EDITOR'S NOTE

Overview

Welcome to the *St. James Encyclopedia of Labor History Worldwide*. Our aim is to provide a scholarly, encyclopedic treatment of the labor movement during the past 200 years. The encyclopedia covers 300 key events in labor history, from the struggle to abolish slavery both in the British Empire and in the United States during the 1800s; to the rise of trade unions later in the century; to the often violent clashes between labor and management in the early twentieth century; and to the onset of globalization toward the end of the twentieth century. Throughout the encyclopedia, events are placed in the context of the labor movement as a whole and related to societal change and development worldwide.

Scope and Coverage

The encyclopedia includes 300 events from period from 1800 to 2000. Two-thirds of the articles focus on U.S. labor history and one-third are devoted to international history. Because of this distribution, international events in particular were chosen for their relevance to larger social movements and their impact on development of the labor movement in a country or region. The entries were selected by an advisory board of expert labor historians, whose names and affiliations are listed elsewhere in this frontmatter; more information about the advisers is available in the "Notes on Advisers and Contributors" section at the back of Volume 2. The entries were written by labor historians, freelance writers, librarians, and journalists.

Format of Volumes, Entries

In response to feedback from public and academic librarians, we have arranged the volumes alphabetically by entry title. An alphabetical listing of the entry titles is included in the frontmatter. In addition, readers may also wish to consult the chronological listing of entries elsewhere in the frontmatter as well as the detailed index at the back of Volume 2.

Within each entry, readers will find the following format:

* Entry title, location, and date. Although the location is typically the country where the event occurred, in some cases it refers to the place where an organization or movement was founded.
* Synopsis: Brief overview of the event.
* Event and Its Context: In-depth discussion of the event and its impact.
* Key Players: Brief biographical notes on people who figured prominently in the event.
* Bibliography: List of sources used to compile the entry.
* Additional Resources: Other sources that readers may wish to consult.

In addition, each entry contains a chronology of key events in world history, so that readers may better understand the historical context in which the event occurred. At the end of most entries, readers will find cross references to other entries in the encyclopedia that may be of interest.

Other Features

In addition to the main text, the encyclopedia features two lengthy introductions, one of which discusses international labor history and another that covers U.S. labor history. In addition, users will find a glossary of labor terms; a general chronology consisting of key events in world history combined with important labor events; a reading list covering English-language sources devoted to labor history; and a subject index. The encyclopedia also includes more than 350 photographs as well as nearly 50 sidebars that provide information on other subjects of interest.

Acknowledgements

The editors wish to thank the following individuals for their assistance in preparing the encyclopedia: Judson Knight, who compiled all of the sidebar material in addition to the chronologies; Caryn E. Neumann, who prepared the glossary; and Willie Thompson and Daniel Nelson, who wrote the introductory pieces.

—Neil Schlager
Editor

Twentieth-Century Unions

As the economy recovered, the labor movement began a long period of expansion and growing influence. Autonomous workers groups, led by the coal miners and construction workers, dominated organized labor for the next third of a century. The debate over tactics was decisively resolved in favor of collective bargaining, though a dissenting group, the Industrial Workers of the World, originally an outgrowth of the Western Federation of Miners, rallied critics with some success before World War I. This decision was effectively institutionalized during World War I, when the federal government endorsed collective bargaining as an antidote to wartime unrest. The other major development of this period was the revival of the AFL. Under Gompers, who proved to be a wily and articulate leader, the AFL promoted autonomous worker groups while professing to speak for all industrial workers. Gompers and his allies disavowed socialism and efforts to create an independent political party, policies that led to an erroneous perception (encouraged by their many critics) of indifference or hostility to political action. On the contrary, Gompers closely aligned the AFL with the Democratic Party and created aggressive lobbying organizations.

Labor's political activism seemed to pay off during World War I, when President Woodrow Wilson appointed Gompers to a high post in the mobilization effort and the federal government directly and indirectly encouraged organization. The greatest gains occurred in the railroad industry, which was almost completely organized by 1920. Government efforts to limit unrest and strikes also resulted in inroads in manufacturing, notably in steel, shipbuilding, and munitions. In 1920 union membership totaled five million, twice the prewar level.

These gains proved to be ephemeral. The end of wartime regulations, the defeat of the Democrats in the 1920 national elections, the spread of the anti-union "American Plan" in many industries, and the severe recession of 1920–1922 completely reversed the situation of 1915–1920 and put all unions on the defensive. Membership contracted. The disastrous 1919–1920 steel strike, which restored the open shop in most firms, was only the first of many setbacks. The decline of the coal and railroad industries in the 1920s was an additional blow. By the late 1920s union membership was back to its prewar level. The one positive feature of the postwar decade was the rapid growth of service sector unionism.

