



A Century of Struggle

To mark the 100th anniversary of the formation of the American Federation of Labor, the National Museum of American History of the Smithsonian Institution invited a group of scholars and practitioners "to examine the work, technology, and culture of industrial America." The conference was produced in cooperation with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. The excerpts on the following pages are drawn from papers and comments at that conference, in the Museum's Carmichael Auditorium, November 15 and 16, 1986. Mary Kay Rieg, Olivia G. Amiss, and Marsha Domzalski of the *Monthly Labor Review* provided editorial assistance.

Trade unions mirror society in conflict between collectivism and individualism

A duality common to many institutions runs through the American labor movement and has marked its shifting fortunes from the post-Civil War period to the present

ALICE KESSLER-HARRIS

Two competing ideas run through the labor movement, as they have run through the American past. The first is the notion of community—the sense that liberty is nurtured in an informal political environment where the voluntary and collective enterprise of people with common interests contributes to the solution of problems. Best characterized by the town meeting, collective solutions are echoed in the temperance, abolition, suffrage, and educational reform societies of the 19th century and have become a cliché of 20th-century political and social life. The collective impulse lends itself to egalitarian values in that all citizens are deemed equal in their capacity to participate in democratic decision-making processes. The second idea is that of individualism—a belief in the hard work and ingenuity characteristic of our Puritan forebears and of legendary frontiersmen and women; and faith in the capacity of people to rise by their own wills to the highest vistas of the American dream. Embodied in the notion of "free labor," the ideal assured the dignity of honest toil and posited that its result would be economic success. Because in this conception, the rewards of earthly existence are earned by those who demonstrate initiative, thrift, and tenacity in the pursuit of a goal, its thrust is towards eliminating the constraints engendered by the collective impulse.

The evident tension in these two sets of ideas, characteristic of many American institutions, informs the structure

and ideology of American trade unions as they developed in the post-Civil War period. It also tells us something of their impact. The conglomeration of unions that formed the National Labor Union and the 15,000 assemblies of the Knights of Labor responded to the onslaught of industrialism after the Civil War by searching for ways to reestablish the community of interest that was threatened by a new and rapidly spreading organization of work. In the view of the Knights, the successful operation of a democratic republic based on the full participation of all of its citizens required a recognition of the "dignity," "autonomy," or "independence" of the working person. That meant fighting for workplace conditions that respected the capacities of all toilers and permitted their moral and intellectual development.¹ At bottom, the Knights believed that only the elimination of the wage system could guarantee such respect and ensure that manhood was equated with citizenship and some possibility for exercising it. In practice, protecting the dignity of the individual required what has come to be known as social unionism: collective activity in the community, the workplace, and above all in the political arena. Individual dignity was not the end product; it was the means for assuring social harmony.

AFL redefined relationship

Impatient with the visionary quality of the Knights' endeavors, the skilled craft workers who founded the American Federation of Labor redefined the relationship between collective and individual interests. For them, the restoration

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of social harmony would come when workers aggregated sufficient power to hold dominant industrialism in check. That could only be achieved by a tightly knit organization. So the American Federation of Labor adopted a class-based definition of community and set itself to secure “more, more now” in the cacophonous phrase of the day. Within this form of unionism, sometimes called market unionism, dignity was defined not as participation in the polity, but as the reward of work. Progress was measured by the “economic betterment” of individual members. In the short term, at least, collective well-being was transformed from a vision of a better world to the immediate object of mutually self-interested societies. For the Knights, dignity for the individual worker resided in a conception of work that harbored the possibility of participation in a democratic society; it derived legitimacy from arguments for equality. For the AFL, dignity resided in a better life for the worker and derived legitimacy from arguments for individual possibility.

But the argument for equality had not been abandoned. If the craft-oriented AFL rejected the “sentimental” solutions generated by the Knights of Labor and later by the Industrial Workers of the World and by socialists and anarchists who tried to influence its course, if AFL leaders steered away from labor parties and from government intervention in the things that the power of labor could achieve, still they made one compromise. The pursuit of individualism for workers required collective action which, in turn, required an appeal to the egalitarian roots of America’s past. To make this appeal, the AFL found common cause with the progressive movement.

In the progressive equation, the restoration of democratic possibility involved reconciling the interests of competing groups, a conviction that weighting the scales on behalf of ordinary workers would restore social balance—right the inequalities that had been introduced by a misplaced conception of individualism. The focus legitimized the collective body of labor, imbuing it with the capacity to bargain with employers in the service of an egalitarian ethic. Thus, labor’s attack on the open shop was construed as a negation of the strident individualism of “freedom of contract” and placed the trade union movement in the ideological camp of progressivism.

In this relatively narrow, but very important, sense, the trade union movement committed itself to a collective struggle on behalf of all workers. If its immediate gains were to accrue only to those it represented, the existence of market unionism—the very possibility of organizing—was rooted in a rejection of rugged individualism and a concomitant defense of the egalitarian ethic. Social unionism became not merely a necessary balance to market unionism, but the node from which market unionism sprang. It provided the rationale for immediate gains and the inspiration from which unions have consistently struggled. In tension with prevailing individualism, it foreshadowed the resolution of conflict

through collective bargaining; nurtured the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations; and provided the rationale for the shift into legislative strategies. To pursue its institutional purposes, the labor movement has consistently maintained a collective stance and an egalitarian vision. Whatever its obvious flaws, the pursuit of some sense of collectivity has enabled the labor movement to serve as an important piece of the Nation’s social conscience, and as an effective weapon in the arsenal of economic democracy. It is worth looking at how this is manifested.

Providing a social function

First, economic democracy has been sustained by the struggle of unionists for workplace control. Following a long tradition, unionists sought to create and retain work rules that not only affirmed the dignity of workers but provided input into the pace of work, the rate of its accomplishment, and its organization. Adhering to what historian David Montgomery calls a code of “honorable behaviour,” union members protected each other from arbitrary abuse by creating and following their own standards of work. Some of the most skilled managed to regulate the entry of new workers into their trades, training apprentices and disciplining the “rats” who violated traditional customs. The strength of workplace egalitarianism can to some extent be measured by the ferocity of managements’ installation of scientific management and efficiency techniques, as well as by the variety of techniques with which corporations attempted to shift loyalty from union to employer. Faced with the assaults, unions confronted management at every stage, resisting encroachments on traditional prerogatives and creating alternatives such as workers’ education programs to enhance their members’ understanding of the struggle at hand.

Though invocations of human relations and corporate welfare shifted the terrain of struggle in the 1920’s, and weakened the union movement, informal work groups persisted and passed on the tradition of resistance. Emblematic of the collective roots of unionism, by the 1930’s “industrial democracy,” “workers councils,” and “codetermination” had entered the unionism’s vocabulary, only to disappear when the Wagner Act made collective bargaining respectable. If, as David Brody suggests, unions too readily traded off input into the managerial decision-making process for the more immediate gains of seniority and promotion ladders, of clear job descriptions, and of mediated grievances, still unions must be credited with continuing to curb managerial discretion and power by means of objective rules.

Second, in the area of economic security, unions have functioned in the public sphere as well as in their own work areas. Beginning with the 1930’s, when the AFL abandoned its celebrated policy of “rewarding friends and punishing enemies” and the CIO added a tinge of urgency to the class struggle, the labor movement has provided the political impetus behind much of our social legislation. Old Age and Survivors’ Insurance, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and

unemployment insurance offered not only the possibility of broader organizational efforts, but of economic security for many nonunionized workers.

Third, collective action has contributed directly to egalitarianism by reducing for union members some of the inequalities of income that characterize the nonunion work force. The principle of equal pay for equal work has narrowed wage differentials among plants and regions.² Blue-collar workers have benefited from rises in the lowest levels of pay and from access to fringe benefits that reduce economic differences between unionized blue-collar and white-collar workers. In industrial unions, belated sex- and race-blind organization has made inroads into social inequality. But there are limits to unionism's power to achieve egalitarian goals. These are set in part by the failure to expand the numbers of organized workers, and in part by the inability of unions to win some desirable benefits in marginal firms. So, as former Auto Workers President Douglas Fraser notes, we have created "two classes within the work force, within the labor movement."³

Last, trade unions serve a crucial function for the society as a whole. The movement provides moral leadership and "voice" even where it negates the special interests of many of its constituents. Economist Theresa Wolfson pointed out in 1926 that the AFL could and did take positions on issues such as the admission of women and blacks that local unions persistently flouted.⁴ Several social scientists have described what are sometimes called the two faces of unionism. One of these may be exclusionary and monopolistic. The second is socially responsive.⁵ The first tries to expand the benefits of privileged groups of workers; the second seeks a voice in political and legislative councils on an array of social issues.

As these examples demonstrate, the exclusionary needs of the trade union movement have not inhibited its capacity to breathe life and continuity into social issues.⁶ Thus, the trade union movement's collectivist and egalitarian heritage continues to function as a social conscience that maintains a vision of collective possibility.

Individualism and the American dream

Just as the collective structure of the movement and its egalitarian vision have sometimes reflected broader social ideals, so the powerful forces of individualism have had their day. Creatures of their culture, workers have used the tactics of confrontation to gain access to the consumer society. Gompers, early on, made clear his commitment to the individualistic aspect of the American dream when he responded to Morris Hillquit's challenge to define the goals of the AFL with a now-classic statement of the instrumentalism that characterized union goals: "I say that the workers, as human beings, will never stop in any effort, nor stop at any point in the effort to secure greater improvement in their condition, a better life in all its phases."⁷ The institutionalization of collective bargaining in the 1930's and labor's

accord with employers was rooted in this shared value—a tradeoff between the employer's need for stability, order, and predictability in the labor market and labor's desire to increase the well-being of its membership. The accord provided organized labor with the capacity to raise the standards of living of its membership and enabled workers to engage in patterns of consumption characteristic of the middle class.

This had some unforeseen consequences for trade unions. The 1950's became the decade of suburban homes and of installment buying for workers: "the progressive accumulation of things," as Eli Chinoy put it.⁸ Possessions brought identification with the middle class, as the wives of blue-collar workers in Bennett Berger's study of working class suburbia testified.⁹ Workers, whose lifestyles and aspirations changed, disassociated themselves from the collective spirit of unionism and encouraged its instrumental ends, giving birth to a generation of unionists who shared neither the culture nor the workplaces of the old. The trade union movement had helped to transform the American dream from a challenge to the individual to achieve a better world to a challenge to acquire possessions. The inevitable consequences included increased involvement in the home and family, social isolation, and attention to private rather than social issues.

