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Labor During the American Century: Work, Workers, and Unions Since 1945

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Seen from afar, United States labor at the start of the twenty-first century looked much like it did when World War II ended. Work for wages still constituted the dominant form of labor, the basic legal framework for industrial relations remained unchanged, unions continued to represent a significant (if much diminished) minority of the workforce, and by world standards workers and their families lived extremely well. But seen from the point of view of the individual worker, labor had undergone an extraordinary transformation. Where and how workers lived and worked, and how much power they wielded, had changed profoundly.

Work and the working class have been in continual flux since 1945. Automation and economic shifts have changed the content and context of jobs. Massive movements of people and industry, and changed gender roles, have altered the composition of the labor force. But perhaps most revolutionary has been an astonishing rise in the working-class standard of living. Before 1974, increased earnings, pushed upward by robust economic growth and a powerful union movement, accounted for most of the gains. After 1974, wage rates fell, but a growing prevalence of multiple wage earners kept family income fairly steady until the mid-1990s, when it began to rise again.

Until recently, scholars had only sketchy accounts of these developments. Few historians wrote about post-1945 labor, and those who did focused on a small set of topics, primarily industrial relations in basic industry. The 1990s, though, saw an explosion of scholarship on everything from managerial strategies to race relations to deindustrialization. As a result, historians know far more about labor since 1945 than they did just a few years ago. Whereas labor history once was dominated by studies of the nineteenth century and the 1930s, now much of the most exciting work deals with the post-1945 period.

The New Deal Formula

The New Deal has been the touchstone for much of the historiography of labor after World War II. The fifteen years prior to 1945 took labor on a rollercoaster ride. The Great Depression undid the relative prosperity that workers in selected industries,
like automobile manufacturing, had enjoyed during the 1920s, and brought deeper misery to those in already depressed industries, like coal mining. The economic crisis, however, created conditions for the emergence of new structures of industrial relations and working-class activity.

Most importantly, union membership soared during the mid-1930s, as a wave of militant strikes allowed organized labor to significantly penetrate, for the first time, major national corporations like General Motors and US Steel. At the forefront of the union surge stood the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a labor federation that split off from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935. It organized on an industrial basis, grouping together all workers at particular facilities or in particular industries, regardless of their skill or occupation. (Many AFL unions organized on a craft basis and spurned unskilled, female, and nonwhite workers.) Union membership rose from fewer than 3 million in 1933 to over 10 million by the time the United States entered World War II.

Mass worker mobilization sparked fundamental changes in labor and employment law. The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (or Wagner Act) guaranteed the right of workers to join organizations of their choice without interference by employers, and required companies to negotiate with unions that demonstrated support from a majority of their employees. The Social Security Act, also passed in 1935, established national pension and unemployment insurance systems. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act set a minimum wage and capped the workweek, requiring overtime pay after forty hours. While none of these laws was universal in its coverage – they excluded farm and domestic workers, public employees, and others – they brought a new set of benefits, protections, and procedures to the heart of the industrial economy.

Much of the scholarship on post-1945 labor examines how the industrial relations system established under the New Deal operated during the ensuing decades, and why it eventually decayed. More particularly, historians have hotly debated the possibilities and limits of what David Montgomery (1979, p. 161) dubbed “the New Deal formula”: “state subsidization of economic growth, the encouragement of legally regulated collective bargaining, and the marriage of the union movement to the Democratic Party.”

World War II set the trajectory for the postwar era, as Nelson Lichtenstein shows in Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II (1982). The industrial demands of total war brought steady work and rising income to workers for the first time in a generation. To ensure uninterrupted production and restrain inflation, the federal government regulated labor relations to an extent only preceded in World War I, checking labor militancy and wage gains while forcing employers to grant concessions on union representation. The result was the continued growth and accelerated bureaucratization of unions, whose combined membership surpassed 14 million by the war’s end, equivalent to 35 percent of the nonagricultural workforce, an all-time high. At the same time, a deep labor shortage sparked a resumption of migration by whites and blacks out of the South to industrial centers in the Northeast and Midwest and on the Pacific Coast, a demographic shift that would profoundly affect postwar culture, race relations, and politics. The tight labor market also forced companies to hire women for jobs once reserved for men, a movement that reversed after the war but eventually resumed.
During World War I, workers and unions had made great advances, only to see them soon undone. After World War II, most business leaders sought, again, to roll back at least some of labor’s wartime (and New Deal) gains. Union leaders hoped to build on them, both through collective bargaining and legislation expanding the New Deal. Meanwhile, wartime population and employment shifts, along with the democratic rhetoric of the war effort, had raised expectations among African Americans and women that progress would be made after the war toward equal rights, but also stirred fears among whites and men that their advantageous positions in the labor market would be undermined. And overshadowing all else, many people feared that with the conclusion of the war the country would again slide into economic stagnation and mass unemployment. The resolution of these issues defined the core labor experience during the first decades after the great world conflict ended.

