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WORKING HARD FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

Workers and Their Unions, World War I to the Present

Randi Storch

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Working Hard for the American Dream

Workers and Their Unions, World War I to the Present

Randi Storch

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Cover image: More than 10,000 people from across Wisconsin marched on the state capitol to protest Governor Walker’s proposed budget repair bill that would eliminate

collective bargaining rights for public employees, among other things. Courtesy, Emily Mills.

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Introduction

Back to the Future

When I think back on my undergraduate courses, I cannot recall one instance when a professor uttered the words “class conflict,” “labor movement,” or “union struggle.” Growing up in a working-class neighborhood as a daughter of a union electrician and housewife, I took it for granted that history in general and US history in particular were not about me, my family, or my neighbors, but instead, about people with power who somehow controlled national events.

What a surprise, upon entering graduate school, to find that United States Labor and Working-Class History was an actual course being offered. It seemed as though I had entered some parallel universe where one’s reality is turned upside down. In this case, working-class people, replete with their own ideology, politics, and movements, determined the historical narrative. Students discussed how different American history looked when examined from the perspective of people who lacked family wealth or access to higher education and instead had to rely on their own hands and labor to put food on the table and pay the bills. From the first day of class, I was hooked.

Over the course of my graduate training I learned about new subdisciplines, including social history and the new political history. They showed that labor historians were not alone but part of a generation of historians trained in the 1960s and 1970s who conceptualized an entirely different way of doing history. Labor history pioneers of the 1920s penned an institutionally driven picture of the past with a heavy emphasis on major labor unions and leaders: this new generation struggled to understand how ordinary people

experienced work and how class shaped their lives, their interactions with others, and their relationship to the state. Yet despite all the time passed, books written, songs sung, websites created, and films produced, the predominantly working-class students who enter my classes still do not have an inkling that labor and working-class history is a dynamic field of interest and, study, and, even more sadly, these students lack an understanding of the role that working-class people play in American history.

Perhaps these observations are not surprising. Most young people in college today do not identify with the working class or as working class. My students even feel uncomfortable with the term “working class” and reveal their biases when they choose to write and speak the term “low class” instead. It is not that they cannot connect to the history of the working class, but they would rather see themselves as upwardly mobile members of an amorphous, but all-American, middle class. At first glance, they cannot see how steel workers’ struggles back in the 1930s have anything to do with their twenty-first century lives. In addition, there are not many working-class groups, such as unions, clubs, musical groups, political parties, or mutual aid societies, clamoring for their attention. Shopping at Wal-Mart, for example, is much closer to their experience than picketing at one. And classes in high school and college, for the most part, do not bother to connect workers’ struggles of the past for dignity and power with students’ concerns of today.

Because of this situation, this book, and the themes of labor and working-class history upon which it is based, are critical to share with today’s student. These themes directly shaped the life of working Americans at the onset of the Great Depression just as they do today. This book will ask the following: How did working people experience the US economy’s changing nature? What was the relationship of

the state to working people? How did global economic and political forces affect working Americans, and how did they shape these same forces? How has the changing composition of the US working class affected working-class agency and protest, ideologies, and organization? Understanding how these issues developed in the twentieth century encourages us to rethink America's past from a different vantage point. Seeing US history through the lens of class promotes critical thinking and awareness of alternative voices in our history, including those of different races, ethnicities, and sexes. Sharing this perspective creates an opportunity to connect the conflicts and drama of the past with contemporary issues.

The period from 1920 to 2011 is a little longer than the average American lifespan, and yet the average working person of 1920 would find little in their everyday living comparable to their 2011 counterpart. In 1920 the census indicated for the first time that most Americans lived in places defined as "urban," but that still meant that approximately half of them resided on farms or in towns populated with less than 2,500 people-and many did so without access to cars, highways or passenger trains. No one surfed the Internet, ate fast food, hung out at the mall, or owned a credit card.