Collectivity undermined

So emerged the fundamental contradiction of American trade unionism: its success at providing "economic betterment" undermined the collectivity from which that success had come. In the absence of a political party or broader social movement, workers who received ever-increasing paychecks began to see unions as instruments for satisfying their personal goals. By the 1950's and 1960's, they had turned from job interests to private interests, from collective to individual orientations. Divided among themselves, some attacked student war protesters, others attacked increasing military intervention. Some supported the civil rights movement, others continued to discriminate against blacks. John Diggins places the contradiction in a broader context: "The paradox of liberal America," he writes, "is that the more egalitarian it becomes the more people scramble after wealth, and as they do so they legitimate the authority of the rich by deferring to the fame of the prestigious few and denying their own identity."¹⁰

The twofold results are familiar to all of us. First, anxious to protect the jobs and living standards of their members, trade unions emphasize their exclusionary aspects. Craft unions try to reduce the numbers of new entrants and to keep out those, like women and minorities, who threaten their conceptions of self. When layoffs threaten, the large industrial unions cut off their least senior members to save the jobs and living standards of the rest. Issues of equity emerge within unions as women and blacks protest unfair treatment, while those excluded appear to suffer from the differential

in pay between union and nonunion workers. The resulting bitterness and antagonism have undermined the labor movement's credibility as a voice for all workers and yielded the public image that it is merely the representative of special interest groups.

Second, the movement's heavy emphasis on the collective bargaining process to achieve economic and shop-floor goals leaves the trade union vulnerable in periods of slow growth, or in the event that management decides not to honor the implicit rules of the game. So, for example, the 1920's assault on labor, commonly called the "American Plan," benefited from the capacity of employers in that age of prosperity to appeal to the self-interest or individualism of workers better than trade unions could. Intent on managing their own industrial relations, employers offered relatively high wages, pensions, and vacations with pay, and built an illusory sense of community through the use of sports teams, lunch rooms, company unions, and the new human relations. Trade unions competing for the self-interest of workers had no weapons with which to combat this assault and one result, as we all know, was the decline of union membership by some 30 percent of its 1920 total.

The future of unionism

In the current period, employers seem to have abrogated the truce of the 1930's. Faced with threats to their markets that reduce oligopolistic power (auto, steel, electronics, and so on) with increased possibilities for escaping unionism by moving shop, and sustained by ineffective or friendly government regulation, employers are choosing not to honor the implicit accords that have been in place since the 1950's. Private sector blue-collar unions have little power to resist. A steady decline in jobs in the manual and production sectors of the economy has yielded a surplus labor market that encourages employers to keep plants open through strikes. International competition firms the employer's resolve to demand concessions of workers. Mobility of capital creates an alternative for investment and makes disinvestment an attractive possibility.

Under these circumstances, the instrumental gains by which unions satisfied the needs of their members are no longer available. As long as employers identified their own interests with harmonious labor relationships, economic growth was shared by workers, and management and labor unions could use collective bargaining strategies to achieve the American dream for their members. In the new environment, concessions, givebacks, and wage reductions are the last lines of resistance. The result has been a steady decline in the ability of union contracts to deliver the goods and resulting doubts about unionism's efficacy.

Given the limits of instrumental alternatives, unions have little choice but to develop the social voice once again. As Douglas Fraser put it, "The only solution to this problem is to try to get basic protection not only under the collective bargaining agreement but under the laws of the land." This

goal is not far afield from the one offered by the recent report issued by the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work that reminded organized labor of its mission to "bring about a broader sharing in the riches of the Nation."¹¹

Several strategies are available to meet that goal. Long ago, John Kenneth Galbraith called for a change in direction that reduces emphasis on private consumption and encourages the diversion of resources to the public arena.¹² Some recent union initiatives have called political attention to that goal by publicizing support for public funding of programs such as child care, parental leave, national health care, maintenance of the elderly, educational incentives, and public housing. On the local level, helping to re-create community life would contribute to raising the moral stature of unionism and enable it to function as a voice for all working people. Other strategies that affirm the social mission of unionism include aggressively seeking political voice and an educational role in policy debates over income redistribution, corporate responsibility to communities, investment and tax policies, and opposing racial discrimination here and abroad. To do this requires political mobilization of members, retirees, and some representatives of the major parties.¹³

The historical record leaves little doubt that the protection of individual privilege for ordinary people is rooted in a common understanding of collective rights. In a period when the gains of unions are being eroded at every turn, and when that erosion is symptomatic of our loss of a commitment as a Nation to the collective enterprise, we need to look back once again at our past and try to adapt it to the needs of the present.

More than any other institution, the trade union movement in America has kept alive the spirit of social responsibility that constitutes an important thread of our national experience. As the AFL-CIO's Committee on the Evolution of Work put it, "no serious observer denies" that unions have played a "civilizing, humanizing, and democratizing role" in public life. □

—FOOTNOTES—

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¹ For summary and analysis see Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1982), ch. 1.

² William Form, *Divided We Stand: Working-Class Stratification in America* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois, 1985), ch. 8 and pp. 185-87.

³ Douglas Fraser, "Beyond Collective Bargaining: Interview," *ChALLENGE*, March/April, 1979, p. 35.

⁴ Theresa Wolfson, *The Woman Worker and the Trade Union* (New York, International Publishers, 1926).

⁵ Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What do Unions Do?* (New York, Basic Books, 1984); see also Daniel Bell, "The Capitalism of the Proletariat: A Theory of American Trade Unionism," *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, The Free Press, 1962), pp. 211-26.

⁶ Robert Bellah, "Populism and Individualism," *Social Policy*, Fall 1985, pp. 30-33.

⁷ Auerbach, *American Labor*, p. 79.

⁸ Eli Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1955), p. 126.

⁹ *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley, University of California, 1969).

¹⁰ John Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York, Basic Books 1984), p. 340.

¹¹ Fraser, "Beyond Collective Bargaining," p. 35.

¹² John Kenneth Galbraith, *Economics and the Public Purpose* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

¹³ Richard Edwards and Michael Podgursky, "The Unraveling Accord: American Unions in Crisis," in Richard Edwards, Paola Garonna, and Franz Todtling, eds., *Unions in Crisis and Beyond: Perspectives from Six Countries* (Dover, MA, Auburn House, 1986), pp. 50–53.

The extension of solidarity conflicts with the spirit of individualism

MELVYN DUBOFSKY

Alice Kessler-Harris' paper succinctly captures the dilemma faced by the American labor movement and its trade unions throughout their turbulent and erratic history over the last century. She also hints at some of the reasons why trade unionism appears in disarray today and the labor movement seems an institution of diminishing importance in our national life. Labor's current parlous situation notwithstanding, Kessler-Harris does not let us forget that all of us (not just working people) who believe in causes larger than narrow self-interest—or should I say self-enrichment?—would be all the poorer in the absence of effective trade unions, which during the past century have done more than almost any other institution to elevate the material and moral conditions of life for the greatest number of people. Yet, as Kessler-Harris points out, the labor movement has always found itself impaled on the horns of a dilemma: the trade union commitment to collective action or solidarity versus the powerful American national myth of individualism. This dilemma was not the only reason that, prior to the late 1930's, the American labor movement rarely counted more than 10 percent of the total labor force among its ranks; however, the appeal of individualism effectively kept many American workers away from the unions for their craft or industry.

Sometimes I think that more workers believed strongly in the right to work than in forms of collective action promoted by trade unions. And such workers willingly and by the hundreds of thousands served as strikebreakers. Trade unions fought long and hard against the powerful strain of individualism in American life, society, and politics, especially prior to the revolution in labor law during the New Deal years. Those workers who joined unions consciously and irrevocably broke with the tradition of individualism.

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Promoting solidarity

What I find most remarkable is how even the allegedly most conservative and respectable of national trade unions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries promoted forms of solidarity. One example is the Brotherhood of Railway Engineers, the most conservative of all craft unions and so respectable that it remained outside the more radical American Federation of Labor. This union—that at different times broke strikes by firemen and brakemen, played a part in breaking Eugene V. Debs' famous 1894 Pullman boycott and strike, and drew the line against all nonwhite members—required its own members, by constitutional oath, to support strike action by all their brothers and never to service the rolling stock of struck railroads. This clause in the union's constitution led several Federal judges, including William Howard Taft in 1893, to declare the Brotherhood a heinous, criminal conspiracy.

It is clear that unions and their members were never as prey to the spirit of individualism as their nonunion brothers and sisters. For union members, then, the issue was not collective action versus individualism; rather, it was usually how far to extend the imperative of solidarity. For the Brotherhood of Railway Engineers, solidarity did not extend beyond the craft and its white members. For most AFL unions, the limits were wider though ambiguous. And for Wobblies, of course, solidarity had no limits. For most leaders of AFL unions and later those in the CIO, certain aspects of the leaders' public behavior were like Sherlock Holmes' dog that did not bark. Sometimes what union officials refused to say in public said more about labor's beliefs and aims than torrents of oratory.

In fact, there were two things that labor leaders seldom spoke about publicly, certainly not outside union halls or conventions. Like all good Americans, unionists extolled the rights of individuals and private property, and the unionists knew precisely what they were doing: tactically, the labor movement's drive to build solidarity and limit the powers of management, which flowed from the latter's control of property, were promoted in the guise of defending individuals and property rights.

The Wagner Act of 1935 proved why this was so. Few pieces of legislation in our history ever had more radical or transformative intentions. Its sponsors clearly wanted to promote trade unionism, collective bargaining, and the redistribution of wealth and income; they also sought, in a variety of ways, to limit the arbitrary power possession of private property conferred on business. However, look for a moment at the preamble fashioned by the drafters of the Wagner Act: it referred specifically to the rights of workers as individuals, not as union members; it promised to render capitalism more stable and profitable; and it alluded to policies that would eliminate strikes and industrial conflict. Like the drafters of the Wagner Act, trade unionists could attack corporate power best by indirection. Labor leaders seldom promoted their cause effectively when they extolled

collectivism in place of individualism, attacked the rights of property, or denigrated capitalism as a system. In practice, however, trade unions did all three. No union member could act as a complete individualist and remain a loyal member. The more successful or powerful a union was, the more it trespassed on the rights of property owners and began the process of altering capitalism.

None of this is to say that union practice necessarily eliminated profits and the accumulation of capital. Still, the way employers acted in the 1920's and the way they are behaving today suggests that they realize that unions as institutions conflict with the principles of accumulation and self-enrichment at the heart of capitalism. □

The black labor movement and the fight for social advance

WILLIAM H. HARRIS

To the ideas of individualism and collective advance that Alice Kessler-Harris sees as central—and that clearly are essential—to the labor movement, we unquestionably must add one more, and that is the idea of exclusion. This concept of exclusion becomes so important because as much as anything else, exclusion has become the Achilles' heel of organized labor. But I want to emphasize that the evidence of the existence of racial exclusion in the labor movement merely shows how American organized labor was the ideal of exclusion. The idea of selective advance is one of the central ideas in the history of American society, and organized labor has had to carry that burden as well.

Writing in 1935, one of the most brilliant observers of American society, W.E.B. DuBois, noted that in the Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction, which he saw as the origin of black freedom in America, lay the kernels for the most progressive labor movement this Nation would ever see.¹ But, as he put it, leaders of organized labor had neither the courage nor the intelligence to recognize it. What DuBois was talking about was that during Reconstruction leaders of organized labor had an opportunity—for a brief moment, at least—to reject the barriers to equality of opportunity that race had constructed in America and thus develop an egalitarian labor movement that would encompass all of organized labor.

