

100 years of labor struggle

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Lawrence started when the mill owners, responding to a state legislature action reducing the work week from 54 to 52, coldly and without prior notice cut the pay rates by a 3½ percent. The move produced predictable results: a strike of 50,000 textile workers; arrests; fiery statements by the IWW leaders; police and militia attacks on peaceful meetings; and broad public support for the strikers. Some 400 children of strikers were "adopted" by sympathizers. When women strikers and their children were attacked at the railroad station by the police after authorities had decided no more youngsters could leave town, an enraged public protest finally forced the mill owners not only to restore the pay cuts but to increase the workers' wages to more realistic levels.

Yet not all of the news was of strike and struggle. By 1904, the AFL could claim a membership in its affiliated unions of nearly 1,700,000 members. Ten years later, at the eve of World War I, it had climbed to about 2 million.

There were, furthermore, important legislative accomplishments. Congress, at the urging of the AFL, created a separate U.S. Department of Labor with a legislative mandate to protect and extend the rights of wage earners. A Children's Bureau, with a major concern to protect the victims of job exploitation, was created. The LaFollette Seaman's Act required urgently needed improvements in the working conditions on ships of the U.S. merchant marine. Of crucial importance, the Clayton Act of 1914 made explicit the legal concept that "the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce" and hence not subject to the kind of Sherman Act provisions which had been the issue in the Danbury Hatters case. The act gave a legal basis in the federal jurisdiction to strikes and boycotts and peaceful picketing, and dramatically limited the use of injunctions in labor disputes.

The Adamson Act, passed by Congress in 1916 concerning work hours on the railroads, was an important milestone in the decades-long effort to achieve the 8-hour day, an objective of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions in 1884 and of many subsequent strikes. The 10-hour day — an improvement in its era — was introduced for federal government employees in 1840, but it took until the early years of the 20th century before the 8-hour work day became broadly accepted in the private sector, particularly in the printing and building trades. The mass production industries and the railroads continued their refusal to grant it.

Wartime gains and post-war challenges

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, the AFL under President Gompers' leadership worked in close cooperation with President Wilson to ensure industrial peace and a steady flow of military equipment and armaments for the American Expeditionary Force in Europe. As head of the War Committee on Labor and members of the Council for National Defense, Gompers and the unions he represented played an increasingly important role in national affairs. A wartime disputes board helped avoid strikes and maintain production; it had the support and cooperation of the labor movement. With the vast expansion of production for military and civilian needs, unions grew rapidly during the wartime years.

During the years following World War I, however, the labor movement suffered setbacks and difficulties.

While AFL membership had reached almost 4 million by 1919, the post-war reaction from employers and their allies was swift and predictable. Elbert Gary, head of U.S. Steel (the company bestowed his name on the Indiana city), refused to meet with striking workers. The AFL endorsed and supported a strike of steel workers committed to such objectives as the end of the 12-hour day, the dismantlement of company-dominated "unions," collective bargaining and wage increases. Using massive propaganda which sought to depict the strike as "unpatriotic," plus such time-tested favorites as strikebreakers, spies, armed guards and cooperative police departments, "Big Steel" finally wore down the strikers, and they were forced to return to work early in 1920 under the old conditions.

The postwar depression brought wages down sharply and caused major erosion of union membership — a loss of about a million members in the years from 1920 to 1923. The difficulties were multiplied by the decision of the National Association of Manufacturers and other anti-union "open shop" groups to wipe out or seriously diminish the status of American unions. The fear of "Bolsheviks," often hysterical, that was nurtured by the Russian communist revolution was used gleefully by the anti-union forces. As early as 1913, President John Kirby of the NAM had decided the trade union movement was "an un-American, illegal and infamous conspiracy." As the Senate Civil Liberties Committee, headed by Sen. Robert LaFollette Jr., reported years later, such demands as "union recognition, shorter hours, higher wages, regulation of child labor and the hours and wages of women and children in industry" came to be seen — under the influence of the NAM-sponsored 'American Plan' — as aspects of the alleged communist revolution from which the anti-labor employers wanted



Women workers were featured in the 1912 Labor Day parade as they fought sweatshop conditions in New York's garment district. (Left)



Triangle Fire tragedy of 1911 brought public attention to working conditions. (Lower right)

to save the nation. Strikebreaking, blacklisting and vigilanteism became, for a time acceptable aspects of this new and spurious brand of patriotism.

The "yellow dog contract," which workers had to sign in order to get a job, bound them never to join a union; at the same time, the corporations promoted employee representation plans or company unions — pale and generally useless imitations of the real thing.

Depression, war and a labor schism healed

December 1931 — the 50th anniversary of the creation of the modern labor movement — found America and much of the world sliding down the much steeper slope of a cataclysmic economic depression. Business enterprises failed by the thousands, production plummeted, unemployment went through the roof. By 1932, when Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President, the American economy was in chaos — and the American trade union movement was but a ghost of its former strength and numbers.

