling industrial conflict. Workers needed representation in the workplace. To that end, commission members also recommended that employers set up grievance procedures before problems led to strikes and that government establish a maximum eight-hour work day and more coherent wartime labor policies.

For the first seven months that the United States was at war, agencies making and recommending labor policy proliferated, and at times worked at cross-purposes with one another, with their congressional critics, and with court rulings. To put a stop to the confusion and conflict, in January 1918 President Wilson issued an executive order that created the War Labor Administration, headed by Department of Labor Secretary William Wilson, and charged it with reorganizing war labor agencies. The most important war labor agency to emerge, composed of an equal number of labor and business representatives, was the War Labor Conference Board (later renamed the National War Labor Board), which established wartime labor principles intended to guide peaceful and plentiful production in war industries and eventually, enforce them. Frank Walsh, a public school dropout who taught himself enough law to pass the bar and had a staunch reputation as a working-person's advocate, accepted appointment to the National War Labor Board (NWLB). He co-chaired

with former President William Howard Taft, a man business leaders vainly pleaded with to defend their interests against labor's encroachment. Taft was inclined to help them out, but Walsh and the country's wartime productivity needs won out. A new relationship between labor and the state was in the cards.

Walsh and Taft oversaw an agency that miraculously turned the wish list of pro-labor reformers into government policy. The agency called for an eight-hour day, equal pay for women for equal work, the right to join a union, an end to employers' union-busting activity, and support of a living wage. The right to join a union was a prized victory for workers because it suggested that government believed in the legitimacy of collective bargaining and saw it as a fair exchange for workers' commitment to maintain high levels of war-related production. Collective bargaining rights allowed workers, under government protection, to advocate for better pay and treatment; and it forced employers to negotiate and then spell out their policies relating to pay, hours, and conditions of employment in a legally binding contract. If collective bargaining did not exist in a plant before the war, employers did not have to recognize unions during the war, but they did have to create shop committees of worker-elected representatives empowered to negotiate on all workers' behalf – a process that looked a lot like collective bargaining. The NLRB created such worker-elected shop committees in 125 war-industry factories.

The idea of "industrial democracy," which the NLRB made popular, carried with it the notion that war-production workers were patriots serving a vital national function and, as such, deserved fair treatment. (Not all war-industry workers benefited from "industrial democracy"; women who sewed for war industries from their homes were excluded from NLRB provisions, a hint of shortcomings in labor policies that used factory workers as their standard.) The new policies shifted power relations in war industries, supporting industrial war workers' challenge to what had been management's unilateral power. Under the protection of wartime agencies and supported by wartime propaganda, working people previously leery of identifying themselves

as union members grew comfortable speaking as patriots in need of democracy.

The results were dramatic. During the war, one million new workers joined unions, and by 1920, five million workers belonged, more than double the prewar number. Union protection and government support resulted also in improved work conditions: by 1919 almost half of the nation's workers enjoyed a 48-hour week and only one in four worked over 54 hours.

Ironically, at the same time Wilson was giving speeches and making government appointments that tied democratic rights to war work, he also supported policies that suppressed free speech, targeting those critical of capitalist business practices and US participation in the war. The federal Committee on Public Information (CPI), led by journalist, hyper-patriot, and war enthusiast George Creel, worked feverishly to unite a divided country behind an unpopular war. Press releases, posters, movies, advertisements, and over 70,000 public speakers manipulated Americans' emotions and implored them to buy war bonds, conserve resources, enlist in the military, and report their antiwar neighbors to the Department of Justice. Creel used hyperbole and fear to build a more pro-war, anti-German society; rumors trumped facts in his war for Americans' hearts.

The problem – for both Creel and Wilson – was that the public was divided over whether to participate in combat overseas. Wilson had won reelection in 1916 as “the man who kept us out of war,” but with government forces committed to bringing democracy to the world, Wilson needed unity of support at home. At first he hoped his government could wrestle critics' support through the CPI's propaganda, but quickly he fortified the CPI's messages with federal legislation. CPI propaganda was emotionally manipulative, jingoistic, and urgent, but ultimately only suggestive; federal legislation, however, restricted civil liberties under the threat of the law. The Espionage Act of June 1917 and the Sedition Act of May 1918 banned antiwar mailings and authorized imprisoning those who spoke against the war. Under these laws, 900 people went to prison and the government deported hundreds more.

Government curtailment of civil liberties also negatively affected those who advocated for workers' rights, especially those who connected workers' problems and unnecessary wars to the same source, the profit-driven capitalist system. To these radicals, capitalism ravaged workers, whether in work or at war. Many with these beliefs joined the American Socialist Party, formed in 1901, since it was the only political party opposed to US participation in the war. Between 1901 and 1917, American Socialist Party members recruited members and successfully elected candidates to city, state, and national office. In the context of war, however, Wilson's war goals chafed against socialists' antiwar beliefs, so few were surprised when socialist leaders became federal targets.

Victor Berger of Wisconsin is a case in point. Before winning a seat in Congress, Berger was a socialist leader of the Milwaukee local of the International Typographical Union and editor of the city's Federated Trades Council's newspaper. Through his union activity and editorial capacity he appealed to those who joined craft unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), offering information on socialist principles. In 1918, with the country at war, Berger won reelection as a representative of his congressional district, but the federal government indicted him under the Espionage Act for his antiwar position. Regardless of the wishes of his constituents, the House refused to seat Berger in 1918 and again in 1920, when he re-won the seat. The Espionage Act also kept all major Socialist Party newspapers from circulating through the US Mail, preventing antiwar advocates from communicating and organizing; it also provided the basis for the Justice Department to indict 27 socialists.

No socialist of the day was better known or more admired than Eugene V. Debs, the American Railway Union leader who in 1894 emerged into the national spotlight at the head of a strike against railway-car maker George Pullman. Imprisoned for his role in the conflict, Debs spent much of his jail time reading socialist writings and wondering why a government that presumably stood for democracy consistently protected the rights of big business over those of workers. Debs became convinced while in jail that

neither the Democratic nor Republican Party represented working people, so, once released, he joined the Socialist Party and four times ran on its ticket for President of the United States. After winning almost one million votes in 1912, Debs ran again in 1920 from his prison cell, having been sent there this time for making what the government considered an antiwar speech. Delivered in Canton, Ohio's Nimisila Park before a thousand supporters and a few federal agents, the speech was labeled in the *Terre Haute Plain Dealer* as "treasonably-inclined blatherskite." In fact, it was a call to broaden citizens' civic rights. Carefully choosing his words, since he was aware of the government's crackdown on free speech, Debs questioned the morality of waging war on the backs of America's workers, without their support:

They have always taught you that it is your patriotic duty to go to war and to have yourselves slaughtered at command. But in all of the history of the world you, the people, never had a voice in declaring war...The working class who fight the battles, the working class who make the sacrifices, the working class who shed the blood, the working class who furnish the corpses, the working class have never yet had a voice in declaring war...If war is right, let it be declared by the people – you, who have your lives to lose; you certainly ought to declare war, if you consider war a necessity.

The Supreme Court ruled that Debs had gone too far. Satisfied with the court's ruling, Wilson told his cabinet, "Suppose every man in America had taken the same position Debs did. We would have lost the war and America would have been destroyed." The broad, vocal movement that formed in Debs's defense saw things differently. To them, American principles were already being destroyed by the government's protection of capitalism and its willingness to send working-class people to fight in a war waged for its leaders' profits. Government's willingness to defy the Constitution and curtail free speech spoke volumes to them. Debs became a working-class hero because, though he did not need to, he aligned his fate with that of the oppressed.



Figure 1.1 Eugene V. Debs speaking in Canton, Ohio. National Archives and Records Administration/Great Lakes Region, Chicago.

Even more than members of the Socialist Party, those belonging to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) faced repression, even though their leaders did not take a formal stand against the war. Formed in 1905, the IWW was an organization determined to organize all workers, regardless of skill, gender, or race, into “One Big Union.” Their greatest successes came in the West among lumber workers, agricultural workers, miners, and seamen. During World War I, federal troops in Montana and Washington monitored railroads and utilities to prevent their destruction from German and other enemies. In 1917, troops expanded their patrols to places where IWW members were recruiting: copper mines, forests, and farms. In the West, often with the aid of local, self-styled patriots, federal troops used violence to break strikes, help strikebreakers cross picket lines, commit unlawful search and seizures, and detain vocal labor advocates. That summer, deputized vigilantes in Bisbee, Arizona, rounded up 1,200 striking copper miners and dropped them off

in the middle of a New Mexico desert, and vigilantes in Butte, Montana, caught up with IWW member Frank Little and left him dangling by his neck from a railroad bridge.

Officials in Wilson's government lent support to these people who took the law into their own hands, believing that strikes and labor militancy were acts of subversion rather than reflections of workers' call for democratic rights. When Wilson tasked a federal judge with investigating the IWW in August 1917, the Justice Department leapt to the charge in its zeal to quiet labor unrest. On September 5, Justice agents raided every IWW headquarters in the nation and eventually convicted 184 members of espionage and sedition. A US attorney boasted that the government raids were intended to "put the IWW out of business," which they nearly accomplished.

While World War I raged in Europe, government forces encouraging democracy in the workplace existed in tension with those bent on violating basic civil rights. The problem facing war industry workers was that the balance of forces was about to tip against them since government protection of their workplace rights was a temporary, wartime-emergency measure meant to last only as long as the war. When the conflict ended on November 11, 1918, so did pro-union, labor agreements and the public's willingness to support them. Government repression continued, however. For example, through the fall and winter of 1919, in response to a coordinated bombing of US officials' homes and offices in eight cities across the country, the US government acted in an heavy-handed, overzealous manner. Without concern for specific evidence linking individuals to the bombings, United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer sent federal agents to seventy cities across the country to detain and deport people identified as communists or aliens with radical ties. The government held 10,000 people for questioning and deported 500. These Palmer raids and deportations sparked a "red scare" throughout the states, causing state officials to draft their own criminal syndicalism laws and to seek out "subversives."

So, between 1919 and 1922, when prices soared and wages stagnated, it was without government protection and public

support that workers fought to maintain their shop-floor power and protect themselves against inflation. Through those years, eight million workers tested the limits of industrial democracy by participating in 10,000 strikes. The most militant year was 1919, when four million people walked off the job. The effects were felt broadly: Seattle workers supported a general strike that crippled the city; Boston police vacated their posts; and 300,000 steelworkers took to the streets. In 1922, hundreds of thousands more textile workers, railroad workers, and coal miners went on strike, sometimes for a day or two, other times for months – or in the case of coal miners, for years.

Whereas Seattle's general strike went off peacefully, violent conflict characterized most of the others. Hints that the steel strike of September 1919 would turn bloody appeared before the strike began. The *New York World* reported:

In the Pittsburgh district thousands of deputy sheriffs have been recruited at several of the largest plants. The Pennsylvania State Constabulary has been concentrated at the commanding points . . . At McKeesport alone 3,000 citizens have been sworn in as special police deputies subject to instant call. It is as though the preparations were made for actual war.

By the end of the strike's first week, 365,000 men stayed away from work, effectively shutting down the iron and steel industry in seventy major centers. That is when politicians and employers unfurled their attack plan. Part of it involved the media, with accusations that "bolsheviks" were behind the strike. Newspapers pried apart strikers' solidarity. On September 27, Pittsburgh's *Chronicle-Telegraph* instructed, "The steel strike will fail. Be a 100 percent American. Stand by America...GO BACK TO WORK MONDAY." Employers joined propaganda with violence. One company manager admitted that his spies operated within the union leadership and used their posts to provoke riots. Union steelworkers added to the tussle by chasing off individuals who attempted to cross picket lines and take vacated jobs (unionists called these strikebreakers "scabs"). They were no match,

however, for state troops, national guardsmen, the army, and deputized forces sent to send striking workers back to work. On January 8, 1920, in defeat and with two dozen of their fellow unionists dead, steelworkers returned to their jobs.