Black involvement in labor

The importance and centrality of race in America comes forth in so much that has been part of the American labor movement, and raises without question the most important

issue with which organized labor must contend if labor will continue to have a major place in American society. History is replete with examples of why this is so. For instance, railway engineers were not solely responsible for the failure of Eugene V. Debs' Pullman strike. The decision of numerous black workers to refuse to join the American Railway Union, and thus, in effect, become strikebreakers, contributed to Debs' failure as well. Yet, the very reason that black workers did not make common cause with the American Railway Union, namely because white railway unionists would not permit blacks to join the unions or to take certain railroad jobs such as engineers, brakemen, and conductors, requires historians to question whether the term scab really fits their actions. Is one a scab or strikebreaker when one takes a job during a strike that the striking workers, all of whom are white, have themselves gone on strike to keep black workers out of? During the late 19th and 20th centuries, white workers initiated more than 100 strikes in order to keep black workers from gaining access to certain jobs. This is the question that I have tried to deal with as I have tried to understand the involvement of black people in the working class movement since the end of the Civil War. No more than anyone else do I have a definite answer.

The central question is can one be governed by the rules set by others when one is not permitted to participate in making the rules or in helping to set the parameters of the tremendous struggle of the American working class? Were black workers less patriotic than others during World War II when they said to the boilermakers and to the shipyard workers, "We won't participate in your unions and pay your dues unless we can have voting membership?" Were they less patriotic and harmful to the American war effort when they said, "We won't pay dues for the right to work?" We as historians, and Americans generally, must deal with these questions because they go to the crucial core of the meaning of democracy in our Nation. Some claim that black workers who demanded an end to discrimination in employment,

Conversation on an airplane

Coming into Washington, DC, about two weeks ago, I was flying on the plane and struck up a conversation with a young man who was sitting next to me. I came to find out that he was a corporate lawyer for a rather well-established firm in Washington, and he talked about the kinds of cases he was handling. Then, he asked me what did I do, and I told him that I am a college president. He then asked, "Well, how did you get into that?" I said, "I used to be a historian of American workers." He said, "Oh, my grandfather was associated with the working class movement for a while." I said, "Oh, who was that?" He said, "My grandfather was George Meany. You might have heard of him."—W.H.H.

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promotion, pay, and other occupational areas were harmful to the American war effort. But black workers insisted that if unions were permitted to write contracts that gave the unions the power to decide who worked, who was promoted, and who was laid off, then those same unions could not be permitted to prevent black workers from being involved in decisions concerning the unions' activities. To the black workers, the white union leaders were anti-patriotic. Put simply, black workers decided that they would refuse to pay a tax for the right to work in America.

Progressing but regressing

Kessler-Harris is right in pointing out, then, that the increasing availability of commodities, appliances, goods, homes, and all the other things that we so much enjoyed in the 1950's and 1960's placed a big halt on the trade union movement, but again those who made it—who had achieved the ability to purchase and to enjoy such goods and services—abandoned the field before groups that had been left out got in. That is another reason why I called my book *The Harder We Run*.² I left it to your imagination to place a comma behind that statement and add "The Behinder We Get," because as this Nation has progressed, gaps among the working class, especially black versus white, have increased. It is indeed a burden we carry in America, this continuing burden of race.

Black unionists clearly understood and emphasized that a major reason for the labor movement was another part of what Alice Kessler-Harris writes about, namely that advances in the workplace for black workers must be accompanied by the advancement of people at all levels, and not just on the job. This was especially true among original thinkers in the black labor movement. DuBois more clearly than most emphasized this point, but so did A. Philip Randolph. Without question, Randolph saw the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as an agency to be involved in fomenting social change across the fabric of America and, if he had his way, across the fabric of the world; this type of advancement was far more important in his view than simply making a contract with the Pullman Company for the Brotherhood's workers. If he had been interested just in the rights of workers who were members of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters at the Pullman Company, Randolph would not have had much to do, because those workers were among the best-placed black workers in America at the time. However, that was not good enough. The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' leaders saw the Brotherhood as a bully pulpit of a small group of workers, but a bully pulpit nonetheless, to carry forward the ideas on which America had been founded: there must be social and equal justice for all, or no justice for anyone could be guaranteed. As such, it remains the goal of organized labor. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction After the Civil War*, 1935.

² William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982).

Forging a partnership between blacks and unions

NORMAN HILL

Clearly, the early history of blacks and the labor movement has been one of both conflict and cooperation. In 1842, for example, mobs battled black workers in Philadelphia, and white workers fought black strikebreakers on the New York City docks. But 7 years earlier, white carpenters and ship caulkers joined black caulkers in a strike at the Washington Navy Yard. That same year, blacks supported a citywide general strike in Philadelphia.

Despite employers' shrewd attempts to drive a wedge between black and white workers, black trade union leaders understood early on the need for labor solidarity that crossed the color line. As Issac Myers, the leader of the Colored National Labor Union, said in 1868, "Labor organizations are the safeguard of the colored man, but for real success, separate organization is not the real answer. The white and colored mechanics must come together and work together. The day has passed for the establishment of organizations based upon color."

Sixty-eight years later, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, told the American Federation of Labor convention: "The white and black workers. . . cannot be organized separately as the fingers on my hand. They must be organized altogether, as the fingers on my hand when they are doubled up in the form of a fist. . . If they are organized separately, they will not understand each other. They will fight each other, and if they fight each other, they will hate each other. And the employing class will profit from that condition."

But it was not until 1964 that the last affiliate of the AFL-CIO removed the "whites only" clause in its constitution and bylaws. Today, black workers tend to be more unionized than the work force as a whole. In 1984, for instance, black workers accounted for 9.6 million wage and salary workers, about 10.5 percent of the work force. About 2.5 million of these workers were unionized, representing about 15 percent of organized labor, while blacks made up roughly 11 percent of the population.

Not only are blacks more unionized in the work force as a whole, but they also represent a large proportion of unionized and total workers in each major section of the U.S.

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economy. Black workers are 30 percent more heavily unionized in the construction industry, 20 percent more unionized in the manufacturing industry, and 15 percent more unionized in the service sector.

In the public sector, where unions are relatively recent but still reasonably strong, there has been a substantial increase in the number of black members and union leaders. In the service sector, which is largely nonunion and lower paying, only about 10 percent of union workers and 20 percent of all workers are black. In the South, where unions are still weak and where racism continues to be a factor, the future growth and staying power of unions are directly related to black participation and leadership in unions.

Black economic progress

Union membership has clearly paid off for black workers, who earn more than their nonunion counterparts. In 1984, black union members earned an average of \$357 per week, or about 50 percent more than the \$236 weekly rate for black nonunion workers. In comparison, white union workers' weekly earnings were \$409, or 33 percent more than the \$307 weekly wages of white nonunion workers.

What about the future? The structural changes in the economy and declining overall union membership, coupled with the proclivity of blacks to join unions, indicate that black membership in unions, as well as black leadership in unions, is likely to increase in the foreseeable future. New organizing inroads are likely to be made in the largely nonunion service sector, which is made up of industries where blacks and other minorities make up a substantial percentage of the work force, particularly in such areas as health care and related fields.

Over the last 4 decades, the labor movement has been an important vehicle for black economic progress, both in the private and public sectors. It has led to the growth of the black middle class, which is composed mostly of blue-collar workers employed in heavy industry and construction. Labor outreach and training programs have helped black and minority youth gain meaningful employment. In the early 1960's, when the A. Philip Randolph Institute first undertook to end the exclusion of blacks in the construction and craft unions, less than 2 percent of Federally registered apprenticeship program trainees were nonwhite. Today, that percentage has jumped to 19.7 percent.

The latest available figures show that, except in the South, the median wage for blacks is 99 percent of the median wage for whites. This rarely acknowledged fact is a consequence of the civil rights legislation of the 1960's as well as of the higher rate of black participation in the labor movement.

Structural economic problems

Despite these gains, recent structural changes in the economy, deindustrialization, and the advent of such technological innovations as robotics, cybernation, and automation—

particularly in the older urban manufacturing centers—have led to increased unemployment for black workers, and thus thwarted social mobility for an increasing number of blacks, leaving them trapped in declining cities and ghettos.

Clearly, blacks have a stake along with organized labor in addressing such developments as the changing organization and character of the work force. Black economic and social progress is intimately linked to the performance of the national economy for all workers. All while racism still persists, the main obstacle to black advancement continues to be the decline in labor intensive industries due to technological changes and unfair trade, as well as sluggish job growth, demographic realities such as the dramatic infusion of women into the labor force, and other economic factors.

Due to unfair foreign competition and two severe recessions in the early 1980's, millions of jobs in such industries as steel, auto, textile, and rubber—industries that have historically provided well-paying, unionized jobs for large numbers of black workers—have been eliminated. The collapse of black family structures, the rise in black poverty, illegitimacy, and the other manifestations of so-called "social pathology" are the result of this economic dislocation.

Moreover, the recent decline in the public sector—long a mainstay of black economic upward mobility, which in recent years employed about 60 percent of the black college graduates—has also limited the avenues of opportunity that led to the expansion of the black middle class in the 1960's.

The shift from heavy industry and manufacturing toward high-tech industries has left many blacks unprepared for jobs in this highly skilled and competitive labor market. The continued growth of the poor black underclass is tied to these developments. Black male joblessness has had a severe impact on family viability, and has led to the dramatic rise in female-headed households, the majority of them living in poverty.

Clearly, black workers have a stake in labor's agenda for social and economic progress, an agenda that must, first and foremost, address the changes in the economy and the work force. □

Protecting workers in the marketplace: new union benefit privileges

RAY DENISON

The American labor movement has sought with a remarkable degree of progress and success—considering the odds—to provide an economic and political alternative in a Nation where business always and government often have sought to weaken, disarm, and destroy the labor movement.

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Yet, we in the labor movement have not waged war on this country's system of subsidized capitalism; in fact, we have sought to make this machinery work. And we have sought to overcome its failings, sought to provide the economic fuel to make it work. I do not think there is any serious sector in the American labor movement that seeks the Nation's overthrow or even the nationalization of its major industries. Some may call the absence of that philosophy or the absence of a labor party in this country a failing. But, we are a part of our society, a part of the economic system, and we believe we are trying—perhaps not too successfully—to make this whole system work better for all of us.

Under the American system, there are two ways to extend economic and social gains. One is to force the employer to provide the economic rewards of better working conditions and higher pay. The second is through legislation wherein the state decrees the change. I do not think anyone who serves in the labor movement wants economic and social betterment to come only to a narrow few at the expense of other Americans. Yet, the labor law very specifically limits where we can organize and specifically those we can recruit for collective bargaining purposes.

However, there is a continued evolution in the American labor movement. The AFL-CIO is providing leadership now on a totally new program whereby we will use our clout of 13½ million workers to extend our influence and our impact from the workplace to the marketplace. We are undertaking a program to extend our massive bargaining power to provide new benefits to members of the AFL-CIO unions first and then to millions of Americans unprotected by unions. Those Americans will be offered associate membership and benefits that are now beyond those who are outside the labor movement. The new union privilege benefit programs of the AFL-CIO will serve to provide the best benefits with the most service and the greatest security in the marketplace—the way the union contract protects in the workplace.