Postwar Labor Relations

In November 1948, thirteen-year-old Elvis Presley and his parents moved from Tupelo, Mississippi, to Memphis, Tennessee, hoping to escape chronic poverty and pinched opportunities. Though Vernon Presley found work at a munitions factory and Gladys as a sewing machine operator, the family at first could afford only one room in a boarding house, cooking meals on a hotplate and sharing a bathroom with several other families. Their move a year later to a public housing project felt like a giant step upward. To help maintain the family’s new lifestyle, Elvis worked afternoons and evenings at a furniture assembly plant. After graduating high school, he moved on to a machine shop, the munitions factory, and a truck-driving job. When he hit it big, he became so giddy with the experience of wealth after a lifetime of privation that he gave away countless automobiles to friends, family, and even strangers (Guralnick, 1994).

Few Americans rocketed upward as quickly or as far as Elvis, propelled as he was by an explosive mix of black and white music and an emerging culture of rebellious youth. But during the quarter-century after the war, the economic status of labor underwent a transformation nearly as miraculous as that of the “King.” At the start of the period, most working-class Americans lived lives of economic marginality. One of the country’s leading television shows of the 1940s and 1950s, *The Honeymooners*, comically portrayed the life of a New York City bus driver and his wife. It not inaccurately depicted a barebones existence: a two-room apartment, little furniture, no telephone, television, or modern appliances, and constant squabbling over money (Freeman, 2001, p. 318). Judith Stein (1998, p. 9), in a study of the steel industry, noted that “In 1942, 15 percent of steelworkers . . . lived in homes without running water and 30 percent had no indoor bathroom.”

All this changed radically during the decades after World War II. Between 1946 and 1960, average annual earnings, adjusted for inflation, rose by over a third (US Bureau of the Census, 1977). In addition, many workers gained previously rare or unknown employer-financed benefits, such as health insurance and pensions to supplement social security. For southern mill workers, rising income meant indoor plumbing, better clothes, radios, and new furniture (Clark, 1999, p. 151). Jack Metzgar, the son of a Pennsylvania steel worker, recalls in *Striking Steel, Solidarity Remembered* (2000, pp. 38–9) that the 50 percent increase in real hourly wages steel
workers won during the 1950s meant that “you had something very few workers had ever had up until then – discretionary income, income that in a sense you didn’t need, income that you could decide how to spend,” be it to buy a car, television, refrigerator, or home, to take a vacation, or to send a child to college, all of which his family did. “If what we lived through in the 1950s was not liberation,” wrote Metzgar, “then liberation never happens in real human lives.” By the 1970s, there were so many retired New York City transit workers living in Florida that the union representing them set up branches of its retirees’ association there.

Historians generally credit unionism, at least in part, for this upgrade of working-class life. After World War II, the United States experienced the greatest strike wave in its history, as business and labor fought to establish the parameters of postwar industrial relations and the relationships among prices, wages, and profits. We still lack a comprehensive study of the postwar strikes, but George Lipsitz recounts the feisty spirit of the strikers in *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (1994), while various historians have chronicled the clashes in particular industries, including electrical equipment manufacturing (Schatz, 1983), automaking (Lichtenstein, 1995), and meatpacking (Horowitz, 1997).

Strike settlements in basic industry, especially steel and auto, set benchmarks for other unionized sectors and even many nonunion firms. Unlike after World War I, unions achieved institutional stability, many gaining union shop agreements that required all covered workers to pay union dues. In addition, they won rising wages (by the 1950s often protected from inflation by automatic cost-of-living adjustments), an ever-growing set of benefits, and some control on the shopfloor through work rules and grievance procedures. Employers, for their part, won greater stability and predictable labor costs through longer contracts and bans on strikes during their course. More important, they succeeded in limiting what matters would be subject to negotiation, generally excluding decisions on investments, products, prices, production methods, and plant locations. Meanwhile, in an increasingly conservative political climate, proposals to expand the New Deal, for example through a federal commitment to full employment or a national health insurance system, went down to defeat.

Leading industrial relations experts, like Derek Bok and John Dunlop (1970), have viewed the postwar industrial relations system favorably, citing the order it brought to the economy, along with greater fairness in the workplace and new benefits for workers. Historians influenced by the New Left have taken a more critical stance. Mike Davis (1986) and Nelson Lichtenstein (1995, 1999), for example, have argued that postwar structural and contractual arrangements reflected union weakness as much as strength. Unions, they contend, survived postwar company offensives and growing political opposition by jettisoning their more radical ideas and modes of activity, including hopes for a social democratic polity and ongoing, shopfloor mobilization. Through collective bargaining, unions did obtain substantial benefits and a degree of workplace security, but only for their members, thereby deepening fissures within the working class.

Many historians see the seeds of labor “containment” in the New Deal itself (Brody, 1993, pp. 135–56). The expansion of state regulation, writes Montgomery (1979, p. 165), “was simultaneously liberating and cooptive for workers.” Dependence on state protection, Davis, Lichtenstein, and others contend, pushed the labor
movement into a junior partnership with the Democratic Party and left it susceptible to shifting political winds. Legal scholars, including Karl Klare (1978), Katherine Stone (1981), and Christopher Tomlins (1985), argue that the radical potential of the Wagner Act became eclipsed by administrative practices and court decisions that encouraged the substitution of quasi-judicial grievance procedures for direct worker struggle.