Coal companies' assault on striking miners was equally cruel. When mineworkers in Matewan, West Virginia, demanded union recognition, coal operators paid detectives to evict them and their families from their company-owned homes. In an armed battle, seven detectives and two miners were shot dead. The "Battle of Blair Mountain" followed a few counties distant, when the company reportedly hired private planes to drop homemade bombs and federal troops swarmed in to quell a group of miners marching to demand their right to form a union. By the time the melee ended, over 500 miners faced charges of insurrection and dozens more of those with murder and treason. They did not get their union.

Without government protections and public goodwill, postwar labor uprisings did not win favorable results for workers. Striking throughout the 1920s proved ineffective because of the way judges handed out legally enforceable orders from the court, known as court injunctions, to stop them. Illinois Federal District Court Judge James Wilkerson handed down the most limiting injunction against a 1922 railroad strike, declaring it illegal to strike against wage cuts. Some hope for labor emerged when Supreme Court Chief Justice Taft led a majority that interpreted the 1914 Clayton Act in a way that favored unions. The Act prohibited activity that threatened free-market competition. Even though the point of the law was to crack down on business practices that undermined competition, anti-unionists hoped to use the law against the right of unions to exist. Taft, along with a majority of the justices on his court, excluded unions from antitrust litigation and went a step further in declaring injunctions inappropriate in regard to legal unions and strikes. But by 1930 this small victory had proved to be a hollow shell. Taft's court limited picketing during strikes, declared pro-worker state labor laws unconstitutional, and forced trade unions to jeopardize their treasuries by holding them responsible for actions of individual members during authorized strikes.

Through the postwar decade, leading Republicans deepened labor's woes. In 1919 President Warren G. Harding called for a return to "normalcy." To that end, while speaking in Boston on May 14, 1920, he reminded Americans that "all human ills are not curable by legislation" and society's problems could not be "solved by a transfer of responsibility from citizenship to government." Any hopes of continuing Wilson's pro-worker policies were doomed. Harding's call for "not revolution, but restoration; not agitation, but adjustment" was an attack against the millions of industrial workers who went on strike in the postwar period.

Between 1925 and 1929, President Calvin Coolidge's labor policies were no different. As governor of Massachusetts in 1919, Coolidge had made a name for himself when he fired Boston's striking police force. As President, Coolidge appointed Herbert Hoover as Secretary of Commerce to work with John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers to negotiate a contract with mine operators: the Jacksonville Agreement of 1924. The contract prevented a strike, but it did not preclude operators from shutting down. Then, when asked to step in and coax mine operators to uphold their end of the deal, Coolidge asserted that government had no power to enforce the agreement. He also warned Lewis that if the UMWA struck, it would be violating a contract and undermining collective bargaining. Meanwhile Hoover, aware of the anti-union nature of the courts, suggested that the union take its grievances to the judiciary.

Little changed when Hoover became President in 1929. As head of the Food Administration during World War I and as Secretary of Commerce under Harding and Coolidge, Hoover shared the former presidents' perspective on workers' rights: they did not need any. During World War I Hoover was impressed with the positive effect of charity and voluntary business cooperation in stabilizing communities and industry. So when the Great Depression hit after 1929, in the face of growing desperation, Hoover continued to promote private solutions to the nation's crisis. Rather than force governmental intervention in banking policy when the stock market crashed, Hoover pleaded with Americans not to remove their deposits. In the depths of the crisis, he said

that hoboes were “better-fed” than ever and in a moment of delusion asserted to the press, “no one is actually starving.”

In 1932 Hoover called in the military to clear the streets of Washington, DC of 20,000 jobless war veterans who marched on the capital. Many of them mobilized in DC in hopes of winning an early payment of a promised \$50–\$100 government “bonus” for their wartime service. Embarrassed by the veterans’ protest, Hoover turned to the US Army to end the march with bayonets, tanks, teargas, and fire that burned to the ground the protestors’ tent city. The images of soldiers on horseback chasing veterans down Pennsylvania Avenue and military personnel brandishing bayonets at the marchers symbolized how far removed the government had become from the suffering and struggle of ordinary people.

To be fair, Hoover and Congress took unprecedented steps to address human problems associated with the Great Depression. For one, they established the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which offered loans to companies large enough to secure their collateral so that they could expand and hire more workers. They also provided money to local governments and supported a few federal construction projects. In 1932 Congress passed the Norris-LaGuardia Act that outlawed “yellow-dog” contracts that employers forced employees to sign, indicating that they were not in, and would not join, a union. It also barred injunctions against union pickets and strikers.

In the early Depression years, neither effort mattered much. Working people realized they had no real, federal protection should they refuse to sign a yellow-dog contract. It made more sense to have a job and sign the illegal contract than to cling to convictions and stand, unemployed, on a breadline. Through the end of Hoover’s administration and some time afterward, the Depression worsened, unemployment rose, hunger spread, and employers succeeded in their attacks against organized labor.

Congress also undermined workers in this period by passing historic legislation that reshaped the meaning of citizenship. In the context of war, the agricultural lobby won the right to bring farmworkers to the United States from Mexico, Canada, Cape Verde, and the Bahamas. As long as agricultural workers signed contracts

with clear dates of departure and as long as growers agreed to send their workers back home at the end of the contract or the war, the government agreed to ignore immigration restrictions already on the books (a head tax and a literacy test in the workers' own language). In the postwar period, however, partly as a result of the Palmer Raids and ensuing red scare, the United States restricted its immigration policies. The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 established a quota system that drastically reduced the number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe and slammed shut America's doors to Asia's immigrants. US diplomatic, trade, and agricultural interests succeeded in keeping Western Hemisphere nations out of the reaches of the new immigration law, but the law still established barriers to American citizenship. New surveillance mechanisms created a new category of person – the illegal alien. Entering the country without a newly required visa meant that many immigrants' first act in the United States was to commit a crime. Migration of wartime agricultural workers continued informally (and now illegally) after the war, and throngs of Mexicans fleeing the Mexican Revolution augmented their numbers. Over half of formal deportations in this period involved aliens without proper paperwork. Over time illegal immigration status would become equated with general criminal activity; in effect Mexicans in the United States would increasingly be identified as illegal and criminal.

By creating racial and ethnic hierarchies through legislation, the state reinforced one of the unsavory ways in which America's wartime propaganda manifested itself in the postwar period. Henry Ford's rants against Jewish bankers and steel magnates' attacks against Bolsheviks resonated among the ranks of white, native-born Americans, who feared foreign influence and looked at the increasing number of African-American migrants from the South with trepidation and horror. Those who believed that wealthy Americans were genetically predisposed to succeed subscribed to the ideas of Social Darwinists, who were certain of the inability of eastern Europeans, Mexicans, and Japanese immigrants to assimilate. Such vocal hyper-patriots as eugenicist Madison Grant and Theodore Roosevelt were afraid that high fertility rates of "inferior

groups” and low fertility rates of native whites would lead to the end of the Anglo-Saxon race, or “race suicide.”

Not surprisingly, with government leaders supporting these notions, the 1920s witnessed the proliferation of racism, manifested most clearly in the activities of the newly risen Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Shopkeeper associations boycotted foreign-born competitors, and white, working-class neighborhoods witnessed a rise in Klan membership. Its members feared economic concentrations of wealth, believing that monopolies had the power to upend republican values and individual liberties. They also had no regard for what one Klan leader described at “a great mass of incompetent, unprincipled and undemocratic voters from below,” namely African Americans, Catholics, and the foreign. And this time around, the KKK spread its hate outside of the South. In 1924 Detroit housed 35,000 Klan members, Chicago 50,000. In August of that year, 50,000 Klansmen made their way to Washington, DC, for a march past the White House in full white gowns and pointed white hats. In the postwar period, this reborn Klan took the government’s patriotic war campaign and its rhetorical excesses to their logical conclusion. Klan members, after all, claimed to be the purest patriots. The flip side of Wilson’s war campaign blazoned with hatred.

Corporate Prelude: The Unintended Consequences of 1920s Corporate Policies

At the beginning of the 1920s, two hundred companies owned one-fifth of the nation’s wealth and their leaders helped shape a pro-corporate American foreign policy. State Department loans encouraged American exports while federal troops defended US investments and interests in China, the Caribbean, and Central America. Rich and powerful American investment houses – J. P. Morgan, Goldman Sachs, and Lehman Brothers – funneled international wealth into stocks, generating cash windfalls to corporations whose leaders spawned a slew of corporate mergers, consolidating their assets and operations, and filling sprawling factories with new technologies and grand department stores with merchandise.

Corporate leaders used their new economic riches to win back the unilateral control over workplace decision-making that they had lost during the war. With easy access to capital, corporate leaders pushed industrial production into the “machine age,” where they found technological innovation to be their friend. Put simply, machinery cost less than workers. A new era of sheet-steel and tinplate production emerged, for example, when each continuous, strip-sheet rolling mill had the capacity of forty to fifty hand mills. Cigar-rolling and glass-tubing machines appeared along with mechanical coal-loading devices, power shovels, pneumatic tools, switchboards, and teletype machines. Developments related to improved technology resulted in one million industrial workers losing their jobs.

New technology also led to debilitating injuries and death. In steel mills, men worked with massive pots of hot metal and fiery blast furnaces. Molten steel sometimes spilled over, and occasionally furnace dust kicked up and landed on workmen. In these cases, workers were literally cooked while the unlucky ones lived with excruciating burns. Overhead cranes provided another menace: one whack could mean permanent disability. In factories with heavy machinery, most accidents occurred on quick-moving belts that easily pulled out limbs. Jack Metzgar grew up listening to stories about his grandfather, a skilled turner at one of Bethlehem Steel’s Johnson rolling mills, who lost both his arms in the mills in 1917. The man got good at picking up dimes with his mechanical arms, but could never scratch his own nose, let alone work in the plant, again. With no protective guards, sawmills cut men in two. Slippery knives in meatpacking plants meant missing fingers and acid often burned away the skin of those in the pickling departments.

To make matters worse, in corporate leaders’ fury to increase production and profit, companies paid managers to stand over workers with stopwatches and bully them. Regularly speeding up the assembly line led to fatigue as well as bloody, disfiguring accidents. Safety gear and disability insurance would have improved workers’ lives, but they were expensive, so they did not exist.

New technologies also gave managers new ways to undermine once-independent craftsmen by pitting them and their skill against

easily trainable, low-paid workers. With new and better machines in their reach, managers created jobs that required less training and more, low-paid and easily replaceable people. The new jobs created as a result often were relabeled “unskilled” or “semi-skilled,” since they did not require as much training or decision-making.

In addition to dividing workers by skill, another way managers asserted their authority and kept workers from seeing that they shared similar grievances was the sexual and racial segregation of jobs. On sugar and pineapple plantations in Hawaii, growers turned to mainland whites to fill management and skilled jobs and to Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos to provide the backbreaking labor. They used racial stereotypes to justify the ethnic division of workers. Because Chinese were believed to be reliable but less energetic, irrigation work suited them best; Japanese workers were considered to have more strength, so growers used them for loading. In another example, Chicago’s meatpacking employers turned to Germans, Irishmen, native whites, and smaller numbers of Bohemians when they needed skilled butchers, whom they paid well and who worked regularly. At the other extreme stood common laborers hired from the masses of recently arrived, southern and eastern European immigrants, and Mexican migrants, often hired by the day or hour with no job security. Meatpackers hired few African Americans, but did employ them, according to Rick Halpern in *Down on the Killing Floor: Black and White Workers in Chicago’s Packinghouses, 1904–54* (1997), as a “powerful element of fear and mistrust in a situation already tense with ethnic friction.”