Now, to some critics, this new approach is too market oriented, too much directed to media gratification, and a

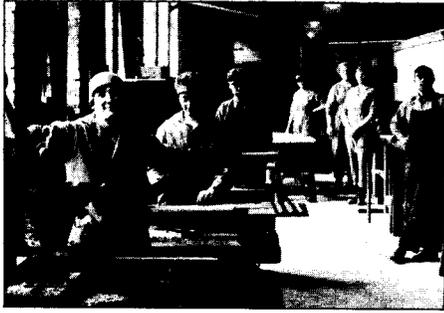
departure from healing the long-range hurts of our society. Even though as Keynes said, "in the long run we will all be dead," we will continue to pursue our long-range agenda, but with a new concept that broadens today's horizons of America's labor movement and extends its unique abilities to bring together new benefits and new programs for the betterment of common good.

Credit cards

For example, the first benefit is a credit card, that capitalist tool. A majority of the 89 affiliated AFL-CIO unions have become a part of this program. We decided that if banks are going to charge credit card interest of 18, 19, and 21 percent, despite the steep drop in the prime rate, then we would challenge this outrageous ripoff of American workers. We have done so, and we are now issuing an AFL-CIO-created credit card with an interest rate of 12½ percent. Our members are now cutting up their old cards and saving millions of dollars in finance charges and annual fees.

We have also created a no-cost/low-cost legal service program. We are doing the same in insurance, travel, finance, health services, and other areas. Eventually, we will demystify all of these programs—remove the intimidation of the glib salesman and the deceptive ads—and make them obtainable by union people and potential union people alike at rates that we consider reasonable.

This new program, when tied to the dynamic force of the existing labor movement, can be an even greater force for good in our legislatures, in the political process, and in the economic betterment of all Americans. We are part of our society, a dynamic part, but if the national structure is upturned by an economic earthquake, which seems to be approaching in these hours, then even the hardiest union and the staunchest union member may find survival impossible. And so while we must make the labor movement more effective and more dynamic, we must also realize that what is at stake here is our whole economic society as well. □



A Century of Struggle

Unions' struggle to survive goes beyond modern technology

Heeding Gompers, workers sought to control 'the use of the machine' into the age of mass production, but unions now face tests of leadership and other challenges that are more daunting than new technology

DANIEL NELSON

The men who gathered at the Druids Hall on South High Street in Columbus, OH, on December 7, 1886, to form the American Federation of Labor were hardly the types of workers one would encounter at a union meeting today. The majority were cigarmakers, carpenters, tailors, granite cutters, and representatives of other crafts that were central to the late 19th century economy. Missing, of course, were the auto workers, airline pilots, electricians, teachers, and other workers characteristic of the late 20th-century economy and the modern labor movement. The contrast between 1886 and 1986 is a commentary on the role of materials, machines, and physical and intellectual skills, in short the role of technology, in shaping the economy and the union's function in that economy.

Few notions about modern economic life are more common than the assumption that technological change has been and will be a critical element in economic progress. Few prospects are more chilling to late 20th-century Americans than a stagnant technology and all that it implies. Yet technology has been and will continue to be the proverbial double-edged sword, creating dangers as well as opportunities. This pattern is no less true for the labor movement than for other institutions. The history of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) is, among other things, the history of the often uneasy relationship between workers and machines.

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In the 1890's, at a time when the linotype machine was displacing hand typesetters and undermining the Typographical Union, AFL President Samuel Gompers conferred with the union's president. Gompers recalled their conversation: ". . . I talked through the problem with [him], urging him strongly to advocate a policy of not opposing labor-saving machinery, but to plan so that the workman could control the use of the machine through the union instead of permitting the machine to control the printers . . ." ¹ Although he was talking about a specific innovation, Gompers came close to summarizing the relationship between technological change and the labor movement over the past century. His observation is an appropriate starting point for an assessment of that relationship.

For the last two centuries of industrial revolution, technological change has swept aside countless established and seemingly vital skills, and the occupations that are their marketplace expressions, and created a multitude of new skills and occupations. The process has been highly unpredictable and frequently cuts across social class and status. Buggy manufacturers suffered no less than their employees after the advent of the automobile; silent picture stars no less than theater musicians after the advent of talking films. Although lasters, mule skimmers, and glass bottle blowers faced declining markets for their skills in the early 1900's, laborers, the majority of workers, enjoyed an ever-widening range of opportunities as machine operators. Today's specialized workers face similar challenges, while others are

positioned to take advantage of the new technologies of the late 20th century.

Institutions react

Yet it is possible to make sense of these events if we keep Gompers' observation from the 1890's in mind. A conspicuous development in economic life over the past century has been the discovery by leaders of a variety of institutions of ways to manage the changes that are an inevitable and desirable feature of a healthy economy. In industry, the most important tactic for achieving this end has been systematic scientific and engineering research. Economists' studies have shown a strong and persuasive link between such activity and corporate perpetuity.² In this century, research has become a key to the generation of new ideas, new technologies and, ultimately, new goods and services. Research is a way to manage technological change.

Such strategies have by no means been confined to business. Among the early leaders of the AFL, a similar goal motivated similar efforts. For union leaders, the management of technological change was actually much easier. It did not require large investments, laboratories, scientists, or other hallmarks of the modern high technology company. For the workers, common sense, a little imagination, and an understanding of the economy were sufficient.

In *Union Policies and Industrial Management*, Sumner Slichter identified three common union responses to technological change: obstruction, competition, and control.³ The meaning of obstruction is self-evident. By union competition, Slichter meant wage reductions or other concessions that made an old technology competitive with a new technology; by control, the type of approach that Gompers had urged on the printers. Obstruction and competition were short-run palliatives. If pursued for extended periods, they would almost certainly lead to the decline or demise of the organization. While obstruction and competition were important and often valuable strategies for individuals, control was the only viable strategy for an organization. Like most commentators on the relationship of technology and labor, Slichter perceived his subject too narrowly, as a new machine or process that threatened a worker, occupational group or union, and the control strategy as an adjustment in bargaining demands, work rules, and the like. For that reason, his work has limited applicability for the larger history of technological innovation and union policy. Nevertheless, it does pinpoint the strategy that enabled alert union leaders to cope with technological change.

During the first half of this century, craft unionism—the unionism most vulnerable to technological innovation—gave way to craft-industrial and multi-industrial unionism. There were 28 craft unions in 1915—20 percent of all unions—and only 12—or less than 10 percent of the total—in 1940.⁴ Thus, well before the craft-industrial debate reached its celebrated climax, before the appearance of the CIO and the era of dual federations, the issue of craft union-

ism had been settled. With few exceptions, like today's professional athletes, the craft approach was a formula for institutional suicide.

Union adaptation

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners provide a classic case of successful adaptation. After 1904, the Carpenters' motto became "One craft, one organization." What did "one craft" mean? In effect, anything that the Carpenters' leaders wanted it to mean. Between 1902 and 1915, they embraced all woodworking industries. After 1915, they went even further. The "essence" of their approach, writes their most perceptive historian, was "a planlessness that left them free, highly mobile, and ready to pounce on any craft intruding on their jurisdiction. . . ."⁵

Another example was the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. Electric power created a series of new industries and skills in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The industries overlapped; the skills were often ill-defined. No one could tell what changes the future would bring. The union responded logically. By 1930, the IBEW was highly decentralized, with separate, semiautonomous divisions of construction workers, telephone linemen, and factory employees. To the electrical workers, "craft" referred to the underlying technology, not a discrete skill or occupation.⁶

The Teamsters became one of the great organizing successes of the second third of the century, due both to the role of government and a commitment within the union to ride the wave of midcentury technological change.⁷

By constantly redefining their scope and constituency—in effect, their niche in a growing and evolving economy—and their internal structures, these organizations and many others managed technology as effectively as General Electric or AT&T. And like the research-oriented corporations, they continued to grow steadily through the years. If their growth did not benefit every worker or even every union member, it assured the labor movement a formidable presence in American society.

Achilles' heel

There was, of course, a major flaw in the unionists' approach, not in their response to technological change in general, but in their reaction to one cluster of innovations. Between 1880 and 1900, the expansion of the American market created new opportunities for technological breakthroughs in manufacturing. Inventors and managers responded with new technologies in steel, tobacco, petroleum refining, and meatpacking, which dramatically raised the ratio of capital, materials, energy, and management to labor.⁸ These industries were economically, technically, and physically distinguishable from others. Notable to contemporaries for their huge plants, profusion of machines, and armies of semiskilled workers, they acquired in the late 1920's the ungrammatical sobriquet that lingers to this day: "mass production."

The advent of the automobile and the extension of electrical power into consumer goods markets created a second generation of mass production industries. By the 1920's, these industries employed the majority of American industrial workers. But they employed only a handful of union members until the late 1930's. If the unions of the early 20th century were in fact as flexible as we have suggested, why did they have so little interest or success in organizing this important group of industries? The answer is a key to understanding the post-1935 turmoil within the "house of labor" and the enduring public images of the AFL-CIO.

The traditional answer to the supposed "failure" of the AFL is that it was wedded to a narrow craft unionism. A better answer is that it was wedded to a policy of selective recruitment, of organizing strategic groups of workers only, of "policing" rather than organizing industries. In mass production, the strategic groups were hard to identify. Skill was of little importance. There were many skilled workers in mass production, probably, on average, as many as in other types of manufacture, but they were less likely to occupy line positions. Instead, many of them made machine parts and tools or performed repairs, functions that justified their high wages and status, but were hardly a basis for policing the industry. Skilled workers in mass production were no harder to organize than other skilled workers—the unions proved that during and after World War I and in the 1930's—but they afforded the union far less leverage in dealing with the manufacturer.⁹ They were important but seldom strategic.

However, machine operators in mass production had much more power than the typical unskilled worker. Far from being the automatons of much popular writing, they had the ability to wreak havoc by ensuring that the expensive machines they operated did not perform as anticipated. The workers' potential was not fully apparent until the sit-down strikes of 1936–37 and the World War II years, but union leaders were not blind to the possibilities. To organize strategic workers in mass production, the unions were required to organize almost everyone. In the steel, auto, appliance, or tire industry, that meant enlisting a horde of new members who would, among other things, cause an imbalance in the internal politics of the unions and the labor movement. For some unions, flexibility had its limits. For others, the federal union, operated directly by the AFL, was the answer. In the rubber industry, for example, federation organizers were active among the mass production workers almost continuously after 1910. Although their success depended on factors that affected all unions, for example, the health of the Nation's economy and government policy, their record was one of sustained and persistent action.

Finally, there were the manufacturers. Mass production companies by definition produced for a large regional or national market. As a result, they were immune to most of the pressures used by unions to organize businesses that produced for the immediate locality. Usually, they could

afford to be truculent.