The dramatic economic downturn that began in 1929 and continued with varying severity for a decade set the stage for the greatest increase in union membership in American history. Why? Recessions and unemployment typically reduced the appeal of anything likely to provoke employer reprisals. This was true of the 1930s, too. Union membership declined precipitously between 1930 and 1933, as unemployment rose. It also plunged in 1937–1938, when a new recession led to sweeping layoffs. Union growth occurred in 1933–1937 and in the years after 1938, when employment was increasing. Yet even the generally unfavorable economic conditions of the early 1930s had important indirect effects. Harsh economic conditions produced a strong sense of grievance among veteran workers who lost jobs, savings, and status. They also turned many voters against Republican office holders. The 1932 election of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had strong progressive and activist credentials as governor of New York, proved to be a turning point in the history of the twentieth-century labor movement.

Union growth after 1933 reflected these factors, particularly in the early years. Roosevelt's New Deal was only intermittently pro-union, but it effectively neutralized employer opposition to organization and, with the passage of the Wagner Act in 1935, created a mechanism for peacefully resolving representation conflicts and introducing collective bargaining. Though the goal of the legislation was to foster dispute resolution and increase wages, it indirectly promoted union growth by restricting the employer's ability to harass union members. In the meantime, industrial workers, notably workers in the largest firms in steel and automobile manufacturing, reacted to the new political environment with unprecedented enthusiasm. A wave of organizing in 1933–1934 surprised employers and public officials alike. Defeats in a series of spectacular, violent strikes in 1934 and other setbacks in 1935 seemingly had little effect. One expression of the workers' determination was the growing popularity of the sit-down strike, notably in the Goodyear Tire and Rubber strike of 1936 and the General Motors strike of 1937. Though most sit-downs were union-led, they represented a degree of shop-floor militancy that shocked many employers and not a few outside observers. Another important expression of the changing industrial landscape was the emergence of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a new federation of unions devoted to aggressive organizing, especially in manufacturing. John L. Lewis, the creator of the CIO, was the veteran president of the United Mine Workers who had presided over the decline of that once formidable organization in the 1920s. Whatever his shortcomings, Lewis grasped the possibilities of the moment. By the end of the decade he was closely identified with both the revival of organized labor and the increasingly bitter relations between the CIO and AFL.

Although the Wagner Act (and other related legislation designed for specific industries) most clearly and explicitly addressed the industrial relations issues of the 1930s, other New Deal measures complemented it. The move to regulate prices and production n the transportation, communications, and energy industries, which dated from the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and continued with a variety of industry-specific measures between 1935 and 1938, created additional opportunities for unions. Regulated corporations had powerful incentives to avoid strikes and cooperate with unions. As a result, about one-third of union membership growth in the 1930s occurred in those industries. If the United Auto Workers and United Steel Workers were symbols of the new militancy in manufacturing, the equally dramatic growth of the Teamsters symbolized the impact of government regulation in the service sector.

Government regulations were more directly responsible for the even more dramatic growth in union membership that occurred during World War II, when aggregate membership rose from 10 million to 15 million members. Most new jobs during the war years were in manufacturing companies that had collective bargaining contracts and, in many cases, union security provisions that required new hires to join unions. War mobilization thus automatically created millions of additional union members, including large numbers of women and African Americans. Organized labor, in turn, opposed strikes, cooperated with the government's wage-and-price-control programs, and promoted the war effort. By 1945 the labor movement had become a respected part of the American establishment.

Postwar Labor

By the mid-1940s full employment, high wages, and optimism about the future, based on a sense that government now had the ability to manage prosperity (together with awareness of the safety net that government had created since the mid-1930s), replaced the depressed conditions of the 1930s. Most workers' experiences in the 1940s and 1950s seemed to confirm the lessons of the New Deal era. With the exception of a few mild recession years, jobs were plentiful, real wages rose, and public and private benefit programs became more generous. The labor movement also continued to grow, but with less dynamism than in the 1940s. Optimists viewed the 1955 merger of the AFL and CIO as a likely stimulus to new gains.

In retrospect, however, those lessons were often misleading. The striking feature of the economy of the 1950s and 1960s was the degree to which the character of work and the characteristics of the labor force changed. Farming and other natural resource industries declined at an accelerated rate, industrial employment leveled and then began to decline, and service industry employment boomed. Formal education became even more critical to success. Married women entered the labor force in unprecedented numbers. Civil rights laws adopted in the early 1960s banned racial and other forms of discrimination in employment decisions.