Events of the late 1940s and early 1950s accelerated labor’s acceptance of an attenuated liberalism. The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act contained a series of business-promoted amendments to the Wagner Act that made organizing more difficult and restricted acts of worker solidarity such as secondary boycotts and sympathy strikes. The law also required officers of federally certified unions to file affidavits affirming that they did not belong to the Communist Party. President Harry Truman’s veto of the bill, overridden by Congress, drew many union leaders closer to the Democratic Party. The Communist Party, by contrast, decided in 1948 to back third-party presidential candidate Henry Wallace. The upshot was to accelerate the erosion of the once-influential position of the communist-led left in the labor movement, a process to which historians have devoted a great deal of attention (Cochran, 1977; Levenstein, 1981; Rosswurm, 1992).

Even before Taft-Hartley, many unions placed restrictions on the rights of communists. After the 1948 election, the CIO expelled ten affiliates because of their communist links. Many historians argue that whatever the merits and faults of the communist left, its repression weakened labor, narrowed the range of debate among unionists, and contributed to labor’s growing political timidity (Zieger, 1995; Freeman, 2000). Lipsitz portrays working-class initiative, creativity, and “resentment against hierarchy” moving out of the industrial and political arenas, where huge roadblocks had been erected, into such cultural expressions as custom-car-building and rock and roll (1994, p. 330).

The purge of communists ended significant labor debate about foreign policy. By the end of the 1940s, union leaders had all but abandoned the notion that international labor might play an independent role in shaping the postwar world, instead lining up behind the increasingly hardline anti-communism of the Truman administration. From the late 1940s through the 1990s, unions worked with the federal government openly and covertly to battle left-wing unionists abroad (Frank, 1999; Silverman, 2000).

While the “containment” interpretation of postwar labor remains dominant, it has come under challenge. Some scholars, including Metzgar and David L. Stebenne (1996), have assessed the benefits and costs of postwar labor–management arrangements more positively than Davis, Lichtenstein, and other critics. Given the historic weakness of labor in the United States, the enormous strength of the major corporations, and the resurgence of the Republican Party, they believe unions did as well as could have been expected, bringing very substantial material and social benefits to tens of millions of workers and their family members and providing a liberal influence on national politics. They argue that scholars need to appreciate what was accomplished and focus less on what was not. As Daniel J. Clark (1999) noted in his study of a southern textile town, for workers who first unionized after World War II, bureaucratized collective bargaining and grievance procedures represented a major, much-appreciated gain in power at the workplace, not a retreat from a different, perhaps more radical, vision of industrial relations.
Other scholarship suggests that the dominant historiography devotes too much attention to a handful of CIO unions, overstating their importance. In a scathing account of the twentieth-century labor movement, Paul Buhle (1999) sees its central flaws – conservatism, exclusivity, support for imperialist foreign policy, and passivity – primarily stemming not from the degeneration or deradicalization of the CIO, but from the triumph of AFL business unionism, exemplified by George Meany, who became president of the AFL in 1953 and the first head of the AFL-CIO after the two federations merged in 1955.

At all times, the AFL had more members than the CIO, yet historians have yet to chronicle its membership and activities during and after World War II with the same energy and sophistication they have brought to their study of the CIO. When they do, the results may be surprising. Some AFL unions did act as a conservative force within organized labor, but others defy stereotypes. The Teamsters union, though riddled with corruption, more aggressively organized workers than the more politically liberal CIO unions (Russell, 2001). The Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees, as Dorothy Sue Cobble shows in *Dishing It Out* (1991), used the craft form of organization – usually associated with skilled, male exclusivity – to unionize waitresses, who in many cases, by choice, formed all-female locals. In New York City, AFL unions proved as likely as CIO ones to sponsor innovative benefit programs such as nonprofit cooperative housing projects and comprehensive, prepaid health care (Freeman, 2000).

As historians move toward a more balanced picture of organized labor, they also have begun reassessing the relative importance of the unionized and nonunionized elements of the economy. Sanford M. Jacoby points out in *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism Since the New Deal* (1997, pp. 35–6) that while

\[ \text{[Large nonunion firms followed wage and benefit patterns established in the union sector, ... these firms also set patterns (norms of conduct, personnel innovations, models of employee relations) for their unionized counterparts to imitate.} \]

Welfare capitalism, usually associated with the pre-New Deal years, “did not die in the 1930s but instead went underground – out of the public eye and beyond academic scrutiny – where it would reshape itself” (Jacoby, 1997, p. 5). Ultimately, nonunion companies with innovative labor practices derived from welfare capitalism, like Eastman Kodak, Sears Roebuck, and Thompson Products, proved more influential models for the future of industrial relations than unionized giants like General Motors or US Steel.