The CIO unions that finally did organize the mass production companies were different in many ways from other unions. In terms of their jurisdiction, they were initially narrower than the more expansive AFL bodies. Industrial rather than multi-industrial, they were wedded to an industry and faced the prospect of technological change and possible decline. The challenge came sooner than anticipated. In the late 1930's, CIO unions declined relatively and in some cases absolutely. But even that experience did not always have a salutary effect. In 1940, to cite only one case, leaders of the Rubber Workers refused to organize the Goodyear Aircraft Corp., a burgeoning defense contractor, because the aircraft workers, although employees of a rubber company, did not work with rubber. As a result, the Auto Workers, which eventually did organize the aircraft workers, now has as many members in Akron, OH, as the Rubber Workers.¹⁰ Gradually, organizations of the CIO did become multi-industrial, but they were overshadowed by the supposedly more conservative and narrower AFL organizations.

However, we should not lose sight of the fundamental point. The story of mass production unionism is a variation on the larger theme of successful adaptation to technological change. Beneath the headlines, the squabble of leaders, and the immediate challenges, there was a pattern of continuous adjustment that defies neat categorization. From the early 1900's through the World War II period, it is the continuity of union activity that distinguishes the relationship between technology and labor.

Since the 1940's, the picture has become more clouded. In the quarter century after World War II, technological change probably slowed; productivity growth rates for many industries declined and there was nothing comparable to the advent of mass production. The labor movement shared in the generally buoyant economic atmosphere, consolidating its earlier gains, achieving unprecedented respectability and becoming enmeshed in an atmosphere of economic regulation and committed, as never before, to collective bargaining. Perhaps too enmeshed and too committed. In recent years, as that period recedes and gradually comes into clearer focus, the long-term costs of postwar prosperity and more importantly, the complacency and self-congratulatory atmosphere that it spawned, become more evident. It is worth asking whether the "achievement of the workplace rule of law" and the operation of "the labor movement in its finest hour" helped or hurt unions in adapting to the longer term evolution of the economy.¹¹

The business of bargaining

Several points seem clear. First, the "ever greater expansion of the contractual net" accounted for most changes in union internal operations.¹² As employers became more adept at managing the bargaining process, union leaders had little choice but to follow suit. They devoted more time to

negotiations and employed more lawyers, accountants, and other technical experts to assist them in wringing concessions from employers and administering complex benefit programs. Their preoccupation was the price of success.

Second, collective bargaining became an effective forum for accommodating employer and employee to technological change on the shop floor. The usual bargain involved a tradeoff between mechanization and employee benefits. Some postwar agreements were spectacular. For example, the Mine Workers' contracts with the bituminous mine operators in the 1950's helped shrink the industry's labor force and the union's ranks by three quarters in exchange for seniority rights and union control of the industry's welfare fund. In one of the more flamboyant statements of the control strategy, John L. Lewis took credit for mechanization: "The coal operators never could have mechanized their mines. . . unless they were compelled to do so by the pressure of the organization of the mineworkers," he claimed in 1952. "We want participation. We ask for it."¹³ A similar arrangement helped revolutionize the longshoring industry in the 1960's.

In most cases, however, the stakes were lower and the changes less dramatic. Even when technology was not a major issue, collective bargaining typically curbed rank-and-file efforts to sabotage technological change. Most observers of postwar collective bargaining agree that collective bargaining curbed the shop-floor powers of union militants.¹⁴ In the mass production industries, at least, those powers were most often used to thwart the piecemeal innovations that typically account for most productivity gains and create an atmosphere of continuous change. The pattern after 1945 was by no means unambiguous. But as recent econometric studies have suggested, unions appear to have contributed to the advance of productivity.¹⁵

A third and more critical issue is far less clear. Did union leaders lose sight of the evolving economy because of the demands of nearly continuous negotiations? Did the imperatives of collective bargaining and the concomitant web of relations with government encourage a narrowing of perspectives and an inadvertent retreat from the aggressive policy of adaptation to technological change that characterized the most successful prewar organizations?¹⁶ Did they lose sight of the fact that the large corporations whose union contracts were so widely publicized were in many cases lethargic giants in mature industries? Did the postwar pattern of industrial relations leave the labor movement singularly ill-equipped to confront a new era of labor-saving technologies that began in the 1970's?¹⁷

We have no confident answers to these questions. The historical record is not a precise guide. However, one point seems clear. Of the major problems that have confronted unions since Gompers and his colleagues gathered in Columbus, technological change has been perhaps the least daunting, less challenging, for example, than relations with many employers and politicians, the recruitment of com-

petent leaders, and the maintenance of democratic processes. As this article suggests, union leaders enjoyed considerable success in developing techniques for managing technological change. The techniques of the early 20th century may be of little value now or in the future, but there is no reason to assume that the challenge of technological change is less solvable now than 50 or 100 years ago. Gompers' advice to "plan so that the workman could control the use of the machine through the union instead of permitting the machine to control" the workers seems no less pertinent in 1986 than in 1886. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography* (Ithaca, NY, ILR Press, 1984), p. 111.

² See David C. Mowery, "Firm Structure, Government Policy and the Organization of Industrial Research: Great Britain and the United States, 1900–1950," *Business History Review*, Winter 1984, pp. 510–11.

³ Sumner H. Slichter, *Union Policies and Industrial Management* (Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 1941), pp. 201–81. Also see Irwin Yellowitz, *Industrialization and the American Labor Movement, 1850–1900* (Port Washington, Long Island, NY, Kennikat Press, 1977), pp. 63–93.

⁴ Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930's: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," *Journal of American History*, March 1979, pp. 1026, 1034.

⁵ Robert A. Christie, *Empire in Wood: A History of the Carpenter's Union* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1956), p. 183.

⁶ Tomlins, "AFL Unions," pp. 1030–31.

⁷ *Ibid.* See Donald Gamel, *The Rise of Teamster Power in the West* (Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1972).

⁸ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1977), pp. 240–44.

⁹ See John Barnard, "Rebirth of the United Automobile Workers: The General Motors Tool and Die Makers' Strike of 1939," *Labor History*, Spring 1986, pp. 165–87; and Kevin Boyle, "Rite of Passage: The 1939 General Motors Tool and Die Strike," *Labor History*, Spring 1986, pp. 188–203. Barnard reports that in 1939, 15 percent of the auto workers were skilled (p. 166). I estimate that in the late 19th century, 10 percent of the textile workers and 20 to 25 percent of the machinery workers were skilled. Chandler cites textiles and machinery as industries that did not employ mass production technologies. See Daniel Nelson, "The American System and the American Worker," in Otto Mayr and Robert C. Post, eds., *Yankee Enterprise: The Rise of the American System of Manufacturers* (Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981), p. 177; and Chandler, *The Visible Hand*, pp. 242 and 270–72.

¹⁰ This information was obtained from local union officials.

¹¹ Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions, 1920–1985* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 157.

¹² The quotation is from David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 201. I am indebted to Melvyn Dubofsky for permitting me to read his unpublished manuscript on unions and technological change. See especially p. 25.

¹³ Curtis Seltzer, *Fire in the Hole: Miners and Managers in the American Coal Industry* (Lexington, MA, University of Kentucky Press, 1986), p. 66.

¹⁴ See Brody, *Workers in Industrial America*, pp. 198–210; the Dubofsky paper; and Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions, Labor Relations, Law and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880–1960* (London, England, Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 247–328.

¹⁵ Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York, Basic Books, 1984), pp. 163, 170. See also Barry T. Hirsch

and John T. Addison, *The Economic Analysis of Unions* (Boston, MA, Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 180–207.

¹⁶ See Tomlins, *The State and the Unions*, for this point.

¹⁷ See Harley Shaiken, *Work Transformed: Automation and Labor in the Computer Age* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), especially pp. 247–63.

Unions need to confront the results of new technology

DENNIS CHAMOT

How will unions adjust to future developments? If anything can be learned from a study of the past, it is that unions do not oppose technological change *per se*. They seek to serve their members. If the changes bring benefits—for example, higher productivity accompanied by higher pay—unions can help to promote the changes. However, if the new technologies are applied in ways that lead to reduced employment or poorer working conditions, then opposition, until an accommodation can be reached, should be expected.

At least two factors exist that make the current situation much more difficult than was the case in the past. The first factor is that the great flexibility of computer systems and other modern technologies allow, to a much greater extent than was possible before, the elimination of workers by design. In other words, one of the goals of a redesign can be to reduce labor demand because the computer systems can take over many functions that required the presence of human beings before. It can be argued that earlier technological changes increased the productivity of individual workers but did not necessarily change the fundamental relationship of the worker to the job. Today, the worker is being removed from the job in many cases.

The second important factor is the great portability of electronic work. Land cannot be moved. The location of particular farms and mines cannot be changed. They may be closed, but they cannot be moved. Factories can be moved either to other areas in the United States or to other countries. This kind of shift could be done over a period of time, say one to several years. Modern office work, however, particularly the rapidly increasing fraction that is done electronically, can be shifted literally at the touch of a button.

Entering new period of change

All of this means that the techniques developed by unions over an active 100-year history may not be sufficient to deal with current and future problems. Certainly much can and will be done through collective bargaining to adjust to changing circumstances, but we are entering another period

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of major fundamental change. Some modern technologies, especially those based on computers, are just not the same as earlier ones. The effects can be much more pronounced, both on employment demand as well as job design. The techniques and the goals of unions will have to adjust to meet new challenges. We are doing just that.

As the economy shifted from manufacturing to services, unions in the service sector expanded rapidly. To give one example: the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees had about 100,000 members in 1960; it has 10 times that number today. Other unions have grown or have avoided major declines by increasing their organizing efforts in new areas employing white-collar and service workers.

In the face of the many obstacles placed in the unions' path, it can be argued that American unions have been doing very well indeed to hold their own and in some cases to grow. For well over 100 years, American business and occasionally government have not accepted the social utility of unions. This is not the case in many other countries.

Within the current environment, the flexibility afforded management by modern technologies presents American labor with problems that are qualitatively different than in the past. We are entering new waters. It is a time of regrouping and of exploration. Dealing with the results of new technologies is one of the most important issues facing American labor in the years to come. I have no idea what the specifics are going to be, but I am fully confident that we will be just as successful as we have been in the past. □

Technological change and unionization in the service sector

CYNTHIA B. COSTELLO

The shift from an economy based on manufacturing to one based on services presents organized labor with major challenges. What the labor movement confronts is dwindling power in the manufacturing industries where it once exercised extensive control and relatively little presence in service industries, which are fast becoming the dominant industries in the American economy. In order to regain the position it once held in American society, the labor movement must assess the effects of technological change on service sector workers and develop new strategies for unionization.

How are new technologies transforming work in the service industries and what do these changes suggest for organizing service sector workers? In the clerical occupations,

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the evidence regarding the loss of jobs due to automation is contradictory. On the one hand, a well-publicized study conducted by Wassily Leontief and Faye Duchin predicted that clerical employment would decline from 17.8 percent of the labor force in 1978 to 13.5 percent of the labor force in 1990.¹ On the other hand, the National Academy of Sciences concluded that in the most plausible worst-case scenario, clerical employment would lose 2 percentage points of its share of total employment by 1995.² What both the more pessimistic and the more optimistic researchers share is an assessment that we can expect slower growth in the clerical occupations over the next decade, in part due to the continued introduction of laborsaving technologies.