In the 1920s, regulated wartime shop committees lingered, giving workers a forum for their voices on the job. In the postwar period, however, industrial leaders used the shop committees as a tool to keep tabs on, and steer workers away from unions. Rather than crush labor with force, the biggest corporate leaders formed their own company unions in which representatives from each department met directly with management to resolve grievances. Employers who recognized company unions believed their efforts would make government reform and union representation bygone efforts. For his part, AFL president Samuel Gompers, a one-time socialist who rolled cigars from the young age of 12

and built the federation on the principle of skilled workers' self-organization, saw representation committees of company unions as a "pretense admirably calculated to deceive."

In company unions, management supervised elections, determined which workers could act as representatives, and dominated committees that made decisions on grievances. Frank Schlieman, a pro-union worker at Emmerson Electric in St. Louis, was not convinced his employer would make changes through their company union. He gave it a chance, however, after his foremen threatened "repression." Schlieman quickly learned its limits when management refused workers' requests for wage increases and ignored their complaints about speedups. Taking each grievance as an opportunity to instruct, management shrugged off requests for higher wages with discussions of what other companies paid. Schlieman eventually stopped taking the company union seriously because he "couldn't get far with it." Others who pushed against the company union simply got fired.

Despite their limitations, company unions did give workers opportunities for collective expression. Occasionally, department representatives were successful in forcing management to make concessions. And unlike AFL unions, whose membership discriminated against women and those who worked unskilled jobs (especially those of certain ethnic groups), company unions often included immigrant, African-American, and women representatives, offering training and experience to a new generation of leaders.

In addition, experience with company unions sometimes politicized workers and sparked their interest in more authentic representation. When employers refused grievances, they helped workers accept the union principle that employers did not share their priorities. Some of those who had faith in company unions but experienced their limits became the best organizers for real union drives. When outspoken Emmerson Electric unionist Frank Sulzer lost his job, his department refused to elect another representative to replace him, prompting his co-workers to turn in blank ballots. Such actions provided a means for workers to act on mutual complaints. Company unions thus slowed what

might have been a surge of union growth in the 1920s, but they still gave workers a voice and a degree of experience with efforts to improve their work conditions.

Company unions often worked with a series of other programs, known collectively as welfare capitalism, to tame calls for the formation of real labor unions. Throughout the 1920s, management in large capital-intensive firms turned to industrial psychologists to develop procedures to turn potentially conflict-laden labor-management relations into cooperative efforts; their goals were to show employees that management cared and to convince them that the most important relationship at work was the one between them and their employer. Chicago's Hawthorne Works of Western Electric, in collaboration with Harvard Business School Professor Elton Mayo, attempted to accomplish these goals when they instituted an interview program and had private conversations with each of their 25,000 hourly employees. The hope was that these once-a-year chats would keep employee grievances low in number and help foster the sense among workers that management cared. Other large industrial companies varied the number and combination of their programs. At times welfare capitalists tried to win workers' loyalty away from their fellow workers by mixing racial and ethnic groups within departments and luring ethnic workers to company life and death insurance policies and away from those offered by their community associations. Others relied on stock ownership plans that allowed employees to invest directly in the company for which they worked, encouraging a capitalist identity and a sense of junior partnership. Other programs retrained foremen to supervise with a gentler touch, offered workers wage incentives for productivity increases, and revealed a new respect for workers' seniority. The most comprehensive welfare capitalism included health and safety programs; educational, recreational, and social activities; such financial benefits as pensions, shares of company stock, life and health insurance, and profit-sharing plans; and such shop-floor relationships as personnel departments, supervisor training, and company unions. Loss of any of these benefits came when workers engaged in strike activity, showed union

interest, or faced regular business layoffs, which hit semi-skilled and unskilled workers (including women) disproportionately. Therefore, the threat of lost benefits always loomed large.

All plans reflected what historian Alice Kessler-Harris in *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in the Twentieth Century* (2003) calls employers' "gendered imagination": whereas employers built loyalty among men through sports clubs and mortgage loans, they reached women through sewing and cooking classes, dances, and summer camps. Reflecting mainstream notions of women primarily as family members and only occasional workers, these programs gave women "sociability rather than security."

The idea that welfare capitalism would blind employees to the need for unions was shortsighted. Actually, few laborers in the 1920s, perhaps one in five, worked for an employer that provided a comprehensive welfare plan. Instead, most who experienced piecemeal welfare capitalism saw its uneven underside because employers could not afford or did not buy into the pro-worker pieces of such plans. Employers in the auto, rubber, and steel industries used personnel departments rather than foremen's favorites when hiring employees on a seasonal basis, but rarely incorporated other programs. Meanwhile, the smallest firms, especially those in stagnating industries, generally lacked any of welfare capitalism's procedures and programs.

Even those companies committed to welfare capitalism could not consistently implement policy. Many corporate leaders planned to reform their managers' leadership style, but foremen notoriously maintained harsh practices. Foremen were not uniformly monsters, but as Metzgar writes, "they all had this power over your life and the life of your family, and most of them used it in both big and little ways, sometimes with a purpose, sometimes just out of meanness, but always with the same humiliating result." In the 1930s, when the Great Depression dried up employment, workers competed aggressively for a day's pay. The opportunity to grab a woman's backside or gifts of money, booze, and homemade treats were a few of the bribes foremen took to assure the donor a work assignment. Corruption oozed over into

job assignments that segregated minorities into industry's least desirable jobs and women into its lowest-paying ones.

The result was pent-up frustration and bitterness that brought workers to unite against a common enemy. In department stores and meatpacking plants, workers undermined their foremen's productivity schemes by limiting their output (also known as stints). Monitoring stints kept workers in communication and skilled in expressing collective power. Welfare capitalism's programs meant to build workers' company loyalty sometimes worked to make them more loyal to one another. Sports programs, cafeterias, and recreational events, for example, allowed men and women to develop friendly relations across racial and ethnic divisions.

Corporate leaders hoped their welfare plans would keep workers faithful and real unions out, but they knew better than to rely on hope alone and made arrangements in case their plans failed. The flip side of welfare capitalism was coercion. Detective and security agents routed out union-friendly employees and built blacklists of persons deemed best not to hire. Pretending to be average working people, spies kept their ears open to identify workers sympathetic to union activity and gave regular reports on them to management. Meanwhile, security agencies stockpiled weapons to use against workers in the case of a strike. In 1936 a special Senate committee exposed corporate America's disregard for workers' rights. Between 1933 and 1936, 2,500 corporations spent \$9.4 million to hire labor spies and pay for firearms. The leaders of corporate America might be speaking softly, but they carried a big stick to silence dissent and ensure that their employees tolerated dangerous and humiliating workplace conditions.

By the end of the 1920s, 1.25 million Americans worked for employers who required them to sign "yellow-dog contracts" and deprived them of basic constitutional rights. If welfare capitalism's programs held out the promise of worker representation and raised employees' expectations, their failed delivery opened workers' minds to the possibility of effective unions. Many times, management's ineptitude proved to be the union organizer's best weapon.

Working-Class Prelude: Activism

In 1924, after almost forty years with the energetic Gompers at its head, AFL leadership passed to a less dynamic personality, William Green, who would serve as president of the federation until his death in 1952. Whereas Gompers grew up with an appreciation for the teachings of socialists and the principle of class conflict, Green was reared with a commitment to organized religion and the belief that employers and workers could reach mutually beneficial agreements.

Organized as a national federation of trade unions with national federation leaders having little ability to influence the policies or actions of its member unions, the AFL, by tradition, was decentralized and Green, a man of tradition, kept this alive. In regions where a number of AFL locals functioned, each would send a representative to sit on their city federation. There they would meet with delegates from the city's other AFL unions. Members of city federations kept one another abreast of local political developments, and every once in a while they joined forces to push for the city's government to abide by one or another demand. Delegates from striking unions informed other AFL unionists of the location of pickets and asked the others to support their job actions, but they were not *required*, just because they were AFL affiliates, to do so. Structure facilitated communication, but in the end it was every union for itself.

A few AFL affiliates, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), for instance, were organized industrially, which meant that within a unionized garment factory the spectrum of workers in all job categories could be signed up as members. The union included unskilled and skilled workers, women and immigrants, as well as white men. Most AFL unions did not operate that way, however. The majority was built around a craft, its knowledge and traditions. AFL bakers, electricians, barbers, or boilermakers were proud breeds. They were also exclusive ones. For those on the inside, that is what made union membership such a privilege.

Few people not related to a union member were allowed formal training in the craft, so individual, local craft unions tended to be family affairs, dominated by one ethnic or religious group. Silvio Burgio, an Italian orphan from New Rochelle, New York, knew this well. The United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local 86 began as a German affair but gradually shifted to a largely Irish one. During Burgio's tenure, a small Italian group was allowed to join. In Burgio's case, a plumber in the Bronx agreed to take him on as a helper. Once the young man completed his apprenticeship, he earned the title of mechanic and then his initiation into the union. By his early twenties, the lean and muscular Burgio had sharp mechanical skills and a determination to measure with exactitude. The knowledge he acquired through his apprenticeship gave him power on the job. Contractors needed men like him to get pipes laid right, and Burgio, and other skilled craftsmen in the trades, relished the respect that gave him. Burgio identified strongly as a union man, carried his card, attended weekly meetings, and credited the union with his ability to buy a radio and a used car. For Burgio, one of the union's biggest victories was protection: he never had to bribe a contractor for a job. The contractors with the best jobs went through the union to hire men like Burgio. Working alongside others who shared a similar heritage, he never questioned the system's logic. Why shouldn't a father help a son into a trade? Why wouldn't one member of the North Italy Society pass his skill on to another? People of color in Chicago complained about these discriminating policies to city federation leaders, but their complaints went unheeded.

When these AFL unionists worked in manufacturing plants, they refused to consider broadening their membership to unskilled workers whose jobs required no formal training and who could easily be replaced. So at least part of the reason a surge of industrial unionism never took place in the 1920s was because the main labor federation of the time was not interested; its member unions understood the political climate, benefited from the 1920s economy, and did not want to be associated with women, African Americans, or unskilled industrial workers. In non-industrial

workplaces where the vast majority of women and minority workers labored – department stores, office buildings, farms, laundries, white and middle-class homes – AFL unions did not exist, and federation leaders were not about to attempt to create them in those places. Female clerical workers were among the largest-growing segment of the workforce as a result of increasing demand for bookkeepers, typists, stenographers, and receptionists in industry, but no AFL organizing drives worked to represent them either. In the factories of 1920s industrial America, unskilled and semi-skilled workers had almost no union representation. Where unions did exist, such as in the aforementioned ILGWU, men led and controlled them.

Fania Cohn, a young Belarus immigrant and member of the ILGWU, represented the kind of person who began to challenge traditional union culture. Within her union, she saw that women juggled workplace and family responsibilities and helped develop innovative strategies to cope with the complexities of working women's lives. ILGWU women activists such as Cohn also broadened their union work to include worker education programs, community organizing, and political lobbying. In 1920 Cohn made alliances with labor activists and educators outside the union and established the Workers' Education Bureau, a central office to support correspondence courses, traveling libraries, and conferences. In 1921 Cohn joined forces with Rev. A. J. Muste, Rose Schneiderman, and other working-class activists to form Brookwood Labor College in New York, the first residential school for union organizers offering one- and two-year programs for its adult students. Fifty union-activist students a year attended Brookwood from the Mine Workers, Machinists, and Ladies Garment Workers unions as well as some railroad brotherhoods. By the end of the decade hundreds of activists had left these schools and returned to their locals to build democratic unions and consider establishing broader networks within labor's community.