"Work" took place both inside and outside the home. In 1920 only one third of the homes in the country had electricity. Basic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and other housework consumed between sixty and seventy hours a week. With few options available to pay the bills, many women earned wages in their homes by doing such "homework," or "piecework," as finishing garments, for which they were paid for each piece completed. Some took boarders, cooked, laundered, and offered lodging for single men or provided domestic service for others. One quarter of women worked in low-paid clerical, service, and sales jobs.

Meanwhile, almost half of the male population (45 percent) labored in mines, construction, transportation, or manufacturing industries. Skilled male workers clocked an average of 50.4 hours a week and the unskilled put in 53.7 hours a week. Steelworkers worked on average 63.1 hours per week. Some jobs in the steel mills, however, required workers to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, including one 24-hour continuous shift. These workers had only one day off every two weeks and had yet to earn an overtime rate.

In 1914 the United States Commission on Immigration conducted a survey of wage earners. In that year, the average annual earning in the country totaled between $550 and $600, but among 10,000 wage-earning men an average annual earning of $413. Half of the men surveyed earned less than $400, and women fared worse. Two thirds of the women made less than $300 a year, most earned half as much as men.

Low wages were exacerbated by dangerous working conditions and job insecurity. Between 1880 and 1900, working people experienced 25,000 workplace deaths per year. They also faced recessions, depressions, and seasonal factory shut downs. Huge waves of immigration from Europe and migration from rural regions meant there was always a fresh supply of people who employers could cajole to work more for less. Workers today face hazardous conditions and insecurity, but before the 1930s job insecurity was a particularly onerous stressor given that the federal government offered no public relief and private charity was provided under demeaning circumstances.

While many of the particulars of making a living in the 1920s may seem different to most working people today, trends in today’s economy, politics, and society should sensitize us all to the changes a person living in the early twentieth century faced.

Like the people in this narrative who lived through World War I, World War II, an international economic depression, and the Cold War, today's working people face global challenges. Global forces have shaped the experience of working people throughout the twentieth century, but not always in consistent ways. Global forces have promoted more diverse workplaces and working-class ideologies, increased workers' power at particular moments, and fostered a close identification of working peoples' efforts with America's national cause. They have also increased government repression and undermined working people's civil liberties, increased citizens' fear of foreigners and politics labeled as un-American, and encouraged government and employers to use race and ethnicity as a wedge to divide working people against one another. Toward the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, global economic forces are taking an enormous toll on working people's job prospects, work culture, union activity, and overall sense of security.

Technological change and reorganization transformed the workplace in the 1920s, as it continues to do today. Back then workers watched as managers applied science and technology and asserted their personal control to reshape the work experience. Workers saw older sectors of the economy struggle even as new technology-based ones surged onto the scene. They also witnessed an intense merger movement and the development and use of new technologies that made certain jobs (and the people who did the work) obsolete. Today workers face similar challenges in new ways. Computer technology has changed the nature of how work is done and sometimes where it is done. Rather than contribute to a growing, developing industrial economy, working people today struggle to pay their bills in a de-industrializing one. Retail and service jobs are easier to come by than industrial or extractive ones; and

science, technology, and management's strong hand often make for mind-numbing work. Attacks by employers and the state on unions coupled with global competition make these sub-par jobs less than secure.

Throughout the twentieth century, working people have seen the role of the state in their affairs increase, for good and ill. In the 1920s, through its laws and politics, the state worked closely with corporate America. Business leaders reached new levels of national and international power and used it, in part, to turn every American's primary identity into that of a consumer. The state also worked in tandem with corporate America to undermine and silence pockets of dissenters who publicly questioned the morality of capitalism and its government. These radicals-always smaller in numbers than in their impact and "radical" mostly in the sense that they wanted a new economic system rather than superficial fixes-articulated a class politics that valued those who worked with their hands and their central role in the economy and society.