The evidence is also contradictory on the effects of technological change on the quality of clerical jobs. As has been the case in other sectors, office automation leads to the deskilling of old jobs and the creation of new skilled jobs. By now, the history of the deskilling of the secretarial occupation is familiar. The job of the traditional secretary combined the multiple tasks of coordinating, typing, transcribing, and filing. By contrast, the job of a person working at a word processor in a large insurance company or bank today frequently involves the continuous repetition of one task. Many persons working at word processing machines repeatedly enter precoded information onto form letters, which are stored on the word processor.³

At the same time, however, the introduction of automated technologies into industries with large numbers of clerical jobs has brought with it the creation of new skilled occupations. In the insurance industry, for example, the introduction of computers has allowed some clerical workers to take on the tasks previously performed by professional insurance adjusters. Nevertheless, I would argue that in the absence of unionization, the long-term consequence of technological change on the quality of clerical jobs is likely to be negative.

What about the effects of technological change on other workers in the service industries, such as food service workers, janitors, and hospital aides? In many service sector jobs, technological change appears to play a less significant role than it has with clerical jobs. For example, technological innovation has done little to change the demand for or the work process of cleaning service workers. The work still requires the intensive labor of workers, which cannot be readily replaced by machines. Another important difference between clerical jobs and other jobs in the service sector is that many service sector jobs cannot be exported. The very nature of many service sector jobs involves the direct, personal provision of services to consumers. The jobs of food service workers, janitors, and hospital aides cannot be relocated.

Technological change in the service sector confronts the labor movement with both obstacles and opportunities for organization. One key obstacle arises from the positive expectations often generated by the technologies themselves. Workers sometimes see the introduction of word processors,

for example, as a positive development offering possibilities for acquiring new skills that will provide the basis for advancement. At the same time, however, these same workers who anticipate positive consequences from the introduction of new technologies may become ripe for organizing when their expectations go unmet. For example, when clerical workers are offered the opportunity to take on new skills in their jobs, such as in the case of insurance adjusting, but are not remunerated for those skills, dissatisfaction can arise.

Technological issues often prove insufficiently concrete to provide a basis for organizing. Therefore, a strategy based on technological change alone is less likely to be successful than one that combines demands for control over technology with other demands for enhancing workers' rights in the workplace. The issue of pay equity or comparable worth provides an example. Pay equity or comparable worth refers to the strategy wherein workers, usually female workers, seek to increase their wages based on evidence that their jobs require skills comparable to those of the jobs held by other workers who are more highly remunerated.⁴ The experience of certain unions, such as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and the Service Employees International Union, has demonstrated that pay equity can be a powerful and effective issue for organizing.

New possibilities exist for joining the issues of technological change and pay equity. Insofar as technological change often adversely affects the skill levels of occupations in the service sector, the long-term success of the pay equity movement may depend on workers' ability to control technological change. If workers are unable to intervene in the process of automation, the very skilled jobs that are today the target of pay equity demands may be eliminated or replaced by low skilled jobs. But by linking demands for pay equity to demands for control over workplace technologies, the labor movement may succeed not only in breathing new life into Samuel Gompers' admonition that workers must control machines rather than be controlled by them, but also in organizing the unorganized. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ Wassily Leontief and Faye Duchin, *The Impacts of Automation on Employment, 1963-2000* (New York, Institute for Economic Analysis, New York University, 1984).

² Heidi I. Hartmann, Robert E. Kraut, and Louise A. Tilly, eds., *Computer Chips and Paper Clips: Vol. 1, Technology and Women's Employment* (Washington, DC, National Academy Press, 1986).

³ *Automation of America's Offices, 1985-2000*. OTA-CIT-287 (Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Congress, 1985).

⁴ Donald J. Treiman and Heidi I. Hartmann, eds., *Women, Work and Wages: Equal Pay for Jobs of Equal Value*, Report of the Committee on Occupational Classification and Analysis (Washington, DC, National Academy Press, 1981).

Globalization and the worldwide division of labor

HARLEY SHAIKEN

In the 1950's and 1960's, certain tradeoffs governed where U.S. firms located production: many labor-intensive jobs were shipped offshore where labor costs were lower and where unions were nonexistent or very weak. But, automation was located in the United States where the necessary skills and industrial infrastructure were found. And, in fact, for workers and unions, automating was the alternative to shipping jobs out of the United States. Technological constraints existed in most developing economies that prohibited the easy transfer of complex, sophisticated, and highly automated production processes. Those tradeoffs are now quite different. With the advent of worldwide telecommunications and with the improvement in infrastructure in newly industrializing countries, the most sophisticated and automated production processes can be located throughout the world. In some cases, computers mean that work that was formerly transferred abroad is shipped back to the United States. In most other cases, just the opposite is taking place. And with all the attention on the trade deficit and mounting criticism of Japan, an increasing amount of the trade deficit is attributable to U.S. firms, either wholly owned or joint ventures, transferring important elements of the production process to places such as South Korea, Mexico, and Taiwan.

Transferring production

The issue is not the very pressing need of these countries to develop and to have those laws and trade policies that allow that development, but rather the ability of multinational firms to transfer production with a great deal more mobility and far fewer constraints than existed in the past. It is not simply a question of factory work. Sophisticated design processes and key aspects of services in financial,

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programming, and other areas are also subject to export.

Take the design of a new car, the Mercury Tracer, that will be introduced in 1987. It is a small, sporty car that typifies the technological changes that are taking place. The car was designed by the Japanese and its engine and transmission will also be built in Japan. The car itself will be assembled in Mexico and sold in the United States. What is important is not just the transfer of the labor-intensive parts of the vehicle's production, but a worldwide division of labor from the point of design to the point of assembly, wherever both happen to be most convenient for the firm.

One automaker operates a major electronic components subsidiary in Ohio, providing parts for automobiles, such as wire harnesses and other electronic equipment. The company sought to introduce new technologies and also to make dramatic cuts in wages and benefits. The union local there initially resisted, concerned about losing jobs and gains that were built up over many years. Ultimately, the company took a number of local leaders down to a new plant in Juarez, Mexico, just across from El Paso, and showed the union leaders the technologies used in the plant, pointed out the capacity, and said, "It is your choice. Either you concede what we are asking in terms of bargaining or the work that you do in Ohio will be transferred to Juarez. If you think this is an idle threat, this is the plant. This is the production process." Rather than wages and working conditions of workers in Mexico slowly rising to the levels of the United States or South Korea or Brazil, just the opposite is taking place: that is, the ability to globally locate production is serving to ratchet down wages and working conditions. In many cases, workers are pitted against each other for the available jobs rather than being able to improve their living standards based on the best conditions that exist.

Solidarity: key to the future

But with this said, the U.S. labor movement brings important traditions to addressing the issue of technological change: while technological change, computers, or microelectronics in many ways are new, dealing with labor's most important values of solidarity and cooperation provide the key for moving changes in a positive direction.



A Century of Struggle

Elements of paradox in U.S. labor history

In America, unions are seen as a special interest group, with methods and purposes not wholly consistent with national values; strategic decisions by early union leaders contributed to this problem, as has the treatment of labor by historians

DAVID BRODY

In 1834, the General Trades' Union of Boston put forth a "Declaration of Rights" that began: "When a number of individuals associate together in a public manner for the purpose of promoting their common welfare, respect for public opinion, the proper basis of a republican form of government, under which they associate, requires that they should state to their fellow citizens the motives which actuate them in adopting such a course." Sound familiar? It is of course a paraphrase of the Declaration of Independence. The document as a whole, in fact, reads like a rewriting of the Declaration, and so does much else in the rhetoric of the American labor movement of the 19th century. One of its hallmarks was a linking of labor's cause with the Nation's republican heritage. For many years, the 4th of July was a workers' holiday, celebrated by them with such toasts as: "The working men, the legitimate children of '76. Their sorrows left the legacy of freedom and equality. They are now of age and are laboring to guarantee the principles of the revolution."

A labor movement battling for the principles of '76 could scarcely be attacked on the grounds of un-Americanism. So compelling, in fact, was the free labor ideology that it was appropriated by Abraham Lincoln and the emerging Republican Party of the 1850's in the debate over slavery. But what kind of labor movement could be built on republican

principles? First, it would have to be inclusive in nature, open not only to wage earners, but to all who thought of themselves as "producers." Second, it would have to concern itself above all with defending the equal rights and independence of working people, that is to say, it would have to challenge the emerging industrial order rather than settling for bread-and-butter gains. On these principles of inclusivity and basic reform, the Knights of Labor enjoyed spectacular success in the first half of the 1880's, and an equally spectacular collapse in the second half, repeating a history of organizational failure by labor reform movements that extended back before the Civil War.

In founding the American Federation of Labor in 1886, Samuel Gompers was intent on constructing a labor movement that would survive and grow in the American environment. He and his circle, mainly German socialists, had the advantage of coming out of a tradition apart from republicanism. They appropriated the labor program of Karl Marx (divested of his rhetoric and revolutionary ardor), and called it pure-and-simple unionism. This meant, first, that power alone counted; second, that power depended on economic organization, not political action; third, that only wage earners, organized along occupational lines, belonged in a labor movement. Finally, the movement should devote itself to winning immediate gains for its members. It did not dismiss the possibility of larger change—in trade union unity, Gompers wrote in 1899, lay "the germ of the future

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state”—but visionary thinking was beyond the province of the labor movement. It was concerned with the here and now. “I am perfectly satisfied to fight the battles of today, of those here, and those that come tomorrow, so their conditions may be improved, and they may be better prepared to fight in the contests or solve the problems that may be presented to them. . . . Every step that the workers make or take, every vantage point gained, is a solution in itself.”

Gompers’ was an approach well calculated for building a viable trade union movement. But this was accomplished by distancing organized labor from traditional republican values rooted in America’s ideological heritage. Trade union leaders did not question the place of republicanism—with its connotations of equal rights for all—in the larger American society, but they believed that it could not endow their movement with either the organizational structure or the concrete agenda that a workers’ movement required in order to survive.

Here, then, is a central paradox of American labor history: To embrace the republican values of the larger society was to have a labor movement that would not work. And to have a movement that *would* work required some degree of disengagement from those American values.

In the circumstances, the labor movement scarcely had any choice. Gompers’ papers, which are now beginning to appear in a major letterpress edition, testify powerfully to the sure hand with which he shaped the American Federation of Labor. But the decision to disengage from republicanism turned out to exact a heavy price on the labor movement, for it thereupon became vulnerable to attack by those better able to clothe themselves in the traditional values of the larger society. It was no accident that antiunion employers enjoyed such great success in mobilizing the powers of the courts on their behalf after the 1880’s, or that they dubbed the open shop “the American plan” in the 1920’s.