Like Cohn, Nels Kjar was bent on changing the character of his AFL local. But unlike Cohn, Kjar was a member of the Workers Party of America, which later changed its name to the Communist Party USA. He was also a skilled carpenter, held an

AFL membership card, and in the early 1920s had supported the Communist Party's trade union, the Trade Union Education League (TUEL). The purpose of the TUEL was to provide an outlet for AFL members to strategize and act upon tactics that would convince members of their AFL affiliates to abandon their craft loyalties, shift to broader industrial-based ones, and support a Labor Party. For those like Kjar, a TUEL membership was *not* to replace his AFL one; the TUEL strategy, called "boring from within," involved TUEL members using their AFL union membership to push fellow union members to adopt TUEL policies. Kjar's membership in an AFL carpenter's local and his ability to cajole, persuade, and ultimately convince his fellow AFL brothers to care about those who lacked union representation – the unorganized – made the TUEL particularly threatening to traditional AFL craft-union diehards.

By 1928 Kjar's union leaders were fed up with him. Apparently he went too far when encouraging his fellow union members to reduce the "fat salaries" of local union leaders. For this and similar activity he was expelled, as were hundreds of other communists like him, and TUEL was all but doomed. To such communists as Kjar, all workers deserved rights and dignity, but capitalism would not grant them. If communists could point out how the system corrupted people, they believed, they could win loyalty among workers and, once united, change the system.

Through their brazen and outspoken style, communist trade unionists alienated many, but their efforts were not completely in vain. Participants in TUEL had learned a great deal about how to motivate and organize working people. They also published an impressive radical labor magazine, *Labor Herald*, supported a labor party based on unions, led striking textile workers in Passaic, New Jersey, and developed a network of labor militants who encouraged organization of workers of all crafts in the same industry. This move of structurally uniting industrial crafts (what was known as amalgamation) would bring them closer to what would become industrial, CIO unions of the 1930s. According to James Barrett in *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (1999), in 1922 and 1923 the TUEL succeeded in getting

their amalgamation resolution adopted by “perhaps half of organized labor in the United States.”

At decade's end the Communist Party scrapped the TUEL and started the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL). Part of the rationale for the new organization had to do with AFL unions' expulsion of TUEL members. Another was that communist leaders in the Soviet Union had called for communists worldwide to form a new federation of independent communist unions that would operate separately from their AFL competitors. This new communist-led federation provided a model and experiences that would fuel 1930s CIO organizing drives. Expelled from the AFL and its local affiliates, communists set out to win over unorganized, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers in factories and restaurants, on fields and building sites, and along the rails. To do so, communist labor organizers reached across gender and racial lines, built community support for workers, and trained a generation of labor militants. By 1930 the American Communist Party's membership remained small – about 7,500 – but was committed and increasingly effective at organizing.

TUUL activists channeled workers' grievances into action and, when possible, encouraged strikes. In 1933 in California, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union led 24 walk-outs of over 37,000 field workers (cherry, tomato, and cotton pickers) over low wages and poor conditions. That same year, in textile towns of the southern Piedmont, workers protested speedups and wage cuts. Often, calls for improved conditions were met with violence at the hands of employers and even the state. The National Miners' Union, for example, led coal strikes in four states in 1930 and 1931, including one in an eastern Kentucky county where the intense and brutal violence of coal-mine managers, vigilantes, strikebreakers, and the National Guard against armed, striking miners resulted in the county being nicknamed, and long remembered, as “bloody Harlan County.” In Tallapoosa county, Alabama, a communist-led sharecroppers' union attempted to win the right to plant gardens, improve local schools, have rest periods, and of their pay in cash, to name just a few of their demands; but the actions of the county sheriff and

a posse of armed citizens he deputized, curtailed their plans. On July 15, 1931, the posse shot and killed one of the union's local leaders, Ralph Gray, burned his house to the ground, and displayed his corpse on the courthouse steps. Their numbers were small, but the willingness of TUUL unionists to take great risks to fight against the odds spoke to the desperation of the times.

Communists quickly found that the most responsive members of the working class were the unemployed; future union activists got some of their best organizing experience outside of factories. Communist-organized councils of the unemployed formed at the neighborhood level in major cities were connected by a national network. In 1930, the first full year of the Great Depression, one million working people joined in communist-led "hunger marches." These marches were characterized by thousands of unemployed people who marched to the offices of state officials, local relief agents, or corporate employers and presented demands for jobs, improved relief assistance, and better homeless-shelter conditions. While communist leaders organized national activity and guided the general contours of council activism, Unemployed Councils were mass organizations with local latitude. With banners in hand and choruses of chants, council members descended on neighborhoods where families were evicted, returning furniture to apartments, cutting through red tape at relief stations, and illegally turning on a neighbor's electricity. Sometimes, as in Detroit and Chicago, police gunned down council members in a rally or at an eviction protest. More often, police arrived with batons and whacked at protestors before arresting those in reach.

More than a few Communist Party council members would eventually build on their organizing skills in the labor movement: Chicago's council leader Joe Weber in steel; council leader and law school dropout Jack Spiegel in the boot and shoe union; and council members and African-American churchgoers James Samuel and Richard Tate in packinghouses. Chicago packing-house union leader Herb March recalled borrowing tactics from unemployed organizers when he and others built the United Packing House Workers of America. One evening a week,

employees forced their employer to deal with their grievances. "Beginning at 4 or 4:30 p.m., one by one a hundred or so aggrieved workers would take their turn confronting the plant bosses with their problems," March remembers. "Nobody's getting out until we settle all these cases. These guys have all been waiting here all this time and you can't treat us this way."

Unemployed councils were also places where communists made their biggest impression on African-American workers. Highly successful in black urban neighborhoods hit hard by unemployment, the councils gave black men and women a vehicle to stand up against racist landlords, employers, and government officials. Surprisingly to many, councils did this with a commitment to civil rights and interracial activity, which leaders would later carry into their union activity. Lowell Washington, an African-American member of the Unemployed Councils in the 1930s, remembered, "[I] never really even talked to a white man before, and I certainly hadn't said more than two words to a white lady, and here I was being treated with respect and speakin' my mind and not having to worry about saying something that might rile 'em up... Let me tell you it changed the way I thought about things."

Another important influence that shaped working-class activity in the 1920s and developed future labor activists was the black nationalist movement inspired by Marcus Garvey. A stout Jamaican whose fast-paced and moving speeches gave voice to the indignities of life in a racist society, Garvey counted half a million members in his Universal Negro Improvement Association by 1921. Garvey awakened African Americans to World War I's failed promise to spread democracy at home and abroad, the cost of the violent postwar race riots to black communities, the hope of African peoples elsewhere to thwart the rule of their white, colonial oppressors, and the promise of black nationhood bolstered by black capitalism and a strong black entrepreneurial class. Garvey was not a communist, nor was he a trade union militant, but like communists and trade union militants, Garvey drew on the symbolism of militaristic culture, emphasizing assertiveness and self-defense. Women participated in the movement and helped shape the meaning of black nationalism.

Garveyism challenged the racist view within US society that black women were immoral and sexually loose, idealizing black women and presenting them as beacons of morality who thrived in the traditional male-led family.

Even though Garvey's business plans did not call for it, his black nationalist ideals entered the workplace through race-based union activism. According to Beth Bates in *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945* (2001), "New Negroes," the growing group of militant African Americans frustrated by the empty wartime promises of democracy and the reality of postwar racial violence, included in their quest for full citizenship the demand for unions. When white unionists excluded them, as typically happened, blacks formed their own unions. Under the guidance of A. Philip Randolph, a gifted speaker, socialist and civil rights activist, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) pushed the New Negro Movement forward by tying the winning of union rights to African Americans' "unfinished task of emancipation."

In 1925 the drive to organize the porters spilled over into the community. In Chicago the Pullman Palace Car Company employed the largest number of porters and maids in the city (4,000 and 100, respectively). In response to Randolph's union, Pullman officials hired spies, fired union supporters, and rewarded *anti-union* black male leaders. To win the respect of Pullman's African-American workers, Chicago's union organizers turned to African-American clubwomen. By the end of the decade, led by journalist and anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells-Barnett as well as some union-friendly ministers, a movement developed among those who supported porters and maids in their union drive. Its leaders reached out to influential persons inside the offices of Chicago's African-American newspaper, *The Defender*; the National Federation of Colored Women's Clubs; the YWCA; and Chicago's National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Urban League chapters to develop a powerful network of union supporters.

This "New Crowd" who came to support the BSCP in the second half of the 1920s, writes Bates, became leaders of a new generation of African Americans ready to "assert rights and make

collective demands rather than appeal to white benefactors on an individual basis for relief for subordinate status." The new crowd called for "applying direct pressure using the power of mass collective action."

Like Cohn and her worker education programs, communists and their unemployed councils, and Garveyites and the New Negro movement, working-class activism that bridged the workplace and the community characterized consumer struggles in cities across the country. When A. Clement MacNeal of Chicago's NAACP helped direct a "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work Campaign," he did so in the face of his organization's refusal to support direct action. Targeting Woolworth's Five and Ten on Chicago's South Side, MacNeal joined a new generation of activists who mobilized a boycott, established pickets and propaganda, and held public meetings to change the corporate policies of a national chain that refused to hire black clerks, even in black neighborhoods. Similar activism emerged among African-American men and women in Cleveland with a Future Outlook League that withheld their dollars from places that did not hire them. Feeling unrepresented by predominantly white unions and the standard, middle-class NAACP and Urban League, Cleveland's black working-class activists organized boycotts and pickets of neighborhood stores, eventually succeeding in getting work for African Americans in local businesses.

By the time of the 1932 presidential election, many industrial workers must have felt as if they had been on a roller-coaster. In the fifteen-year period that preceded Franklin D. Roosevelt's election as president of the United States, industrial workers tasted government-enforced "industrial democracy," only to have it yanked away from them after the war. They watched as their employers installed welfare capitalism and quickly learned there was nothing democratic about it. Many lost their jobs; many others feared losing their jobs. A small fraction held a union card and an even smaller one had the foresight to imagine how these exclusionary and largely craft-based unions might become more inclusive, democratic, and powerful. Only a tiny number had the experience to make it happen. But through shared workplace

grievances, new community organizations, and experimental unions, some were beginning to believe that joining in a union with other working people from different backgrounds and sexes was exactly what they needed to do if they wanted to have a meaningful voice on the job. From 1932 until the decade's end, for industrial workers, a perfect storm was brewing.

A New Deal for Workers: A Failed and Flawed Start

In the early 1930s General Motors workers were fed up with how the company was treating them. Gage Russell worked a line ten feet away from a water fountain, but foremen increased the pace of the belt he worked on to the point that even short water breaks were impossible. Every time GM worker Leo Connelly had to use the bathroom, he had to get the permission of his foreman, who timed his bodily function. In 1932 the company cut Connelly's pay. When asked why, his foreman told him that he did not know; that money decisions were made by upper-management in the main office. When Connelly got up the courage to inquire at the main office, he was told that decisions over pay were in fact made in his department. When he returned and told this to the foreman, the man got angry. Did he want his job? If so, he must stop asking questions. Why were GM workers ready for a union? Connelly knew: the company "treated you just like a dog, you know."