**Regionalism and Race**

During the 1930s and 1940s, many corporate executives acquiesced to unionism because they believed they had no choice. Determined to change that after the war, businesses moved to check the power of unions not only through collective bargaining and legal restrictions, but also through extensive public relations campaigns extolling free enterprise and attacking organized labor (Harris, 1982; Fones-Wolf, 1994). They also began a systemic effort to relocate industry to parts of the country...
where unions were weak and social and political conditions were not conducive to them. At the end of the 1940s, in spite of two decades of massive union growth, organized labor remained essentially a regional phenomenon. Union membership clustered in the Midwest, Mid-Atlantic, Northeast, and parts of the West Coast, with two-thirds of all union members living in just ten states (Stein, 1998, p. 17). The existence of large, nonunion regions, most notably in the South, undermined labor’s strength. First, it made it difficult to establish national wage scales or maintain high wages in unionized sectors of industries that also operated in nonunion zones. Second, it created incentives for companies to build new facilities or relocate old ones in nonunion areas, threatening the jobs of unionized workers. Third, it sustained the social basis for an anti-liberal political bloc in Washington, joining Republicans from the North with conservative Democrats from the South. This cross-party political alliance frustrated efforts, from the late 1930s through the mid-1960s, to pass pro-labor or civil rights legislation.

Soon after World War II, both the CIO and the AFL launched southern organizing campaigns, but neither achieved substantial breakthroughs. Barbara S. Griffith’s *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (1988) is the only full-length study we have of these campaigns. Griffith blames the failure of the CIO effort on a variety of factors, including southern paternalism, flawed union strategies, and employer propaganda charging the CIO with being communist and integrationist. More than any one factor, though, Griffith argues that it was the totality of the southern social structure, especially employer access to institutions of authority, combined with the CIO’s inability to establish its cultural legitimacy, that led to the union defeat.

More recent studies – part of a burgeoning of southern labor history – paint a more complicated picture. In a study of the southern textile industry, Timothy J. Minchin (1997) notes that unions made substantial membership gains in the region during World War II, and that in the immediate postwar years southern workers took part in numerous large strikes, which belies their usual conservative image. In Minchin’s view, the CIO’s failure to expand its foothold in the textile industry – the key target of its southern drive – reflected the policy of nonunion firms of matching union wages as much as any cultural predilection among workers against unionism.

Race played a role in both the failed southern organizing efforts and the development of the union movement nationally. Not inappropriately, it has been a central concern of historians of post-1945 labor, and the subject of fierce debate. During the first two decades after World War II, every possible system of racial organization could be found within the labor movement, from all-white, racially exclusive unions, common among the railroad brotherhoods and AFL craft groups, to organizations like the International Longshoremen’s Association, which had both black and white members but often kept them in separate locals, to a few, virtually all-black unions, like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, to racially integrated unions, the model to which the CIO, at least on paper, committed itself. Looking at this complex pattern, scholars have reached contradictory conclusions about whether organized labor served as a progressive force in the struggle for racial equality or primarily as a vehicle for white workers to maintain their privileged position in the labor market.
Local studies have revealed complex interconnections between the labor and civil rights movements. The unionization of large numbers of black workers during the 1940s provided a financial and political base and a degree of self-confidence that enabled African Americans to begin challenging restrictions on voting rights and the segregation of public facilities in both the South and the North (Korstad and Lichtenstein, 1988; Jones, 2000). Michael K. Honey’s study of Memphis reconstructs how CIO biracial organizing challenged the widespread denial of basic rights not only to African Americans, but also to white political activists (Honey, 1993). Martha Biondi (1997) and Joshua B. Freeman (2000) show how African American and left-wing unionists launched a multi-fronted attack on racial discrimination in New York City. Joseph E. Wilson (1989) documents the role of the Sleeping Car Porters in civil rights efforts. Taken together, these works portray labor playing a major role in challenging racial injustice during the immediate postwar years.

But even as some scholars were unearthing the ties between labor and civil rights struggles, others were documenting labor resistance to desegregation and racial equality. Herbert Hill put the case most strongly:

In the development of labor unions in the United States, racist ideas and practices were not occasional expressions of a random, deviant attitude, or of individual malevolence; rather they were a basic characteristic of the social organization of white working class life.

Even in the post-1945 years, Hill believes,

unless there was a significant concentration of black workers in a specific industry over a long period of time and unless they had established their own leadership in the advance of white-led organizations, labor unions would inevitably engage in a broad range of discriminatory practices. (Hill, 1987, pp. 32–3)

While few other historians are as unremitting in their criticism, studies of a range of unions, including ones formally committed to racial equality, have shown how race often marked what Bruce Nelson (2001) calls “the limits of solidarity.”

In her steel industry study, Judith Stein (1998) moves beyond the debate over discrimination in trying to understand the experience of black industrial workers. Liberal activists and federal legislation treated black employment as a civil rights issue, but from the point of view of black workers, equal access to industrial jobs meant little if such jobs were disappearing from their communities. And precisely that happened, in both southern industrial centers like Birmingham and the northern manufacturing centers to which so many southern blacks moved. In Stein’s view, the failure of postwar liberalism lay not in its approach to reforming race relations, but in its failure to develop economic and foreign policies that sustained sufficient industrial employment opportunities for both white and black workers.