It is apparent, moreover, that the AFL soon recognized what it had conceded. In Gompers’ appeals to patriotism after the 1890’s, and in labor’s embrace of such nativist issues as immigration restriction, we see an effort to regain some of the ground lost by the disengagement from republican traditions. Much more successful were labor’s efforts to link itself to the larger struggle for social justice that began during the Progressive era and matured under the aegis of the New Deal. From the 1930’s to the 1970’s, organized labor enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy as a force for social justice. But it had not lost its vulnerability, and, as is evident in current public opinion polls, the labor movement during the 1980’s has been singularly unsuccessful in the battle for public sympathy. Its eroding power is very much a function of the dubious regard in which it is held by the larger society.

The issue of labor’s legitimacy has resonated in the historical treatment of the trade union movement. Let it be said by way of preface that history is by its nature a form of legitimization, selecting out of the past what is worthy of inclu-

sion and indicating how that remembered past should be understood by the present. For American trade unionism, problematic as its place has been in the larger society, that legitimizing role of history has perhaps been of special importance. It was no accident that the first histories of American labor appeared at roughly the same time that pure-and-simple unionism began to dominate the labor movement, or that the first generations of labor historians saw it as part of their task to legitimize this form of trade unionism. There was, in fact, a remarkable intellectual confluence between Gompers and his trade union circle and John R. Commons and the Wisconsin school of labor scholarship.

The origins of labor history are found not in the development of the American historical studies—workers were of little interest to the emerging historical profession—but in a bitter struggle over the proper direction of late 19th century economics. The dominant school was classical economics. It had come under attack by reformers, strongly influenced by German scholarship, for its formalistic assumption of an ideal marketplace of perfect competition ruled by the laws of supply and demand and, equally, for the defense of the status quo which this approach implied.

History attracted these critics of classical economics because it offered empirical evidence of a real world of institutions and power relationships that shaped the way markets actually functioned. This was what prompted Richard T. Ely, John R. Commons, and other pioneering labor economists to begin their historical studies. And, where conservatives had used the classical economics to attack trade unionism as an invalid intrusion on the marketplace, the institutional economists took the opposite tack: for them, historical research was a vehicle for showing why trade unions were a natural response to the power realities governing modern economic life. This legitimizing function was most fully realized in Selig Perlman’s *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (1928), which celebrated American trade unionism as the labor movement most “organically” rooted in the psychology of rank-and-file workers. And, in more workaday fashion, it suffused the prolific monographic literature of the Wisconsin school, perhaps best exemplified in the writings of Philip Taft.

In recent decades, a reaction set in against the established labor history. Within labor economics, a neoclassical approach superseded institutionalism, and with it, the interest in historical research. The field was increasingly appropriated by academic historians, whose horizons have rapidly expanded since the 1950’s beyond the conventional boundaries of the discipline. The study of workers has become one of the most dynamic of historical fields, generating a rich literature that has placed it within the mainstream of American historical scholarship.

The new labor history, as it has been called, is technically far more accomplished than the older institutionalism, both in its research and as historical writing, and is likewise more adventurous and far-ranging in exploring fresh lines of in-

quiry. But this new historical scholarship has not taken up the legitimizing function which institutional labor history had performed for trade unionism. In fact, that identification has been seen by a new generation of scholars as one of the weaknesses of the old labor history, limiting it to the minority of workers represented by trade unionism (10 percent or less until the 1930's) and confining the subject even there to narrow institutional questions. Beyond that, the new labor history was invested with an ideological thrust that was unsympathetic to pure-and-simple unionism. The key influence derived from the English Marxist historian E.P. Thompson, whose *The Making of the English Work Class* (1963) became something of a model for the new labor history. Many of the younger labor historians, moreover, came out of the New Left of the 1960's, and drew from it a high valuation on the virtues of rank-and-file activity and of workers' control on the shop floor. Seen from that perspective, trade unions seemed to be confining institutions, designed to hold workers in check rather than to liberate them.

So here we have a second paradox. The very sources of scholarly vitality that have enlarged the study of labor history—and indeed moved it to the cutting edge of the discipline—have served also to diminish the historical stock of the American labor movement. There are, of course, countervailing forces at work. The comfortable assumption of a powerful trade union movement under which the new labor historians operated no longer applies. And the questions of institutional power which first stimulated an interest in trade union history once again are engaging the attention of labor historians. So we may anticipate some reversion to the earlier pattern of legitimization. Yet there is no question but that a toll has been taken on American trade unionism. In its time of need, the movement found labor history working at cross-purposes with its ongoing struggle to surmount the liability it had incurred when Samuel Gompers chose to disengage trade unionism from the Nation's republican traditions. □

How union members and nonmembers view the role of unions

CAROL KEEGAN

In 1985, as Research Director for the Labor Institute of Public Affairs, I had the privilege of working with the AFL-CIO's Evolution of Work Committee, a high-level planning committee assembled to identify the most promising directions for the future growth of the labor movement. One of

the ways the committee informed its deliberations was through an assessment of public opinion about organized labor. The committee set out to learn more about how the public thinks about labor unions, so that future communications activities would reflect an understanding of labor's public image.

After making a thorough review of existing public opinion data on this subject, the committee decided it still needed more detailed information, so it commissioned a special study. The Louis Harris Organization was selected to conduct this survey which involved nearly 1,500 telephone interviews with a national sample of employed persons, four-fifths of whom were not currently members of a labor union.

A number of important findings were derived from this survey, but perhaps most relevant to this discussion were the data that pointed to a communication gap we will need to close in future efforts to tell labor's story. This gap appeared when the survey used a series of questions to compare nonunion and union perceptions of how unions function for the workers who form them. The survey sample had been specifically designed to permit such comparisons, with the majority of the sample composed of nonunion employees, but with a smaller subsample of union members asked comparable questions during their interviews. Our reasoning in building such nonmember-member comparisons into the survey's capabilities was to make it possible to evaluate the difference in attitudes between persons who have had direct experience with belonging to a union and nonmembers who have learned about union membership indirectly through media coverage or hearsay, for example.

To structure this comparison in the survey questionnaire, we asked members and nonmembers alike to consider a range of 10 workplace conditions. These conditions ranged from wage and benefit considerations to less tangible concerns like whether a worker participated in decisions affecting his or her job. In the questions asked of union members, we asked people to predict what would happen to these conditions if they lost their union—would the situation get better, get worse, or stay the same? Nonmembers were presented with the same 10 workplace conditions and asked if the introduction of a union in their workplace would make each condition get better, get worse, or stay the same.

The results show a very different pattern of member versus nonmember response to these questions, suggesting that there is indeed an "image gap" between those with direct experience of union membership and those whose information about unions is acquired from more indirect sources. Union members predicted that the loss of their union would result in a worsening of a wide range of wage and nonwage factors. The following conditions were most often expected to worsen: benefits (67 percent said benefits would "get worse"), pay (62 percent), job security (56 percent), treatment by supervisors (46 percent), workers' ability to participate in decisions affecting their jobs (38 percent), and

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health and safety conditions (38 percent). On the other hand, nonmembers were most likely to predict the union would improve their pay and benefits (43 percent said each would “get better”), but were much less likely to predict a union impact on nonwage conditions.

So, it seems those with direct experience with union membership realize unions help them improve a variety of important conditions in their daily working lives, while nonmembers primarily see unions as improving pay and benefits and seem unaware of nonwage aspects of union representation. Union membership seems to have much broader connotations for the member than it does for the nonmember.

The Evolution of Work Survey generated many additional findings—such as the statement by 30 percent of the nonmembers surveyed that they would vote for a union if an election were held in their workplace “tomorrow”—but the communication gap between member and nonmember perceptions of the range of benefits of union membership is a pivotal finding to emphasize in this discussion of the public’s images of organized labor.

Apparently, we who currently are involved in the labor movement’s public communication initiatives, such as the AFL-CIO’s new Labor Institute of Public Affairs, would do well to look within as we consider what messages and images will be most important to convey to the general public. As we examine the gaps in the public’s understanding of trade unionism and attempt to fill those gaps with convincing evidence, perhaps it is the experience of our own members—their satisfaction in membership, the benefits of unionism they see in their daily working lives, the kinds of problems unions have helped them manage and solve—that will best tell the story. These are the types of messages the Harris survey suggested will be invaluable as we try to help nonmembers grasp the full meaning of union representation. □

American labor history: a conspiracy of silence?

ROY ROSENZWEIG

Within the universities, the field of labor history is flourishing as never before. First-rate scholarly books and articles issue forth regularly from the university presses—a surprising number of them winning the historical profession’s top prizes. Yet, as even an unsystematic survey shows, popular presentations of labor history (especially high-quality ones) are much more difficult to find.

Probably the most pervasive way to present labor history

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to public audiences is to not present it at all. To a large degree, this has been the practice of *American Heritage*—the Nation’s leading popular history magazine—during most of its 33 years. I pick on *American Heritage*, not because it has an exceptionally bad record, but because it is an often excellent magazine that has followed the general tendency of the popular media to ignore America’s laboring past. A check of the detailed index of the magazine’s first 28 years, a period during which it published something like 2,000 articles and about 10 million words, yields the following number of references to labor leaders: Samuel Gompers, 13; John L. Lewis, 8; Bill Haywood, 8; Emma Goldman, 3; Walter Reuther, 2; William Z. Foster, 2; and Terence V. Powderly, 1. Most other labor leaders of note were not mentioned at all.

By contrast, consider the 38 references to Andrew Carnegie, the 44 references to members of the Vanderbilt family, the 37 references to members of the Astor family, the 37 references to P.T. Barnum, and the more than 300 references to Theodore Roosevelt. Similarly, the index contains almost twice as many references to Christmas as to strikes and almost 10 times as many references to Mark Twain as to the American Federation of Labor. In the last couple of years, *American Heritage* has become a bit more eclectic and pluralistic in its coverage of U.S. history, but labor history has received only marginally more attention.

However, *American Heritage* is far from the worst offender in a general conspiracy of silence about American labor history. One searches with difficulty in other arenas for the public presentation of history to find discussions of labor history, particularly if we define that field specifically to mean the history of unions, labor leaders, or strikes. Take museums, for example. Certainly, many museums, influenced by new social and labor history scholarship, have recently offered such fine exhibits about work and workers as “Workers’ World: The Industrial Village and the Company Town” at the Hagley Museum, Wilmington, DE, or “Perfect in Her Place: Women at Work in Industrial America” at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in Washington, DC. Yet, it is much more difficult to think of exhibits that have focused on the development of the trade union movement or particular moments in labor history.

Even more difficult to find are museums devoted primarily to labor history. There are, of course, some excellent museums, particularly in New England, that focus on industrialization, and some of these have begun to do a fine job of incorporating the experience of the factory workers. But, so far as I know, the Botto House in New Jersey, which commemorates, in part, the Paterson strike of 1913, is the only museum in the United States that focuses on the traditional concerns of labor history. This against the dozens, if not hundreds, of historic sites, historic houses, and museums that celebrate industrialists and great triumphs in industrial and business history.