Still, changes had to occur in the White House and the union movement before Russell, Connelly, and thousands of others could channel their grievances into the creation of viable industrial unions. But change was on the way. The 1932 election was a complete routing of Hoover and those who championed business as a knee-jerk reflex. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) won 89 percent of the electoral vote and 57 percent of the popular vote. At the Democratic nominating convention, FDR had argued that Americans deserved a "New Deal." No one at the time, including Roosevelt, was sure what that would mean, but in the end the broad range of New Deal agencies and policies would

reorient the role of the federal government in such a way as to guarantee working people security.

Committed to bringing economic recovery and stability to the nation, Roosevelt took a pragmatic approach to reform, one premised on the notion that government owed working people a safety net and protection from capitalism's chaotic whims and shifts. In this vein, Roosevelt's administration helped create a modern labor-relations system that early scholars of the era credit with benefiting the organized labor movement. Democratic-led Congresses passed pro-worker legislation in part because New Deal supporters believed that secure jobs, minimum wages, and union rights would encourage workers to spend their wages on American-made consumer goods, which in turn would keep factories running and jobs plentiful. Economists, lawyers, and public administrators agreed with such union leaders as Amalgamated Clothing Worker (ACW) President Sidney Hillman, Roosevelt's closest labor advisor, that workers' inability to participate in consumption underlay the current economic crisis. Policies that supported workers' and consumers' rights turned private, corporate decision-making into a public matter with national consequences. Labor's demand for a rising standard of living no longer fit in to the national discussion as a selfish end. Collective bargaining combined with fair pricing put working people at the center of the nation's economic recovery and its future stability.

Roosevelt's presidency represented a new promise to workers, but in its early years, Roosevelt addressed that promise unevenly. The president's speeches asked Americans to return to the unified determination mustered to fight foreign enemies in the Great War, using the comparison as a basis for expanding his federal powers. He then relied upon many of the same advisors Wilson had consulted on labor policy, none more so than Felix Frankfurter. And as he had under Wilson, Frankfurter worked with other government officials who operated under conflicting political philosophies concerning power, labor, business, and the state. Business-friendly advisors hoped to support cooperation between labor and capital without fundamentally redistributing power.

Worker-friendly advisors hoped to redistribute power by giving unions the tools to remake society's economic and social relationships. Roosevelt vacillated between the two, always feeling vulnerable to fiscally and socially conservative Democrats who held power firmly throughout the South. Such tension in Roosevelt's administration helps explain the disagreement among scholars interpreting the nature of the New Deal – whether it was liberal or corporatist, radical or reformist. In the end, Roosevelt was capable of supporting far-reaching, progressive change for working people as well as undermining it.

The initial major piece of New Deal labor legislation that passed in 1933 during Roosevelt's first 100 days in office, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), reflected both tendencies. Concerned with economic recovery, the law excused industry from antitrust legislation and encouraged business cooperation to plan and predict their share of sales, then limit their production accordingly. In exchange, companies had to guarantee minimum wages and maximum hours and stop using child labor. In addition, Section 7a of the act supported workers' right to form unions and bargain collectively without employer intimidation. Companies that complied were awarded the Blue Eagle to post publicly, a signal to consumers that purchases from these sellers were safe contributions to a better economy.

For workers, the NIRA was better on paper than in practice; it gave the appearance of government support without providing any way to enforce its rules. Section 7a, especially, had no teeth. When employers fired employees for talking about unions, the jobless individual had no recourse. Moreover, the NIRA excluded field workers and domestic servants from collective bargaining rights, establishing troubling precedents.

And there were other problems with the NIRA. Believing labor's place at the bargaining table to be an illegitimate intrusion, employers were set against the act's labor provisions. New Deal union legislation was based on craft unions' governance structures and contractual arrangements, but corporate leaders viewed craft unions as illegal fronts that engaged in extortion – in other words, a racket. Everyone knew that illegal rackets bribed

businesses to pay for protection against such crimes as arson or murder that the racket itself might inflict, but business leaders also believed that craft unions fit this category, since they saw unions as illegal businesses that forced companies to pay for union “protection” from strikes. The influence of organized crime in such unions as the teamsters, whose union organized truck drivers and warehouse workers, meant that many in the public also negatively identified craft unions with mobs, violence, and extortion.

New Deal reformers challenged these long-held views, arguing that union members should be allowed to engage in constitutionally protected, voluntary activity. With Roosevelt in the White House, federal authorities used state power to make unions legitimate. In the case of the NIRA, New Deal officials invited craft unions to participate in the creation of codes that set wage scales, hours of work, and terms of business competition.

Naturally, employers fought the provisions of Section 7a, and they had their day in 1935 when the Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional. Even though the court’s technical problem with NIRA was with how the law dealt with monopoly-like business practices and not in its support of unions, the decision ended the entire experiment three weeks shy of its second year.

Fighting for Unionism in the 1930s Without Meaningful Federal Protection

Working people’s widely shared belief that the president of the United States supported their struggle to gain rights in the workplace overshadowed weaknesses in the NIRA. Workers participated in a spate of strike activity that spread like wildfire. “Man-days lost due to strikes, which had not exceeded 603,000 in any month in the first half of 1933,” writes the historian Irving Bernstein in *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (1971, reissued 2010), “spurred to 1,375,000 in July and to 2,378,000 in August.” From heavy industry to filmmaking, workers demanded the right to collective bargaining. Despite

Roosevelt's willingness to exclude farm workers from the NIRA, in 1933, 56,000 of them in 17 different states went on strike – 47,000 field workers in California alone. Come 1934, Bernstein notes, "Anybody struck. It was not just auto parts workers in Toledo, truck drivers in Minneapolis, longshoremen in San Francisco, or mill hands in the South. It was the fashion."

By fashion or necessity, 1934 was the most militant year of the decade, with 1.5 million workers involved in strikes. General strikes broke out in three major cities – San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo – and 400,000 textile workers along the eastern seaboard supported an industry-wide strike. Each of the General Strikes had elements in common: they were led by radicals determined to increase workers' control; strikers won support from AFL unions and the public; and the strikers used the opportunity created by the NIRA to demand union representation while not depending on the federal government or the AFL to win the day. The San Francisco waterfront strike extended up the West Coast to Seattle. In San Francisco police fired shotguns at picketers and lobbed tear-gas canisters into crowds. The governor brought in the National Guard; Roosevelt put the US Army on alert. Workers stuck together in the face of violence, sometimes in opposition to their union leadership, and in the end the longshoremen were victorious, and won the right to union representation.

In Minneapolis, Teamsters local 574 shut down the trucking industry and eventually the city by using "flying squadrons" of pickets who moved from worksite to worksite. A month of violence-initiated against strikers by police, private guards, and deputized citizens-ended when employers surrendered, leading teamsters to continue organizing drives throughout the Midwest. The successful workers in Minnesota took their cues from a core group who identified politically as Trotskyists, a splinter group from the Communist Party who believed that their leaders and doctrine were the purest expression of Lenin's Russian Revolution.

Workers in the Auto-Lite plant in Toledo, Ohio, striking for union recognition, were stymied by a court injunction. Thousands of picketers, led by the Unemployed League – a group

organized by the radical American Workers' Party – trapped scabs when they tried to leave the plant. National Guardsmen demanded the pickets scatter, and when they refused, guardsmen shot and killed two and wounded hundreds more. The city's unions voted for a general strike, but around-the-clock negotiations resulted in the union winning recognition, a grievance system, and increased wages. Not all was won, however, as the hated scabs were allowed back in the plant. Nevertheless, the company union had been routed and union fever spread in Northwest Ohio.

Some scholars argue that 1934 was the most important Depression-era year in reversing labor's decline. Union membership increased 20 percent that year, sending a message to lawmakers and AFL leaders that industrial workers had power and were willing to exercise it by striking in mass.

Not all labor activism sprang from NIRA promises. The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (AAA), a pillar of early New Deal legislation, required landowning farmers to leave their land unplanted in exchange for a government payment. By subsidizing acreage reduction (paying farmers to keep fields unplanted to reduce supply and raise prices for crops) the government would be increasing the ability of farmers to buy food and consumer goods. The government allotted funds for tenant farmers and sharecroppers who lost employment when the land they worked on for their landlord went unplanted, but local authorities in sparsely populated rural areas did not believe such people, many of whom were African American, were worthy of federal payments, so few of them actually received money. Instead, hordes of poor farmers and their families were simply kicked off the land and sent packing.

Taking their cue from factory workers and teamsters, tenants and sharecroppers organized unions and struck over the unintended effects of AAA. According to Robin Kelley in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990), thousands of Alabama's evicted tenants turned to the Communist Share Croppers' Union (SCU) for help. Local protesters grew in number as landowning farmers booted tenants and sharecroppers

from their land. As these AAA-triggered evictions surged, SCU members demanded immediate relief, along with investigation of local New Deal officials. "The SCU in places where [it] has been slack [is] beginning to wake [people] up," said one SCU leader, "and people don't wait for the comrades to come as they used to." Local officials not only refused to distribute federal payments to tenants and sharecroppers, but they also undermined SCU activity by taking evicted tenants and strikers off relief rolls. Without a job or federal payments and no chance of earning relief, the evicted farmers found the SCU one of their only allies in their fight for survival. In 1934, after winning increased cotton payments and credit allowances, the SCU numbered eight thousand.

The energy released from New Deal promises and workers' attempts to organize spawned union growth. The UMWA could barely keep up with demands from miners wanting to sign union cards; by 1934 its membership had reached half a million. Clothing workers in the ILGWU welcomed new, predominantly Mexican-American locals in Los Angeles and San Antonio. By the end of 1934 the AFL had added 2.5 million workers, including those in one of its 1,400 newly chartered, federated locals. Communist TUUL unions also had success, although not as much as the AFL. By 1934, membership in TUUL locals numbered 125,000. New independent organizations also formed among black sharecroppers in Arkansas and Tennessee, pork butchers in Minnesota, tool-and-die makers in Detroit, professional actors in Hollywood, and journalists in New York.

However, union interest did not translate into consistent union victories. In such highly competitive industries as garment making, collective bargaining was successful. But in the larger steel, auto, and electrical manufacturing firms, which had not traditionally dealt with unions, employers refused to bargain in good faith and continued to fire union militants – all activities that went unpunished so long as NIRA officials had no policing powers. Company unions were most employers' first line of defense against Section 7a. GM worker Clarence Lisher remembered the fear he and fellow workers felt when their only

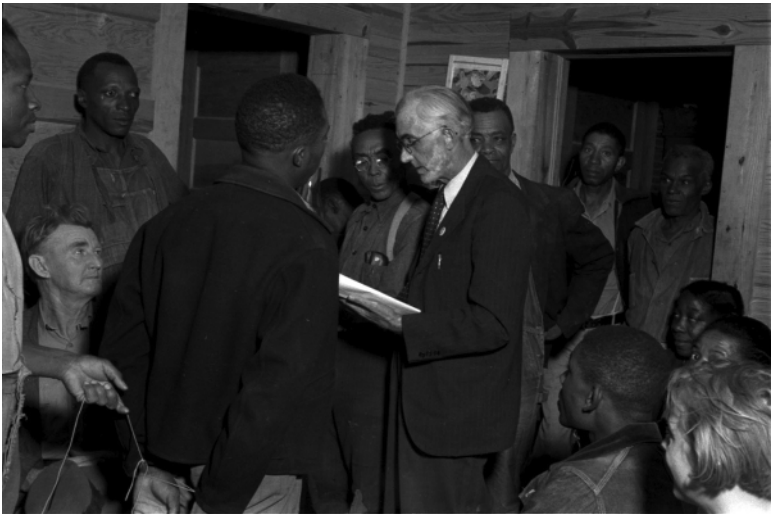


Figure 1.2 Reverend W. L. Blackstone, union organizer and member of the president's Farm Tenancy Commission, inducts a new Southern Tenant Farmers Union member, 1937. The string symbolizes the tie between the member and the union. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M. P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University (#5859pb2f22ep800g).

recourse was to go to the company's "hand-picked representative." GM worker Irving King recalls, "everywhere their authority was absolute. You had no recourse if you disagreed with anything on your job." Employers claimed they were happy to negotiate but believed they should choose which employees to sit down with, and only they should determine the parameters of the discussions.