In the steel industry, the great implosion of employment opportunities did not occur until the 1980s, but as studies of Detroit and New York show, blue-collar job loss had begun to undermine the status of workers, especially nonwhites, in northern cities as early as the 1950s (Sugrue, 1996; Freeman, 2000). Industrial relocation to the South became especially attractive once the Taft-Hartley Act gave states the option of outlawing union shops, which many southern states did. Taking advantage
of their low labor costs and scarcity of unions, southern states launched aggressive campaigns to lure northern industry, offering tax breaks, publicly built factories, worker-training programs, and other subsidies. Indirectly, the federal government promoted the shift of industry southward and westward by financing the interstate highway system, which made the dispersion of industry practical, and by concentrating military spending in the emerging “Sunbelt” (Friedman, 2001).

“Post-Industrial Society”

While “runaway shops” cost communities some jobs, others were lost to automation and technological change. In the years after 1945, many industries introduced mechanized systems for transferring material or aiding production that dramatically increased productivity. In some sectors, like mining, the workforce shrunk absolutely. In others, like manufacturing, roughly the same number of workers produced an ever-greater quantity of goods. Meanwhile, employment in business and personal services mushroomed. The net result was a relative decline in the importance of manual labor.

This change provoked a great deal of discussion among journalists and social scientists. Many followed sociologist Daniel Bell (1973) in celebrating what he called “post-industrial society,” which placed an economic and cultural premium on knowledge and brought increased power to the “professional and technical class.” As a smaller proportion of the population engaged in blue-collar work, and the union movement increasingly seemed a stodgy, if liberal, element of the establishment, social critics like C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse questioned whether or not labor would continue to function as an agent of social change. Somewhat hesitantly, they pointed to the growing number of skilled white-collar workers, technicians, scientists, and professionals as a potential force for restructuring society and checking the power of business, a line of thinking taken up by elements of the New Left during the 1960s (Miller, 1987).

Discussions of “the new working class” of white-collar and professional workers, and of “post-industrialism,” often had an abstract air, floating above lived experience. For many workers, “post-industrialism” concretely meant fewer job opportunities and less security, especially for those with limited education or training living in northern cities. African Americans suffered disproportionately from the decline of goods production, a process that Thomas Sugrue has identified as part of the “origins of the urban crisis” of the 1960s (Sugrue, 1996; Freeman, 2000).

We know less about what “post-industrialism” meant for white-collar workers and the technical-professional class about which so much theorizing took place. Though one theorizer, C. Wright Mills, undertook a pioneering study of such workers, White Collar (1951), labor historians have yet to follow his lead. No overall picture has been painted of the political, organizational, and cultural life of the expanding occupations of the post-1945 years and the workers who filled them, for the most part upwardly mobile white men and women.

Public employees form an exception to this scholarly neglect. The postwar years saw a tremendous growth of government employment, which encompassed a broad range of occupations, from clerical to blue-collar to professional. The vast majority of public employees remained unorganized or members of nonunion civil service
associations until the 1960s. The next two decades saw a massive wave of public sector unionization, labor's one great post-1945 organizing success. While the full dimensions of this story have yet to be told, a growing number of monographs ably chart the history of public employee unionism among particular groups of workers, such as teachers (Murphy, 1990), or in particular locales, such as New York City (Maier, 1987).

Glory Days
At least on the surface, labor's place in society never seemed more assured than during the 1960s. A growing economy and the organization of public employees brought a steady flow of new members to the union movement, which peaked at over 19 million members in 1970. George Meany's cigar-smoking visage and gruff pronouncements regularly adorned newspaper front pages. With the unemployment rate dropping, in part as a result of the Vietnam War, workers grew increasingly aggressive. By the end of the decade, strikes reached a frequency not seen since the early 1950s.

The AFL-CIO's Committee on Political Education (COPE) gave unions considerable political influence. With an extensive network of volunteers and a huge war chest, COPE provided favored candidates with a ready-made field operation and substantial funding. The Democratic recapture of the White House in 1960, and the massive Democratic congressional victory in 1964, created the greatest opportunity for labor legislative action since the New Deal. After a decade as Washington outsiders, labor leaders and lobbyists found themselves roaming the corridors of power, helping formulate and run a host of federal programs. Much of the clout for the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the Medicare/Medicaid program came from labor (Brody, 1993, pp. 215–16). Belatedly, at least some elements of labor's postwar political agenda reached fruition.

Ironically, though, as David Brody put it, “the AFL-CIO proved a better champion of the general welfare than of its own narrow interests.” During the late 1950s, unions failed to counteract the bad publicity they received from congressional hearings on labor corruption and racketeering. Recognizing political realities, the AFL-CIO reluctantly supported the 1959 Landrum-Griffith Act, which established federal oversight of internal union operations. Then, during the 1960s, several efforts to repeal section 14(b) of Taft-Hartley, which allowed states to outlaw the union shop, went down to defeat (Brody, 1993, pp. 216–18; Boyle, 1995; Stebbe, 1996).