The Great Depression provided the context for a major reshuffling of political partners. In the face of a national discourse about capitalism's shortcomings and the need for a more robust state role, the government moved away from its unilateral, pro-business approach to the economy. Instead it began to create structures to help working people achieve more voice at work and to assist those who fell through capitalism's cracks. Its results were mixed, but even what was considered at one time as successful is today viewed much more critically. In the 1930s and 1940s, the federal government began protecting some workers' civil rights and liberties at work and their general welfare and security in society through the creation of legislation, federal boards, and agencies. Almost as soon as these changes were enacted, however, political forces bent on undermining workers' power, and silencing the working-

class dimension of society's issues, usurped them. Today, when real socialist movements are few and powerless, any attempt of the state to pass legislation with such class dimensions as healthcare, is publicly (and incorrectly) attacked as socialist.

Like today, few workers in the 1920s had union representation. In fact, union density is similar today to that at the end of World War I. The difference, however, is that in the 1920s working people were on the verge of growing a major union movement that offered them protection, power, and relevance. Today, unions are on the decline. They and the people they represent are on the defensive and under siege. Big business and capitalist values are in such vogue that in many quarters the word "union" has once again assumed an unfavorable stigma. The pressure for working people to identify primarily as consumers is still strong, but increasingly difficult to realize without lots of credit cards and deep, deep debt.

Given that unions are the only vehicle with the potential to inject democratic principles into our working life and give working people a chance at real staying power and voice while making a living, the low density of unionized workers then and now is troubling. This is not to say that all unions (then and now) are committed to democratic principles, protecting the weak, and working to improve the lives of the most vulnerable, even when those individuals and groups are not in one's bargaining unit. Still, the goal of fighting for the ideal is just as important then as it is now. In the 1920s the main labor organization, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), primarily concerned itself with skilled, craftsmen. This meant that the majority of people who worked for wages (women, minorities, and immigrants) faced their employers as powerless individuals. Labor radicals (working people who questioned capitalism) challenged the AFL to do better and organize more widely,

to no avail. Internal attacks of one group against the other plagued the labor movement of the 1920s and leaders of established craft unions were often uninterested in those they did not represent. It was not until the 1930s and World War II when the state created new laws and structures that the union movement expanded into new communities of working people and opened itself to new voices, a broader vision, and a staying, national role for unions and their leaders. For a time, working people got their news from labor sources, attended union social events, and listened to their union leaders before casting their electoral votes. Union jobs were coveted because they were secure and well compensated. Being in the union meant that working people did not have to face the boss, the government, or the economy alone. Today we live at a time when most working Americans cannot name the president of the American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), get their news from sources owned and influenced by corporate America, and identify more with the values of consumption than with class. Many will ask: Unions may have made sense for some bygone era of factory worker, but haven't all those issues been worked out and no longer apply to me? Don't unions mean conflict, and do we need to be so confrontational? And why do we need unions when they cannot guarantee security of any kind?

This book is intended to explain how workers and the labor movement got from there to here, and why this story is so important today. It is an attempt to explain what those in the field of labor and working-class history have uncovered in their scholarship and where points of disagreement still exist. I have organized it chronologically, but within each chapter I emphasize the themes discussed above. Chapter 1 shows how World War I – era hopes that democracy would be realized at home, at work, and in the world failed to materialize and instead inspired working-class movements

that would ultimately result in the New Deal and the movement for industrial unionism. Chapter 2 traces ways in which World War II and the Cold War reinforced the role of the state in workers' lives, giving the union movement new life, and new problems. Chapter 3 outlines the tensions and promises that the 1960s and 1970s movements for civil rights, broadly defined, brought to the union movement, and discusses the rise of public sector unionism. Chapter 4 focuses on the decline of the industrial sector and its impact on the labor movement from the 1970s to the turn of the twenty-first century, and the Epilogue follows the story through to Barack Obama's presidency.