The Wagner Act and Industrial Unionism

As the dust of the 1934 labor uprisings settled and the Supreme Court ruled the NIRA unconstitutional, lawmakers began debat-

ing a new labor bill. New York Democratic Senator Robert Wagner, led the charge against employers and for workers' right to unionize. The strength of working-class activism in the early 1930s pushed legislators like Wagner to pass the National Labor Relations/Wagner Act (NLRA) of 1935 in an attempt to rectify the NIRA's weak nod to unionism.

The NLRA was a landmark piece of legislation for many working people. Expressions of workers' unionization rights were not new, but legal enforcement of these rights was. Such enforcement was crucial, the preamble to the act indicated, since collective bargaining rights and "the exercise by workers of full freedom of association, self organization and designation of representatives of their own choosing" was understood as fundamental to healthy employment, wages, and the "free flow of commerce." According to law, "the denial by employers of the right of employees to organize... leads to strikes and other forms of industrial strike or unrest, which have the intent or the necessary effect of burdening or obstructing commerce." Employers' resistance to negotiate, explained the NLRA, caused strikes and labor unrest, which in turn harmed the nation's economy. Employers, therefore, had to cease actions that undermined union organization.

Section 8 of the NLRA defined some of these activities as unfair labor practices (ULPs), actions the law precluded employers from taking, such as refusing to bargain collectively, coercing or intimidating employees who supported unions, firing workers who filed ULP charges against their employer, and dominating or interfering with labor organizations. Section 10 of the act established the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), a body of three appointees (later five) empowered to make sure that when outlawed labor practices occurred, those behind them were prosecuted.

One of the Wagner Act's (as the NLRA was commonly called) most significant contributions was to empower the NLRB to designate units of exclusive representation, thereby undermining employers' use of company unions (and their hand-picked favorites) that previously had helped them skirt the provisions of

the NIRA. Using collective bargaining as a weapon to fight for the economy's recovery and stability, Wagner went to war against company unions on the principle that workers should be protected from employer coercion and have the right to choose their bargaining representatives, in effect protecting the tradition of self-organization that dated back at least to the 1840s. To that end, representation elections were not mandatory; the NLRB would only hold them when workers filed for them. To file, workers needed to gather their co-workers' signatures on cards that indicated their support for a union. Once they had enough signatures to convince them that they could win an election, they turned those cards into the NLRB. During a card drive and in the period leading up to an election, employers were not permitted to coerce employees or intimidate those who were pro-union.

US business leaders reacted against the Wagner Act swiftly and with a heavy hand. In St. Louis, electrical employers organized into anti-union groups and argued that higher wages would scare off industry and business. These business associations dated back to the 1910s and maintained power through their anti-unionism. The St. Louis anti-union business associations were not unique. Coal operators turned to private deputies; southern cotton textile operators wielded power by controlling public officials, newspapers, and police forces; steel employers stockpiled tear gas and ammunition in preparation to break strikes; while others infiltrated their workforce with spies. Key corporate leaders believed if they resisted long enough, they would withstand this "undignified affront."

It would take a while for the Wagner Act to make a difference. In 1935 a foreman caught General Motors worker Robert Gibbs with a union card. Switching before Gibbs's eyes from a "nice guy" to a tyrant, the foreman fired him on the spot, refused to pay him, and gave him two minutes to exit the building. Seeing the Wagner Act as an unnecessary intrusion of federal power into private negotiations, the business community, aligning with conservative citizens, dug in their heels, fired workers suspected of having union loyalties, and waited, believing that the Supreme Court would set things right. This time it did not.

While business united against the Wagner Act, labor divided over the old question of which workers were worthy of union representation. Labor militancy in 1934 gave way to membership losses in early 1935. By that time, thousands who had joined AFL unions a year or two earlier had lost their jobs, changed employers, or left town. Such a high rate of turnover convinced some AFL leaders that it was not worth going after largely unskilled and semi-skilled mass production workers, who did not have enough experience with unions, were often of different ethnic backgrounds than the Anglo, German, and Irish workers already in the craft unions that dominated the AFL, and were too easily provoked to strike.

But some AFL leaders disagreed. John L. Lewis of the UMWA, Sidney Hillman of the ACW, and David Dubinsky of the ILGWU came to the AFL from industrial unions, supported the addition of new federated locals, which would be organized industrially and comprised of workers from a spectrum of skill levels. They also believed that the organizational separation of skilled from semi- and unskilled workers was a mistake. While affiliated with the AFL, these leaders argued for reaching out to the unorganized in creative ways, including the need to dispel craft loyalties and jurisdictional claims that taught that all butchers, for example, belonged in a meat cutters'-only local, that sausage stuffers could fend for themselves. Under the craft-based organizational structure, it was considered blasphemous to suggest folding meat cutters into a broader, packinghouse workers' union. In the jurisdictional world of the AFL, craft unions had proprietary rights to organize all workers claiming a trade. After a year of pleading and arguing with his craft-bent colleagues, Lewis had enough. He had entered the mines at age 15 and at 39 held the presidency of the UMWA. A powerful speaker and effective strategist, the stocky, confident Lewis commanded a strong presence. When at the AFL's 1935 convention in Atlantic City the burly William L. Hutcheson of the Carpenters' Union moved to silence dissent among a group of rubber workers over the question of jurisdiction, Lewis lost his temper. The two men parlayed insults, Hutcheson called Lewis a "bastard," and the latter landed a thereafter

famous, crushing fist onto the face of the 61-year-old Hutcheson, knocking him across a table.

Lewis's push for industrial unionism within the AFL seemed odd given his career, which rested to this point on his ability to use bureaucracy to maneuver to the top of the UMWA. During the 1920s, writes historian Robert Zieger in *The CIO: 1935–1955* (1995), Lewis was not open to democratic union control and “clamped a rigidly repressive personal control over the union.” He also supported Republicans Coolidge and Hoover. At the same time, however, industrial unionism struck close to home for mine-worker Lewis. As long as steel mills remained without unions and steel corporations owned and operated their own coalmines, they threatened the existence of the UMWA. Even though the union won victories in these so-called captive mines, non-unionized steelworkers made the wins vulnerable to back-sliding. On a more socially conscious note, Lewis feared that the economic changes of the 1920s threatened the social order of the nation. Against the conspiratorial machinations of financiers, bankers, and the corporate elite, the labor movement stood as the best fortification against corporate domination of the United States. To him, the time for industrial unionism had arrived.

And he was right. Beginning in 1935, Lewis and other union leaders formed the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) within the AFL. In 1938, they would break from the AFL completely and call themselves the Congress of Industrial Organizations or, more simply, the CIO. CIO hired organizers to travel to industrial centers, where they explained to workers how industrial unions would differ from craft ones. CIO unions would represent all workers in the core industries, from the most to the least skilled; they would include women, ethnic minorities, and African Americans. At its best, CIO unions would bring democracy and its principles into the walls of US industrial workplaces. More generally, a union federation with a commitment to organizing all workers, regardless of skill, meant that an entire organization would be committed to shoring up the rights of the working class and advocating on their behalf in city halls, state capitols, and Washington, DC. A core number of these CIO recruiters were

communists, fresh from battles in Unemployment Councils and eager to advise workers about how best to spread the union movement throughout their company. Despite facing threats and uncertainty, industrial workers listened.

With the Wagner Act facing a court challenge, NLRB police powers frozen, and employers' heightening resistance to unions, workers rose to the call. Between February 18 and March 21, 1936, in Akron, Ohio, workers led a struggle at the Goodyear Tire factory that involved picket lines of 5,000 strikers and supporters. Building on the momentum created by rubber workers, the CIO formed the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC) in June 1936 and urged the AFL's Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AA) to organize the unorganized. When the AFL and the AA showed little interest, Lewis hired 200 organizers from the ranks of the UMWA and the Communist Party and prepared for battle.

One of the more dramatic episodes in the early days of the CIO occurred when workers sat down in Flint, Michigan's General Motors factories and ceased work from December 1936 to February 1937. In this famous sit-down strike, rather than picket GM from outside the factory gates, a thousand employees camped inside two of the huge Fisher Body Plants for six weeks. Such a tactic prevented GM's management from bringing strikebreakers through picket lines and into the factory, where they would take strikers' jobs. It also forestalled excessive violence: strikers had a hunch that GM would hesitate to invoke violence inside the factory's walls – the equipment was too valuable to risk.

GM management (and others in the period like them) fundamentally opposed the principle and exercise of collective bargaining. GM's workers agreed that they should collectively have a say in how they would be paid, the order in which workers should be laid off in slow times, and the number of hours they should be expected to work. As US citizens, they expected to be able to vote for candidates, push for legislation, and freely speak and gather. Why should they have to forfeit these rights when they punched in for work each day? Workers' productivity drove corporate profits and CEO salaries. Didn't their labor earn them the right to expect dignity at work and security during hard times or

when they became too old to work the line? Collective bargaining legally protected their right to send representatives to negotiate with GM's representatives over matters critical to their lives.

At the end of 1936, United Auto Worker (UAW) President Homer Martin tried to negotiate with GM's Executive Vice President, William S. Knudsen, but Knudsen showed no interest in bargaining with a person whom workers authorized to represent them over wages, hours, and other business decisions. Knudsen said, "Grievances of individuals or groups of individuals can only be handled locally where the employe[e]s and the plant management are familiar with local conditions as well as the basic general policies of the corporation concerning employe[e] relations." He told the *Detroit News* in January 1937 that UAW leaders could not understand the complexity of GM's 200,000 employees who lived in "35 separate communities in 14 states." Knudsen also argued that it was impossible to bargain collectively as long as workers were striking. "We cannot have bonafide collective bargaining with sit-down strikers in illegal possession of plants." To win the public's support, GM took out full-page newspaper advertisements claiming that the UAW was illegitimate and only had workers' support because union thugs coerced and intimidated people. Collective bargaining would open the door to a "labor dictatorship," the nation's largest automaker alleged, running roughshod over businesses in America at the same time Adolf Hitler and German forces were expanding their reach across Europe. To GM's corporate leadership, collective bargaining was simply un-American.