By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement, urban riots, white “backlash,” the “counterculture,” and the war in Vietnam had shattered the loose bloc of liberal forces within which organized labor operated. On economic issues, union leaders remained committed to a liberal vision of government-managed growth, expanded state benefits, and federal programs to raise the floor of the national standard of living. But on social and cultural issues, many labor leaders moved to the right. Furthermore, no group remained more firmly committed to the country’s course in Vietnam than the upper echelons of labor, which shared the deep anti-communism behind the policy. Even many self-styled social democrats, like United Automobile Workers president Walter Reuther, preferred supporting President Lyndon Johnson’s actions in Indochina to losing their insider status in Washington (though a minority of unions
did join the anti-war movement early on) (Foner, 1989; Levy, 1994; Lichtenstein, 1995).

Labor leaders often found themselves out of touch with their own members. Polls indicated that working-class men and women were more likely to oppose US policy in Vietnam than the economically better off (though many also disliked anti-war protesters). At the same time, some workers began questioning basic tenets of postwar labor–management arrangements, especially the trade of increased wages and job security for a relatively free management hand over the methods and pace of production, and the bureaucratic model of unionism in which elected officers and large staffs “serviced” a demobilized rank and file.

A 1972 strike at General Motors’ Lordstown, Ohio, assembly plant brought public and political acknowledgment of the new working-class mood, quickly dubbed by the media “the blue-collar blues.” Managers at the Lordstown plant, one of GM’s newest, introduced robotic equipment, speeded up the assembly line, and imposed draconian discipline in an effort to boost productivity. The young workforce, which included many Vietnam veterans, revolted. The strikers seemed infused with the anti-authoritarian ethos of the protest movements of the 1960s. Some openly expressed dissatisfaction with the relentless pursuit of “the almighty dollar” (Green, 1980, pp. 218–22).

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the mood of militancy and dissatisfaction evident at Lordstown manifested itself elsewhere, too, in official and wildcat strikes and efforts to oust incumbent union leaders. Several factors contributed to this wave of worker mobilization, rarely noted in general histories of the period and only beginning to be examined in depth by labor historians. Like the Lordstown strike, some protests stemmed from dissatisfaction with oppressive working conditions, especially in mass-production factories, and the failure of grievance procedures to provide adequate remedies. Others targeted racial discrimination. In the wake of the civil rights movement, African American workers displayed greater impatience with racial inequities in access to jobs and union power. Workers also acted in response to accelerating inflation, which wiped out wage increases, drove up the cost of mortgages, and threatened savings. Finally, many unionists protested what they saw as a lack of union democracy.

The rank-and-file rebellion reached its peak in the early 1970s. In 1970, the largest public employee strike, and quite possibly the largest wildcat strike, in the nation’s history took place when New York City postal workers defied a ban on federal employee walkouts to demand higher pay, improved benefits, and the right to strike. Their walkout quickly spread to other cities, until some 200,000 workers were off the job. The strike ended only after the federal government conceded some of the strikers’ demands, and President Richard Nixon sent National Guard troops to occupy New York post offices. The telephone, automobile, coal, and trucking industries also were hit by strikes led by rank-and-file activists dissatisfied with deals their national leaders had negotiated. In the United Mine Workers, in 1972 Miners for Democracy managed to oust union president Tony Boyle, who had turned to murder in an effort to maintain power. In the Teamsters, a series of rank-and-file groups formed that eventually coalesced as Teamsters for a Democratic Union and helped eject the union’s mob-linked officers (Moody, 1986; Brenner, 1996). Changing economic and political conditions, however, soon brought the labor offensive to a halt.
Recession and Retreat

During the 1960s, a booming economy, growing membership, and militant worker action masked structural weaknesses in the union movement. Since the mid-1950s, the percentage of private sector workers who carried a union card had been dropping, weakening organized labor’s ability to set industry-wide wage and benefit standards, and leaving it vulnerable to counterattack. During the 1970s, this trend became brutally obvious. A series of severe recessions, marked by high unemployment and high inflation, a drive by business to lower labor costs, and a conservative turn in national politics, sent organized labor into a tailspin, while checking, and in some respects reversing, the advances in living standards and security workers had achieved since 1945.

Each year between 1973 and 1981, the average income of employed workers, adjusted for inflation, fell by at least 2 percent. Nonunion workers were hit hardest. By 1981, the real income of workers was at its lowest level since 1961. All the wage gains workers as a group had made during the 1960s – when they were at the height of their power – were wiped out in less than a decade.

Business took advantage of the changed economic climate by launching aggressive anti-union efforts. Companies resisted organizing drives with new vigor, employing sophisticated psychological measures along with wholesale violations of the law, most notably the firing of union activists. Corporate managers also took very tough stands in negotiations. Rather than the post-World War II norm, in which every contract brought better pay and improved conditions for workers, now businesses saw negotiations as an opportunity to eliminate longstanding work rules, lower benefits, cut wages, and introduce two-tier wage systems.