Even black history, hardly a topic that is well represented in popular history, is more fully portrayed in museums and historic sites than is labor history. One looks in vain across the museum landscape to find museums or even more than a handful of historic markers devoted to great moments in labor history. Even in a prolabor State like Michigan, for example, it is only quite recently—and apparently after some struggle—that the State government decided to erect some markers commemorating the Flint sitdown strikes of 1937.

Obviously, one of the problems in creating such labor history sites and museums is that the historic locations often belong to the companies that the workers were fighting. And one might expect those companies to have little interest in preserving the memory of moments of struggle. One would hardly expect General Motors to turn Fisher Body One in Flint into a museum of 1930's labor history. But this reality only points up the larger set of power relations that keeps labor history out of the public sphere. How many Hollywood movies have depicted great labor conflicts or the stories of labor leaders? The only two recent ones that I can think of are *The Molly Maguires* and *Norma Rae*, both made by the same director, Martin Ritt.

I could chronicle this absence at some length, but let me instead move to a second problem in the public presentation of labor history—its misrepresentation. Obviously, this is a slippery question, because one person's misrepresentation is another's incisive interpretation. Still, I think there is a pervasive tendency to underplay fundamental conflicts between bosses and workers and to overemphasize the potential of consensus and compromise.

Allow me again to turn to the pages of *American Heritage* for an example. One of the magazine's rare forays into labor history produced a 1960 account of the Pittsburgh Homestead steel strike of 1892 that totally absolved Andrew Carnegie of any blame for the conflict. The strike was portrayed as the result of a misunderstanding between an obstinate Henry Clay Frick and an equally obstinate set of steelworkers, rather than a fundamental struggle for control of the work process. "The truth was," according to a sidebar to the article, "that had Carnegie been on the grounds when the strike broke, trouble might never have started, for the men worshiped him."

Although I have not done any systematic survey, I would argue that most public presentations of labor history tend to minimize the sources and depth of conflict between workers and employers. Thus, for example, in 1979, television viewers were offered a version of the infamous Triangle factory fire of 1911, in which 146 women factory workers perished, that focused on domestic melodrama and *Towering Inferno* theatrics and avoided issues of industrial safety and employer negligence. Again, a labor conflict appeared to be the result of a tragic accident rather than fundamentally differing interests.

In a 1979 study of 17 commonly used high school text-

books on American history, Jean Anyon found a similar pattern.¹ The books she studied provided very little labor history information, only about 6 pages on average in the chapters covering the crucial period from the Civil War to World War I. Almost all of them discussed the same three strikes: the 1877 railroad strikes, the 1892 Homestead strike, and the 1894 Pullman strike. And in most cases, the texts argued on this basis that strikes "only hurt labor's cause, are costly, and result in violence."

By contrast, the textbooks generally discussed labor legislation of the period in glowing terms, without noting that such laws were subsequently either ignored or declared unconstitutional. As Anyon concludes, "The omission of successful strikes and the implied success of political avenues for the resolution of conflict suggest a desire to avoid conflict and to facilitate consensus."

Similar studies of social studies textbooks, ranging from the American Federation of Labor's 1923 report on social studies in public institutions to Mark Starr's 1947 study ("Labor Looks at Education") to Will Scoggin's 1966 examination of Los Angeles textbooks to Richard Fantasia's detailed 1978 consideration of texts used in Buffalo, NY, document the same pattern of neglect and bias in the treatment of labor history.²

The third and most subtle problem in the public presentation of labor history is the divorce of the past from the present. And here, the problem is much broader than labor history itself; it reflects the larger tendency of our culture to avoid making connections between our history and our current lives and policies. It is the sort of attitude that allows us to celebrate the lives of leaders of important social and political movements while allowing the gains achieved by those lives to be eroded. It is also the sort of attitude I see among my students, who are perfectly willing to sympathize with the sufferings of workers in the late 19th century while denouncing labor unions in the present.

Finally, to return once more to *American Heritage*, when the journal did run an article on the 1937 General Motors sitdown strike in 1982, the author painted a sympathetic portrait of the strikers. But his conclusion suggested that labor and management had achieved "parity" by the end of the 1930's, and that the labor movement therefore no longer needed tactics like the sitdowns or aggressive organizers like the radicals who had participated in the strikes. The magazine's then-editor did use the article to offer a more contemporary note about the "precious right to organize." Ironically, his reference was to the Polish labor movement, and not to any of the important labor-management problems that remain to be addressed in the United States today.

A more general tendency to divorce the past from the present can be found in many industrial museums. It is hardly an accident, in fact, that such museums have flourished only when the industry in question has died out locally. In New England, for example, virtually every town now has a museum focusing on the textile industry. But

nowhere can one find museums that examine work in such currently important local industries as insurance, health care, or high technology. Moreover, as Mary Blewett has argued in a recent study of textile history museums in New England, those museums often evade the current implications of their presentations, particularly for our understanding of industrial capitalism as a system.³

These impressionistic comments may present an excessively gloomy picture. After all, there are numerous bright spots in the public presentation of labor history. There have, of course, been a number of very good labor history documentary films in recent years, although since 1981, public funding for such projects has been increasingly difficult to obtain. The 20 or so State labor history societies have sponsored numerous worthwhile projects—from erecting historic markers to establishing walking tours to conducting essay contests. The Massachusetts History Workshop has been particularly energetic and innovative in sponsoring commemorations, celebrations, and reunions around important moments in local labor history. Children's history books provide some surprisingly good and progressive presentations of labor history.⁴ The Longshoremen's union on the West Coast recently commissioned a mural commemorating the 1934 San Francisco general strike. And the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in New York recently mounted an exhibit on the Triangle Fire. Finally, the American Social History Project at the City University of New York is producing some excellent labor history curriculum materials for high schools and colleges.

Still, when we compare the thriving state of academic labor history with the relatively dismal state of popular knowledge about, interest in, and understanding of labor history, we cannot help but conclude that this is an arena to which scholars and trade unionists (and members of the general public as well) should devote increasing attention in the coming years. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ Jean Anyon, "Ideology and United States History Textbooks," *Harvard Educational Review*, August 1979, pp. 361–86.

² Richard Fantasia, "The Treatment of the American Labor Movement in Social Studies Textbooks: A Case Study in Clarity or Mystification," unpublished M.S. thesis (State University of New York at Buffalo, 1978), reviews these studies.

³ Mary Blewett, "Machines, Workers, and Capitalists: The Interpretation of Workers and Industrialization at the Textile History Museums of New England," in Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums and Historic Sites in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, forthcoming 1988.)

⁴ Joshua Brown, "Into the Minds of Babes: Children's Books and the Past," in Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1986), pp. 67–84.

Are the media shortchanging organized labor?

JOHN A. GRIMES

At one time, I was a labor reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, and, as such, was one of those persons affecting the public perception of labor unions. The *Journal* became a very important voice in translating what labor was doing, what it was thinking, and what the consequences would be for a public—the business community—that was very interested in all of those things. This reflected a conscious decision by the editors of the newspaper that labor union activities were extremely important to business.

Labor reporters in the 1940's, 1950's, and 1960's were major figures on major newspapers in major cities across the Nation: New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis. We talked to each other, exchanging information and ideas. We talked to labor union officials, business agents, and local union officers—and rank and filers—as well as international union presidents and vice presidents. We talked to the academic community. There was in this communication process an important cross-fertilization, a reaching beyond narrow geographical boundaries, that brought a breadth and depth to our reporting. This provided our reading public—and our constituency of labor union members and officials, industrial relations personnel in industry, the academic community with a particular interest in labor-management relations, and government officials—with a seasoned, considered, and balanced view of events taking place in the area of their prime interest.

I do not see that kind of emphasis on labor coverage among the major newspapers of today. But perhaps part of the reason is that, in earlier years, what was happening in labor was crisis, crisis, crisis. There were strikes, there were picket-line beatings. There were indictments. There were trials. There was lots of action and lots of show. Along with that, for a considerable period during the 1930's and 1940's, there was a great deal of visible advance by labor unions. It was exciting, a moving story.

Looking back at those times from the perspective of some distance, I wonder if reporters approached the labor story correctly. In reporting on the turbulence in the labor movement, did the media create some distortions that did not really help anybody? Did the media provide the true story, or did they fail to serve the audience they were trying to reach by giving them a wrong perception? Did they, in fact, bend the trade union movement a little out of shape?

Another reason for the decline in media attention could be that the labor story is more complicated to cover today. It involves dealing with economics, with all sorts of social

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matters, and with politics. But when I used to go out into the field to report on labor, go to a union convention, or talk to some union leader, I would very often find that the local reporter assigned to the story was actually his newspaper's police reporter, who had been sent out to cover a strike or some other potentially dramatic development. He often had little perception of what the labor movement was, where it had come from, or what the important issues were.

A lot of the drama went out of the labor movement because of the developing complexity of the economy and changes in the workplace and in the economy. And it seems to me that most newspapers do not want to invest the time in covering a story with many subtle complexities that the reporter must digest and put into perspective. So it does appear that the media have shortchanged the labor movement. Television simply is not, except in too few cases, equipped or inclined to interpret the labor movement to the public. Print journalism can—as it has in the past—but it does not seem very interested in doing so now.

I think this is a disservice to the reading public and to the reader constituencies I cited earlier. This lack leaves the field of comment on matters affecting the trade union move-

ment open to those persons whose views are more often a reflection of what they believe the trade union movement ought to be rather than what, in today's world, it is able to be.

If today's labor movement is going to make an impact through the public press, its representatives must explain to reporters, editors, and newspaper owners why labor is an important element in the local economy. When I went on the labor beat during the 1950's, I found that I did not know anything about labor unions or the labor movement, but I also found that the people I talked to within the trade union movement were very willing to help me learn. They were interested in presenting the most positive image they could, and they helped train me. I wrote some things that they liked, and some they did not like, but even so, they were eager to have their story told because they believed that more good than bad would come of telling that story in an honest manner. I think that was a correct decision; it may have been risky, but they had confidence in their position. Unfortunately, for labor to try to reach the public through the media now would be difficult because there are very few people in the newspaper business listening out there. □

CORRECTION

The following is a letter from J. Stephen Pretanik, director of science and technology at the National Broiler Council:

In your article, "New basket of goods and services being priced in revised CPI," which appeared in the January 1987 issue of the *Monthly Labor Review*, you indicated that the efficiencies attained in the poultry industry are achieved with the use of growth hormones. In reality, this could not be further from the truth. Commercial broiler/fryer chickens, as well as turkeys, are not fed or administered hormones in any manner. This may be verified with both the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Center for Veterinary Medicine and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service. In fact, hormones have not been used in commercial broiler/fryer chickens since 1959, when the Food and Drug Administration banned the use of DES in poultry.

I am bringing this to your attention because the use of hormones appears to be a sensitive issue with the public. Our members, who produce and process more than 85 percent of the broiler/fryer chickens consumed in this country, are very concerned that the positive image enjoyed by chickens could be seriously damaged if the public thought they were fed or administered hormones.