One other major development also was little noticed at the time: organized labor stopped growing. Contrary to most predictions and popular impressions, the labor movement lost momentum in the 1950s and 1960s and faced a host of obstacles by the 1970s. Three problems, in reverse order of importance, were particularly notable. First were the unions' internal difficulties. Adapting to an expanded membership and larger public presence was inevitably challenging, but it also could be damaging, as two well-publicized incidents suggest. At the end of World War II the CIO included numerous (mostly small) communist-dominated unions. Though the CIO soon expelled them and supported U.S. cold war policies, it was unable to prevent anti-union demagogues from loudly portraying it, and by implication unions in general, as subversive.

Even more harmful was the mounting evidence of union corruption and especially of abuses involving the now giant Teamsters organization. Revelations of Teamster misdeeds led to the U.S. Senate's McClellan Committee investigation of 1957–1958 and the subsequent passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act (1959), designed to protect union members from dishonest officials. Whether the act was warranted or effective was beside the point: the scandals devastated the unions' public image.

A more fundamental cause of union decline was organized labor's association with industries (manufacturing, mining, transportation) that were growing slowly, if at all, and its tardiness in recognizing the overwhelming importance of the service economy in the postwar era. Labor's one significant breakthrough came in the 1970s and early 1980s, when it won collective bargaining rights for most state and municipal employees. By the end of the 1980s unions increasingly were associated with public rather than private employment.

Finally, employer counterattacks grew more effective in the postwar years. Though some employer groups sought to challenge unions directly (for example, in the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 and state right-to-work legislation), others adopted a more subtle approach, attacking union power in the regulatory agencies and the courts and promoting employment policies that reduced the benefits of membership. These attacks gained momentum during the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. One additional tactic, locating new plants in southern or western states, where there was no tradition of organization, also helped isolate organized workers.

The impact of these varied trends became inescapable in the 1970s, when the economy experienced its most severe downturns since the 1930s. Major recessions in 1973–1975 and 1979–1982 led to thousands of plant closings in traditional industrial areas. Unemployment reached levels that rivaled the 1930s. Productivity declined, and real wages stagnated. Exploiting anxiety over the future of the economy, Republican Ronald Reagan ran successfully for president on a platform that attacked government assistance to the poor and support for collective bargaining. Reagan left no doubt about his intentions when, in 1981, he fired air traffic controllers for striking in violation of federal law.

The experiences of the 1970s created a labor force that was more diverse in composition and overwhelmingly engaged in service occupations. The return of favorable employment conditions in the 1980s was almost entirely a result of service sector growth. Formal education, together with antidiscrimination laws and affirmative action policies, opened high-paying jobs to ethnic and racial minorities, including a growing number of immigrants. At the same time, industry continued its movement into rural areas, especially in the South and West, and unions continued to decline. Indeed, by the mid-1990s, the private sector of the American economy was largely union free.

The decline of organized labor was associated closely with three other ominous developments. The first was a slowing in real-wage increases, especially among low-income workers. The purchasing power of most manufacturing and service employees remained largely unchanged between the 1970s and 1990s, eliminating an important source of social mobility. Second was a gradual decline in welfare capitalism. A new generation of nonunion firms that paid high wages but provided few or no benefits initiated this trend. Other firms followed, arguing that cost reductions were necessary for survival. Other employers reacted to the rising cost of medical insurance and to the lower costs of defined-contribution retirement plans (as opposed to the traditional defined-benefit plans). Even the tight labor market conditions of the mid-1990s to late 1990s, which led to real-wage increases, did not result in expanded benefit programs.

Third was the accelerating globalization of economic activity. The growth of international trade and investment were partly a consequence of the transfer of industrial technology to economically disadvantaged countries. It also was a result of a series of legal and regulatory changes, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993, which liberalized economic relations between countries and encouraged international activity. These changes had the potential to raise living standards, but their immediate effects were often painful, as employers moved some or all of their operations to lower-wage countries. Already many American manufacturers had moved labor-intensive assembly operations to Mexican border towns to take advantage of lower wages and other low costs. In most cases Mexican employees replaced American workers. And while the Mexican employees earned more than most of their neighbors, their jobs were extremely insecure. Indeed, by 2000 manufacturers were increasingly moving their operations from Mexico to China and other Asian countries, where wages were even lower.

The results of these complex developments were at least superficially contradictory. On the one hand, by the 1990s many workers enjoyed expanded opportunities and high wages. Severe labor shortages in some industries attracted a flood of immigrants and made the United States a magnet for upwardly mobile workers. On the other hand, many other workers, especially those in agriculture or industry or who had little formal education, found that the combination of economic and technological change, a less activist government, and union decline depressed their wages and made their prospects bleak. A recession that began in 2000 created additional uncertainties. At the beginning of the new century the labor force, and American society, were divided in ways that would have seemed unlikely or even impossible only a few decades earlier.

—Daniel Nelson