The narrative is based on the newest scholarship to emerge in the field, which presents its own challenges for today's student. Today labor and working-class history is still interested in the traditional story of the labor union, but the field has expanded in innovative ways to include much more. In fact, many of the assumptions of an earlier generation of scholars (the most important "workers" were male, factory workers; the industrial workplace was the most important area of their activity; and unions were the most representative voice of working people) have fallen out of favor. They have been replaced by a more robust attempt to understand the lived, dynamic experience of working-class people in all their racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. But the problem that still exists in telling this story is that much of what shapes working Americans' lived experience is a plethora of laws and institutions, unions and corporations, and long lists of acronyms and work-related lingo. It is difficult for the uninitiated to keep all the names of laws, institutions, and economic terms straight. I have done what I can to make these things understandable in an attempt to acquaint the reader with what sometimes feels like a foreign world. In general, when I use the term "labor" as a noun throughout the book, I am referring to the formal

union movement (federations, labor leaders, internationals, and locals). I have also tried to be clear about what kind of working person I am discussing when using the term “worker,” rather than assume the white, male, factory kind.

This story begins with World War I and its aftermath because this pivotal period launched changes in the US economy, state, and work force that would influence the modern era. Even though the United States was involved in the fighting for less than two years, wartime mobilization exaggerated and compressed economic, political, and social developments that had led up to the period and would have a profound effect on working people. Progressive reformers divided over the question of joining the war effort. Those, including President Woodrow Wilson, who ultimately backed US participation in the conflict, did so at least in part hoping that wartime initiatives would reflect a spirit of reform and democratic principles. In these ways, despite the fact that the United States emerged as the leading world power, US participation in the war was a complete failure. Previously weakened labor groups did receive national attention and short-term power, but Wilson and wartime federal agencies also unleashed nationalist propaganda that equated economic and political dissent with potential criminal activity, actions which reverberate loudly in our current wars against terror at home and abroad.

1

“Everyone Was Ready For Unionism”

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

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

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

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

early 1930s pushed government leaders and a generation of industrial workers to look to unions as a solution to their problems. The new unions they built stood on the foundation established during and after the Great War.

Political Prelude: Industrial Democracy Betrayed, from Wilson to Hoover

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

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

federal policies that guaranteed industrial workers new protections.

Previously when workers struck, government generally acted to protect business's property through the use of court orders, mandating workers end their strike. Government officials also approved the use of state and federal force, sending in police or troops to "quell" strikes and get businesses back to business. Politicians agreed with industrialists that the legal and physical force used to end work stoppages was a small price to pay for companies being able to turn a profit. But in 1917, when one million workers in such war industries as copper, lumber, and meatpacking chose to withhold their labor in 4,500 strikes around the country, Wilson chose not to use the heavy hand of the state to crush them. Instead, he turned to his newly established Presidential Mediation Commission. The charge of the commission was to investigate labor conflicts in industries deemed vital to war production and recommend solutions. It was headed by Felix Frankfurter, a Jewish immigrant who grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, taught law at Harvard University, and took an early interest in trade unionism, socialism, and communism. The commission, in its final report to the president on January 9, 1918, concluded that workers and management needed to develop a "collective relationship." According to Frankfurter, both "autocracy and anarchy" were basic evils. But the "central cause" of war industry conflict was due to unequal power in the workplace when it came to settling industrial conflict. Workers needed representation in the workplace. To that end, commission members also recommended that employers set up grievance procedures before problems led to strikes and that government establish a maximum eight-hour work day and more coherent wartime labor policies.

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

Walsh and Taft oversaw an agency that miraculously turned the wish list of pro-labor reformers into government policy. The agency called for an eight-hour day, equal pay for women for equal work, the right to join a union, an end to employers' union-busting activity, and support of a living wage. The right to join a union was a prized victory for workers because it suggested that government believed in the legitimacy of collective bargaining and saw it as a fair exchange for workers' commitment to maintain high levels of war-related production. Collective bargaining rights allowed workers, under government protection, to advocate