Union efforts to resist “give-backs” generally proved ineffective. Employers willingly endured long strikes, or even provoked them, to cripple unions. President Ronald Reagan set the pattern in 1981, when he fired more than 11,000 air traffic controllers who violated federal law by going out on strike. His bold action and willingness to tolerate years of turmoil until a new workforce could be trained, inspired private business to act similarly. Jonathan D. Rosenblum (1995) chronicles how in 1983 the Phelps Dodge corporation used “permanent replacement workers” (a sanitized term for what once had been called “scabs”), protected by the National Guard, to break a strike at its Arizona copper mines and rid itself of long-established unions. Other companies, including Hormel, International Paper, the Chicago Tribune, Greyhound, Caterpillar, and several airlines, used similar tactics. In the face of a string of widely publicized union defeats, workers became increasingly reluctant to strike.

Employers also weakened unions, won wage concessions, and disciplined their workforces by using a time-tested tactic, threatening to move or close factories and offices. A massive wave of plant closings during the late 1970s and early 1980s made these threats credible. The number of permanent jobs in the American auto industry fell from 940,000 in 1978 to about 500,000 in 1982. The steel industry suffered a similar downsizing.

Increased transnational mobility of goods and capital contributed to the job losses. Rising foreign competition meant declining sales of domestically made products. Also, many US companies began moving production facilities abroad or buying parts or finished products from foreign manufacturers. Jefferson Cowie’s study of RCA
(1999) showed how its establishment of electronics factories in northern Mexico extended its long-established pattern of industrial relocation within the United States in an unremitting search for cheap, pliable labor.

Dana Frank (1999) argues that labor was reaping the harvest of its postwar backing for a US foreign policy that kept anti-communist, anti-labor regimes in power throughout the developing world. Cold War politics created the social and economic infrastructure that enabled US companies to find cheap production alternatives abroad. Unions floundered for a response to the new wave of globalization. A few, including the garment and automobile workers, launched “Buy American” campaigns and called for federal restrictions on imports, but with little success.

The US economy did add millions of new jobs during the 1970s and 1980s. But the typical job created during the Ford–Carter–Reagan years was not making steel or building computers, but cooking French fries at Burger King or selling clothes at the mall. One economist estimated that between 1973 and 1980, 70 percent of all new private sector jobs were in low-paid service and retail areas. Many were temporary or part-time. For working-class Americans, the shift away from manufacturing often meant a move from secure, high-paid, unionized jobs to insecure, nonunion jobs that sometimes paid little more than the minimum wage and lacked benefits or opportunities for promotion.

A series of community studies traces the devastating impact of deindustrialization. William Serrin (1992), David Bensman and Roberta Lynch (1987), and Milton Rogovin and Michael Frisch (1993) document in text, interviews, and photographs the damage caused by the rapid downsizing of the steel industry, which left many once-great centers of steel production, like Youngstown and Buffalo, with few facilities operating. An elegiac mood suffuses these studies, which celebrate the tight-knit working-class communities and high union wages that once characterized centers of basic industry.

Ruth Milkman’s sociological comparison of workers who accepted or rejected a buyout offer at a GM factory in Linden, New Jersey, goes against this grain (Milkman, 1997). She found that workers who left the plant expressed few regrets, even when it meant, as it usually did, a decline in income. Both workers who stayed at GM and those who did not reported an intense dislike of the physical demands of auto work and the autocratic behavior of managers. Only African Americans, who because of discrimination found it more difficult than whites to get good new jobs, tended to feel that they had made a mistake in taking the buyout. Milkman’s study revealed that the dissatisfaction of the Lordstown era had not disappeared but had merely become less likely to be expressed in the harsher economic climate of the late 1970s and beyond. She concludes that the former GM workers’ “lack of nostalgia highlights a sad fact that is all too often forgotten in the age of deindustrialization: factory work in the golden age of mass production was deeply problematic in its own right” (p. 12).

Despite the decline in wages from the early 1970s through the early 1990s, family and per capita income stayed steady or, in the latter case, actually rose. Much of the explanation for this lies in a rise in the percentage of the population that worked for wages. As families got smaller, children made up a smaller percentage of the population, shrinking a group largely outside the workforce. Also, more teenagers began taking jobs, both to help meet family needs and to enable them to buy expensive, youth-oriented products that flooded the market. Finally, and most importantly, the percentage of women who worked for wages rose dramatically.
For most of the twentieth century, female labor force participation had been going up, but the second half of the century saw an acceleration of this trend, with a big jump after 1970. By the latter year, even a majority of women with children under the age of six worked outside the home. As one study noted, “Virtually all of the income gain among white two-parent families in the years after 1967 can be accounted for by the wages of wives and daughters” (Lichtenstein et al., 2000, p. 714).