Of course, nearly all of GM's workers disagreed. In a response to Knudsen, Martin made clear that the UAW was not trying to run GM unilaterally because that was not what collective bargaining meant. To Martin and GM's workers, collective bargaining would allow better wages so they could do such basic things as purchase GM's most inexpensive cars, an act that was out of reach for many, but one that would be good for individuals, the company, and the US economy. But beyond a wage increase, Martin and GM workers believed that bringing union rights to their workplace connected them to Americans who fought for political freedom in the Revolutionary War. Martin said:

We today are fighting for social and economic freedom. This is a struggle against the inhuman speed-up which has made man the slave of the machine; it is the fight against the vicious espionage system which deprives the automobile worker of those legal rights to join any organization he desires (keeping in mind that the General Motors Corporation paid \$167,000 to the Pinkerton strikebreaking agency in 1935); it is an endeavor to shorten the hours to a working day which will enable the automobile worker to enjoy his wife, his children, and his leasure [*sic*] time. It, in short, is an effort to obtain those things of which every true American can be justly proud . . . Organization can be labor's only reply to conditions which are subject to the whims of management. Only through the effective medium of a national agreement can dictatorship by management be avoided. (*Detroit News*, January 7, 1937)

As for coercion and intimidation, the *Detroit News* of January 22, 1937, told the story of George Culley, a six-year employee at Chevrolet Gear and Axle in Detroit, whom GM fired after he refused to sign a company-drafted petition stating he opposed the union effort. In Flint, company officials told Buick and Chevrolet workers that if they did not sign anti-union petitions they would not be able to get company loans during the season when the plants closed and workers were laid off. In Saginaw, Michigan, a vigilante campaign openly supported in the local press resulted in union representatives receiving threats of physical violence. Responding to such tactics, union leaders sent word to workers in non-striking plants to sign the petitions to protect their jobs.

Meanwhile, the workers in the Fisher Body plants in Flint continued to sit and wait, writing and singing songs, forming committees to clean up after themselves, leading exercises, safeguarding company equipment, and keeping one another inspired. They also read newspapers and ate food delivered by a group of a thousand wives, mothers, and supporters, who organized themselves into a women's auxiliary. From the strike's beginning, organizers agreed that the sit-down was a male affair. If women and men co-mingled in the plant, the company and the press would have a field day spreading rumors, discrediting the strikers,

and distracting attention from collective bargaining. Outside the plant, however, women performed vital functions to support the strikers, including generating publicity, staffing picket lines, organizing first aid, cooking meals for the men in the plant, keeping an eye on workers' children, and giving support to women whose husbands were inside.

Women were limited to this auxiliary role until January 11, 1937, when Flint's police tried to force their way into the plant to dislodge the men. The unarmed men inside turned on fire hoses and threw car parts from windows at the approaching officers, who were armed with rifle shells and buckshot, tear gas, and firebombs. In the end, it was one Genora Johnson who turned this skirmish into a union victory. As the leader of the women's auxiliary, Johnson stayed close to the occupied plants when the police arrived, and she refused to be led to safety. When the battery on the sound truck used by male union organizers began to run out, Johnson took charge. She recalls:

That's when I got to take the mic [*sic*], and again, circumstances you lose yourself; you go beyond yourself and think of the cause. I was able to make my voice really ring out on that night because I knew the battery was going down and we had only a few minutes left. That's when I appealed to the women of Flint. I bypassed everybody else then and went to the women, and told them what was happening. That's when I said, there are women down here, the mothers of children, and I beg of you to come down here and stand with your husbands, your loved ones, your brothers, your sweethearts.

Her call encouraged other women to confront the police, which ultimately turned the tide.

According to Johnson:

And when I made that appeal...A hush came over the crowd the minute a woman's voice came over the mike. It was startling!...then I saw the first woman struggling and I noticed when she started to break through and come down, that a cop grabbed her coat – and this was in freezing weather, freezing weather, there

were icy pavements and everything was frozen – and she just kept on coming. And as soon as that happened other women broke through and then we had a situation where the cops didn't want to fire into the backs of women. When the women did that, the men came naturally and that was the end of the battle.

After what was dubbed “The Battle of Bull’s Run” (after the attempted assault by the police), the sit-down strikers held strong for another four weeks.

In early February 1937, union members occupied an additional plant, Chevrolet Number Four, in hopes of pushing GM to the negotiating table. GM fought back in court and won an injunction ordering the strikers out of GM plants, but the workers still refused to budge. Michigan Governor Frank Murphy sent



Figure 1.3 Crowds gather outside of the Fisher Body Plant no. 1 to show support for the sit-down strikers inside, Flint, Michigan. Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University (#3890).

National Guard troops to Flint, but, fearing bloodshed, he did not order them to enforce the injunction. With both sides holding firm, President Roosevelt tipped the scale on the side of the union and asked GM representatives to meet with the workers' representatives. On February 11, 1937, they did so.

As a result, GM employees at 17 plants won pay increases and recognition of their union as the sole bargaining agent. Workers emerged victorious and inspired a generation to consider the power unions gave workers.

In the wake of their triumph, the industrial union movement swept into the Packard, Hudson, Murray Body, and Chrysler auto plants. In an unexpected turn of events, US Steel signed a contract with the SWOC on March 2, 1937, and Lewis declared at a 1937 SWOC conference, "If we can break the Hindenburg line of industry – steel – everyone knows how far we can go in organizing millions."

Corporate Resistance and Workers' Unity

The CIO would go on to organize millions of workers, but not right away. Corporate resistance kept the Wagner Act tied up in the courts in the hope that the Supreme Court would rule it unconstitutional, as it had the NIRA. In April 1937, to the chagrin of corporate America, the high court upheld the constitutionality of the Wagner Act.

CIO organizers wasted no time in getting back to work, only to run up against the vicious anti-unionism of Tom Girdler and other leaders of "Little Steel" – the name given to the five independent, mid-sized steel companies that were "little" only when compared to the size, productivity, and geographic reach of US Steel. On Memorial Day, 1937, the bloodiest attack of the year was caught on film as Chicago city police, fed and armed by Republic Steel, swung clubs wildly against unarmed marching workers, their families, and supporters. Bashing limp bodies and shooting into the backs of retreating workers, the police killed ten persons and wounded many more.

Even in the face of public scrutiny, neither Republic Steel's Tom Girdler nor Chicago's police showed remorse. Before the Congressional La Follette Civil Liberties Committee, a committee formed to investigate ways employers avoided collective bargaining, the Chicago police demonstrated what *Time* magazine called disturbing "comedy" in the face of "otherwise, grim, gruesome business." When shown a picture of the riot, a Senator on the committee asked Police Sergeant Lawrence J. Lyons "what that [police]man was drawing." Lyons replied, "I don't know. He may be drawing his handkerchief." The Senator asked, "Out of his holster?" Quick on his feet, Lyons responded, "We have left-handed policemen." Then Captain James Mooney laid the blame for the police slaying of ten protestors at the feet of communists. According to Mooney, "the purpose of communists is to overthrow the Government and attack policemen, and they are getting money from Russia to help them do it." When asked if he really thought that the Republic steel strikers were paid by Russia, Mooney replied, "I wouldn't be surprised...A lot of people in my district went back to the capital of Russia." When asked where that was, Mooney answered, "I don't know - wherever Lenin is." When senators showed the photo of a policeman clubbing an unconscious body, William V. Daly, Chicago's assistant corporation counsel, argued, "you got to consider the human element, Senator. They was all excited." Apparently, to Daly, only Chicago's police had a "human element" worth considering. Paramount released the amateur film as a news reel to the public after the La Follette Committee held a viewing of it for 700 witnesses, mostly senators and congressmen. Upon its release, Chicago police banned it from the city. In other cities, audiences had a hard time making sense of the chaotic scene put before them. But when shown close-ups of the dead, dying, and wounded, they began to hiss, boo, and shout.

Still, the event did little to unsettle Girdler, who faced the press and insisted that 21,000 of his 50,000 workers remained at work and that his mills were shipping thousands of tons of steel every day. As far as spending a million dollars on arms and ammunition, Girdler quipped, "I never knew a steel plant that didn't have guns

and ammunition to protect its property." For Girdler, the workers in the Memorial Day massacre got what was coming to them.

Steelworkers wanting union representation in Cleveland, Youngstown, and Massillon, Ohio, also met with violence. At the notoriously brutal, anti-union Jones & Laughlin works in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, workers on strike for union recognition engaged in a two-day battle against the company. Family and supporters took to the streets, blocking plant entrances, as horse-mounted and armed police blasted them with tear gas. In the end, 18 workers were killed in the struggle during the summer of 1937.

In November 1938, when the CIO formally established itself as the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the number of mass production industries resisting unionization blossomed. Even in such corporations as GM and Firestone, where the union had won victories, employers worked overtime to limit collective bargaining's scope – racism and sexism would still apply in hiring and job assignments, for example. International Harvester hired a team of lawyers to maneuver around the NLRB and stall union recognition.

It turned out that despite the Wagner Act, workers could not simply rely on the state to see their union to victory. They had to keep pressure on the shop floor to rout out company unions, defy obstinate foremen, and pressure their employers for recognition. Shop stewards, the union representative in each factory department, led these efforts. In Chicago's Armour meatpacking plant, workers participated in "whistle bargaining" whereby every grievance came with a steward's secret signal to stop work. Slowdowns, stoppages, and walkouts showed workers' initiative in winning recognition and built loyalty and trust among co-workers in a plant.

For workers, the taking of these collective actions made for heady moments. Standing with fellow workers against their foremen and the companies they represented was as thrilling as it was terrifying. Winning was historic. That is why steelworker Johnny Metzgar and other CIO unionists like him spoke of John L. Lewis and the miner's union "with the same reverence and gratitude that [they] usually reserved for God." Lewis and the UMWA paid the bills, sent out the organizers, and allowed men

like Metzgar to fight for dignity in places as undignified as the shop floor of US Steel. "All this ferment, militancy, radicalism, violence and perhaps even an altered working-class consciousness," writes historian Melvyn Dubofsky in *The State and Labor in Modern America* (1994), "were part of American reality during the 1930s."

Workers' sense of power had indeed been altered, but by no means were most workers radicals or persons seeking revolution. In 1937, when strikes affected every mass production industry in the nation, a mere 7.2 percent of employed workers participated in walkouts. The capitalist system might have stumbled, but it never completely collapsed. In fact, under the guidance of New Deal policies and programs, it seemed to be improving without fundamental changes. In fact, workers were not trying to change the system in the late 1930s. Instead, surveys and polls from the decade show a leftward movement among workers and working-class voting patterns that betrayed new levels of class-consciousness. Most workers remained committed to what Lizabeth Cohen in *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (1990) refers to as "moral capitalism." Rather than revolution, Cohen argues, workers "looked to the state and the union to create a more just society within a system that still respected private property and many managerial prerogatives." Most workers viewed the New Deal as favorable to them. In the end, they sought a fairer capitalism and were drawn to the CIO in part because of its legitimacy in the eyes of the state.

Extending the New Deal for Workers

As CIO workers fought to make their working lives more just, they felt a partnership with President Roosevelt and the Democrats in Congress and pushed them to address not only the workplace but also unemployment, healthcare, and old-age security. To achieve these ends politically, a coalition grew among national unions, union locals, city and county governments, ethnic fraternal organizations, and members of the Communist Party. In

1934 the Lundeen Bill, named for Ernest Lundeen, the Minnesota congressman who introduced it, proposed that *all* workers, including part time, agricultural, domestic, and professional, should be guaranteed unemployment benefits paid for by federal government revenues, which would be enhanced by taxes on the richest individuals and corporations – not payroll taxes. Such a plan connected the welfare of US citizens to the state rather than limiting coverage to particular workers in specific job categories. Bold on its face and backed by a wide base of supporters, the Lundeen Bill was ultimately displaced by the Social Security Act, a landmark piece of legislation in its own right.