Roosevelt, taking the leadership of the all but paralyzed nation on March 4, 1933, undertook a number of programs designed to recharge the economy, feed the unemployed and restore confidence. At his urging, Congress passed the National Recovery Administration; the NRA's Section 7a specifically placed on the statute books the right of unions to exist and to negotiate with employers. Although it had no real enforcement powers, Section 7a was seen by millions of workers as a green light — if not a government invitation — to join a union.

The Supreme Court soon declared NRA unconstitutional, and Section 7a was no more. Under the leadership of Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York, Congress in 1936 enacted the National Labor Relations Act — known as the Wagner Act. It went beyond "7a" to establish a legal basis for unions; set collective bargaining as a matter of national policy required by the law; provided for secret ballot elections for the choosing of unions; and protected union members from employer intimidation and coercion. That law, as amended in 1947 by the Taft-Hartley Act and in 1959 by the Landrum Griffin Act, is still in force.

The surge in union membership in the early years of the New Deal, and the potential for organizing the important non-union mass production industries like steel, automobile, rubber, textile and others, led directly to the most serious schism in the history of the modern labor movement. Heads of a number of the industrial unions in the AFL, led by John L. Lewis of the Mine Workers, called upon the AFL to finance and support big organizing campaigns in the non-union industries on a basis that all the workers in each industry would belong to one industrial, or "vertical,"

union. Most of the leaders of the AFL unions presided over craft, or "horizontal" unions, and they maintained that employees of the same skills or crafts in the unorganized industries should sooner or later belong to their organizations.

In November 1935, Lewis announced the creation of the CIO — the Committee for Industrial Organization — composed of about a dozen leaders of AFL unions, to carry on the effort for industrial unionism. In 1938 the CIO held its first constitutional convention and became the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The CIO began a remarkably successful series of organizing campaigns — and in rapid succession, over the next few years, brought industrial unionism to large sectors of basic American industry. After U.S. Steel signed with the CIO Steel Workers in the spring of 1937, major organizing efforts brought, during the next few years, first signed agreements — most frequently after strike action — with major corporations in the steel, auto, rubber, glass, maritime, meat packing and other mass production industries. At the same time the unions remaining in the AFL registered even more substantial gains in membership.

The growth in union strength of both the AFL and CIO throughout the period, coupled with Roosevelt's domestic program, led to passage of a number of national social programs long advocated by the labor movement: among them, the national social security program, unemployment compensation, workers' compensation, and a federal minimum wage-hour law (the original minimum hourly pay set by the 1938 statute was 25 cents an hour).

During World War II, the AFL and CIO, while preserving areas of disagreement, began to find more substantial bases for working together on problems affecting all workers. They were reunited into the AFL-CIO at a convention in New York opening on Dec. 5, 1955.

George Meany was unanimously elected president of the merged labor federation, and a new chapter opened for the American labor movement.

The AFL-CIO years

George Meany's commitment to "the traditional objectives of the labor movement" was expanded in his role as AFL-CIO president, to include labor's "full contribution to the welfare of our neighbors, to the communities in which we live, and to the nation as a whole."

A major phenomenon of this period was the rapid growth of unions of government employees — federal, state and local. For many decades, postal employees, teachers, the fire fighters, and building and metal trades

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REWARD YOURSELF WITH CONFIDENCE

Solid foundations help support what we build. Whether a house, a project — or a life. One of the surest foundations is confidence. And Shari Ichida-Busse has it.

An early hunch that led to her first job, at WGN-Chicago, also opened the door to the career she maintains today. Once just on the ground floor of Traffic Operations for the Illinois station, Shari now oversees an entire department as Traffic Manager for KPTV. The confidence that grew with her is well-earned. It also had to be learned.



Lessons could be found from home, and from honest self-assessment. On the one hand, Shari recognized the example of her parents. Though both second-generation Pacific Northwesters, they were interred in the American concentration camps that sprang up after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Determined to put the experience behind them, they relocated after the war and raised their family with values to depend on, such as perseverance and respect for life.

For her part, Shari moved gradually through the ranks of her business specialty, becoming familiar with all its aspects. The desire for a fresher, more hospitable environment impelled her to seek work in Portland, where she and her husband then moved. Her willingness in Chicago to master the new computer-based Broadcast Industry Automation System — now standard in the business — enabled Shari to transfer her abilities to TV-12. Patience with much to be learned again proved worthwhile, as she garnered further experience necessary for her present position.

After so much effort, Shari is comfortable with her proficiency, but not surprisingly, she still pays close attention to what is before her. Keeping her staff motivated. Upholding organization. Handling the turnover of technical data. These are simply par for the expectations she sets and upgrades. In her view, "You've got to take pride in what you do, no matter what." That means, "overcome the past, rise above it, and strive to be better." Shari also senses the importance of education, formal and informal. "If you don't have guidance, find it from someone who knows." With such a blueprint, efforts are rewarding, and confidence is inevitable.

Whether or not your training is broadcast-related, the skills you take pride in might be applicable to a television career. To learn more about such possibilities, consult the KPTV Personnel Department.

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