The prolongation of worktime also contributed to the rise in per capita income, as documented by Juliet Schor in her influential book, *The Overworked American* (1991). Countering both historic trends and developments in other industrial countries, the number of hours Americans worked each year increased from the 1970s on, jumping sixty hours between 1979 and 1998 alone (Mishel et al., 2001, p. 400). Combined with increased female labor force participation, this led to a time crisis, as families struggled to care for children and do domestic chores while working more and more.

A dramatic increase in immigration further transformed the labor market. In 1965, as a result of the civil rights movement and a business desire for more labor, Congress eliminated the racist, national quota system that had heavily favored immigration from Northern and Western Europe and virtually banned it from Asia. Along with changes in the world economy, the result was a dramatic increase in the rate of immigration, with the majority of new arrivals coming from Latin America or Asia, not Europe, as had been the case in the past. Some immigrants filled jobs in emerging, high-tech industries, such as computer programming, sparing employers and the country the cost of training the native born. But most took unskilled, low-paid jobs in service and manufacturing: cleaning homes and hotels, packing meat and preparing food, sewing garments, driving cabs, caring for children. The growing pool of documented and undocumented immigrant workers allowed employers in some industries to set wages, conditions, and benefits at a level below what native-born workers would accept. Labor historians have yet to study the new immigration in depth, but sociologists and anthropologists have portrayed the worklife of recent arrivals in such diverse settings as restaurants in New York, garment shops in Los Angeles, and meatpacking plants in rural Iowa (Kwong, 1987; Fink, 1998; Milkman, 2000).

The combination of economic change, growing female employment, and immigration created a workforce at the end of the twentieth century quite different in composition than when World War II ended. White men no longer constituted a majority of the waged labor force; women made up nearly half of it, while African Americans and Hispanics accounted for one out of every five workers (Zweig, 2000, p. 31). In 1999, manufacturing workers made up only 15 percent of the workforce, down from 24 percent in 1950, while the service industries had ballooned in size. As the twenty-first century began, sales clerks, hospital aides, and schoolteachers were more representative of the working class than the steel workers, coal miners, auto workers, and railroad men who dominated images and notions of twentieth-century labor.

**Labor at the New Millennium**

By the 1990s, over twenty years of decline had left organized labor in sorry shape. In 2000, just 13.5 percent of the workforce belonged to a union, down from 20.1
percent in 1983. Looking at just the private sector, the situation looked bleaker, since the high rate of government employee unionization drove up the overall rate. With only 9.0 percent of privately employed workers belonging to unions, the labor movement found itself at roughly the same private sector density as before the New Deal.

Organized labor proved slow to respond to its woes. Finally, though, in the mid-1990s, in the face of growing rank-and-file discontent and shrinking economic and political power, a group of union leaders moved to oust AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland, who had succeeded George Meany in 1979. A contested election for the top AFL-CIO posts resulted, the first in the federation’s history, with a new team, led by John Sweeney, victorious. Moving quickly, it reemphasized organizing, beefed up labor’s political operations, and began building ties to various groups from which labor had been estranged, including religious leaders, academics, and left-wing activists. All this brought the labor movement a higher profile, a more positive image, and some political payoffs, including the 1996 passage by a Republican-dominated Congress of a higher minimum wage. Union membership gains, though, remained modest, leaving the long-term future of the movement in question (Fraser and Freeman, 1997).

In part because organized labor had become so weakened, workers made only limited gains during the economic boom of the 1990s, as the vast majority of the new wealth went to those already rich. Still, the standard of living of most workers did rise. As the twentieth century ended, two-thirds of all American families owned their own homes, while such items as air conditioners and televisions, rare or unknown in working-class homes a half-century earlier, had become all but taken for granted, and vacations, travel, and college education, though by no means universal, had become common.

But while in some respects workers had achieved an enormous amount since 1945, in other respects they had fallen backward, particularly in influencing, as a social group, national social and economic policy. Issues of work and class by no means disappeared. Job discrimination, the need of overtaxed workers for flexible schedules, the desire of companies to be freed of regulations governing working hours and overtime pay, decreased job tenure and security among white-collar workers, and the growing number of workers without health insurance or other basic benefits all received considerable public attention. So did the reemergence of sweatshops in some industries like garment manufacturing, a problem once thought to have been eradicated. Courts, legislatures, trade associations, human rights groups, and even student activists addressed these issues (with limited effectiveness), but workers themselves had little direct say. As the new millennium began, labor remained a social process subject to public concern and contending interests, but workers had become a less visible and influential element of society.

Historians have gone a long way to explain how and why labor gained and lost so much. But to fully understand the transformation of labor, we need to know more, not only about workers but about their relationship to the larger society. This will require investigating such matters as the impact of militarization on work and workers, suburbanization and its effects, working-class culture and its relationship to mass culture, working-class participation in the protest movements of the 1960s and beyond, immigrant workers and their interactions with one another and with the native born, and the changing ways workers and their families have thought about
themselves, the nation, and their place in it. Building on what they already have accomplished, labor historians have plenty of fruitful work ahead.

REFERENCES


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**FURTHER READING**