The Social Security Act of 1935 is largely remembered for its government support for the elderly; but the legislation was more comprehensive, broadening the role of the federal government to include unemployment insurance and aid for poor families. Under this law, federal or state payments to the poor, the elderly, and the unemployed represented new ways of thinking about the government's responsibility to society; if capitalism created vulnerable categories of people, then it was the government's job to provide support and security to all. The legislation suggested that the poor and unemployed should not be blamed for their condition, as they traditionally had. Because there was a structural element inherent in the capitalist system that created winners and losers, the federal government had a responsibility to protect the welfare of society against the vicissitudes and misfortunes such a system created. Old Age Insurance, moreover, would ease older workers out of jobs with the guarantee of a pension, which would allow older citizens to maintain their consumer purchasing power. It would open their freshly abandoned positions to younger workers, who would no longer have to support their aging parents alone, and it would put an end to costly state-based, means-based, old-age programs.

The legislation, however, created a new set of winners and losers. When it came to old-age insurance, lawmakers chose to fund it through a tax shared equally by the employer and employee, a payroll tax. By raising money to support the program in this way, most citizens would see their payment as

something they earned, an entitlement, not a government handout. If a person worked in an industry covered by the law, they directly paid for their government-supported pension in the future. Workers' contributions, lawmakers argued, "would purchase dignity." Because the idea of equity was so pervasive among lawmakers, the notion that investors would get a fair return on their contribution was central to the act. Those who worked irregularly, or whose contributions would be too low to earn an old-age benefit that would induce them to leave the workforce, undermined the program because lawmakers cared primarily about opening jobs to younger people. Framers of the legislation kept their gaze on industrial workers whose retirement would mean employment for the next generation. Their motivation meant that several job categories, including agricultural laborers and domestic servants (together representing approximately three fifths of the nation's African-American population), were excluded from social security taxes and their pension benefits.

The notion that wage work was rightly a male preserve also shaped this legislation that treated women as second-class economic citizens. According to Alice Kessler-Harris in *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America* (2003), lawmakers imagined that women lacked a commitment to work, worked irregularly, and primarily labored outside of the industrial sector. Women's retirement, therefore, would not improve the labor-market problems inherent in the Great Depression. When the law was amended in 1939 because it was excluding nearly half of the working population (60 percent of excluded workers were women), lawmakers extended benefits to fatherless children, wives, and widows of male wage earners who contributed to the program. Such a move bolstered the benefits of those who were already covered rather than opening up opportunities to excluded categories of workers; women and children got benefits as men's dependents. These new benefits reinforced society's belief that male dignity was tied to a man's ability to provide for his family and that a woman's virtue was linked to her dependency on a man.

Other Social Security benefits were problematic as well. Unemployment insurance, established through a federal and state partnership, was administered through the states. From state to state, workers faced widely varying eligibility requirements and benefits. Southern states had more restrictions regarding eligibility and paid less than northern states. When it came to the part of social security that dealt with single mothers with children, government oversight and scrutiny took on an even more oppressive character. Aid to Dependent Children put mothers under the watchful eye of state social workers, who determined benefits based on their understanding of what a particular woman needed, how stable her home life was, and whether her sex life was appropriate.

Once the president signed the Social Security Act into law, broad coalitions of labor leaders and liberals then turned to redefine health security as a relationship between citizens and the state and not one between employees and employers. The New Deal's promotion of personal security paved the way for all reformers to make the case that security against sickness was a matter of justice and every citizen's right. A 1938 national health conference sponsored by the Roosevelt administration brought 150 activists to Washington, sparking what one scholar refers to as a grassroots health security movement. Activists designed and constructed community health programs and pushed for wider local, working-class access to health facilities and services. In addition, unions and organized community groups in six cities launched educational programs and experimented with local health plans. The late 1930s was a period of ferment and experimentation, seeing many unions and employee groups deciding to subscribe to health plans independent of their employers. Workers' demands for power and security did not have to be an either/or equation: these goals were often combined.

As the pace of economic recovery slowed in 1938, Congress passed the last major New Deal initiative directly affecting US workers: the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). The FLSA called for a 44-hour work week, reduced to 40 by 1941, and overtime pay after that. For the first time, it included a minimum wage

that would increase over time with no regional differences; and it stopped the shipment of goods made with child labor.

As a matter of principle, the FLSA made enormous strides, expanding the role of government into the world of wages. Unfortunately, it did so in a way that established wage minimums rather than wages levels that would allow families to live above the poverty line. The rate negotiated was tied to the low-paying southern textile and lumber industries as a concession to conservative congressional representatives from the South; it was too low to actually improve the livelihood of most wagedworkers. Of course, AFL leaders preferred it that way. They believed that the government had no business trying to control wages: that was the job of unions. They only backed the law once it was clear to them that its mandated wage minimum would not interfere with the contracts they negotiated through collective bargaining and would only affect those workers outside of traditional union strongholds. In the end, the FLSA excluded 20 percent of the labor force from its provisions, among these domestic servants, seamen, and workers in agriculture, retail and service, food processing, packing and transportation, government, and non-profit enterprise. Only 20 percent of women who worked for wages were employed in sectors of the economy covered by the FLSA. Four out of five African-American men worked in agriculture in 1935 and more than one third of African-American women worked as domestic servants. Taken together with the NLRA and the Social Security Act, the FLSA represented a new, if flawed, partnership between the federal government and society.

Assessing Workers' New Deal and Industrial Unionism

Roosevelt's New Deal was no small undertaking: the federal government inserted itself into workers' relationships with their employers, removed the job of regulating hours from employers' hands, and guaranteed workers security in their old age. The labor movement, unleashed by New Deal policies, agencies, and

protectors, brought protections to millions who had suffered without them. These were not small advances by any means.

As inclusive as they were, both the labor movement and the New Deal shared limitations, leaving many unprotected. Taking industrial workers as its model, the NLRA assumed that all employees worked in the same worksite. But women and minorities working as homecare workers, for example, were often dispersed. New Deal policies also entrenched racism by excluding those working in certain sectors of the economy – like farming and domestic service – and supporting segregation in several of its other programs. Because the New Deal was narrowly conceived as a federal project to revive the capitalist economy and get people back to work, women, African Americans, and ethnics were dealt with as potential workers rather than in ways that would address prejudice and discrimination. Because women were imagined as homemakers, dependents, and only marginally tied to wage work, they received less than equitable treatment in government programs.

The CIO treated women and minorities better than did New Deal policy, but not always. Committed to closing the gap that divided workers by ethnicity and race, CIO leaders tried to reach out to African Americans by demanding promotions for black workers, challenging racist company practices, and forcing the hiring of more black workers. The labor movement's rhetoric convinced Canadians, Mexicans, and other foreign-born workers that unionism was an important way to express ones' identity as an American. Wearing union buttons to create a public presence, frequenting taverns and restaurants to unite different groups in a social atmosphere, using radio spots to promote a unified message, and providing supportive roles for union wives and family activities, the CIO created an alternative community based on the union. Reminding workers that their fates were connected, union leaders encouraged a spirit of unity.

The problem was that this culture of unity was always limited and tenuous. In particular, it was limited, like the larger New Deal, by a masculine notion that the primary worker was the man. Women, whether they supported families or not, were

auxiliary. The culture of unions was also limited by ethnic and racial tensions that were malleable but present despite the culture the official CIO promoted. UAW leaders who talked about “working-class Americanism” in their broad appeal to ethnic and racial workers, at the same time used the rhetoric of “working-class Americanism” as a weapon to constrain black workers’ fight for racial equality within the UAW. When black workers pushed for an African-American seat on the union’s executive board, for example, UAW leaders used the rhetoric of “working-class Americanism” to turn them down. No one group should get special treatment, the argument went, over the others. In such cases, civic nationalism brought black workers to unions, but once they were members, racial hierarchy and white control limited conditions and prospects for advancement.

The New Deal unleashed labor activism, but it would take another world war to consolidate the gains of the new labor federation, as well as for the limitations of the Wagner Act to be fully felt. In the meantime, the CIO continued to vie with an equally large and growing force in the AFL. AFL locals maintained emphasis on male, craft-exclusive membership and kept its business–union parochial practices. At the same time, crime organizations scared a handful of AFL union leaders – in Chicago’s teamsters, construction employers’ associations, the Building Service Employees International, and Chicago’s Bartenders Union – into opening their union’s bank accounts to illicit ends. When the head of the coal teamsters refused to admit gangsters, he was shot in each leg in front of his wife and children. In the 1930s, gangsters murdered thirteen Chicago labor leaders.

As corruption dotted AFL unions, CIO campaigns continued, and the federal government expanded its responsibilities, a conservative backlash coalesced. Republicans and southern Democrats, intolerant of federal interference in private businesses’ economic policies, redoubled their efforts to thwart union organizing and government involvement. AFL leaders joined anti-New Deal groups, particularly concerned (without clear grounds) that the NLRA favored CIO industrial unionism over their form of craft unionism. Also, they pushed to limit the wage provisions of the

Social Security Act. That year, the NLRB came under federal scrutiny for being a communist-run agency, and the House of Representatives formed the House Committee on Un-American Activities (chaired by Martin Dies, Jr. of Texas and known as the Dies Committee) to investigate and expose the suspected subversion.

In the last years of the 1930s, political forces were aligning to redirect the fortunes of workers. Liberty League members (conservative Democrats opposed to the New Deal's pro-labor provisions) as well as anti-labor business leaders in the National Association of Manufacturers mobilized to defend management rights against unions and New Deal liberalism more generally. They saw a major victory in the Supreme Court's 1939 *Fansteel* case ruling. Workers in Chicago at *Fansteel Metallurgical* tried to form a union in 1936, but their employers did everything they could to stop it, including hiring spies to infiltrate union planning meetings and setting up a company union, which was illegal under the Wagner Act. In response, *Fansteel* workers organized a sit-down strike in the plant and stayed put even after management got a court order to force them out. After a second order, police removed the workers, management fired them, and they appealed their case to the NLRB. In 1938 the NLRB ruled that the company had to hire 90 of the workers back because the company had broken the law, thereby inciting the sit-down. A majority of Supreme Court justices, however, did not agree and ruled that the NLRB could not force employers to rehire workers who had broken the law. Since sit-down strikers violated the terms of a court order, they were the ones at fault according to the court. Hereafter, sit-down strikes would no longer have the same workplace sting (although civil rights activists would use them to create new ends in the postwar period). Employers may have lost the battle, but they were not planning on losing the war.

Conclusion

In the end, the 1930s left US workers with a mixed legacy. Rising to the challenges of the Great Depression, working-class activists

built new movements and organizations and pushed the federal government to extend its eye to the world of work, where the labor movement began to establish itself as an equal player. CIO union activists pushed labor organizations to expansive social, political, and economic ends, as well as for inclusive, interracial union membership. Individuals committed to the idea that the state had the responsibility to step in to help the individual when the capitalist system could not brought into the open the issue of healthcare, old-age pensions, and the persistence of unemployment. The new role of the federal government as responsible for the security of US workers meant that many working people, including women and minorities, turned their loyalty to the Democratic Party and committed themselves to the New Deal order. New government responsibilities, social-democratic union agendas, and reconfigured political alignments were just some of the changes to emerge from an otherwise tragic period in the nation's history.

And yet, the government's oversight of the world of work came at a cost to women, minorities, and ultimately the labor movement itself. Roosevelt's negotiation between his liberal base and those more racist, southern Democrats meant that New Deal programs and policies were developed in ways that perpetuated racial and gender discrimination. They also were unquestioning in their support of individual spending as the solution to capitalism's crisis and helped promote working Americans' identity as upwardly mobile consumers. Finally, whereas the state's willingness to assert itself into the relationship between workers and employers worked to the advantage of newly forming unions during the Great Depression, only a few years later, the cost of state intervention would begin to be felt. World War II and its aftermath would reveal just how strongly and widely.