

Forces Influencing the American Labor Movement, Past, Present and Future

Le syndicalisme américain : le passé, le présent et l'avenir

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Résumé de l'article

INTRODUCTION

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Les positions du président de la FAT-COI quant au « communisme international » et aux pays communistes de l'Europe de l'Est furent une des causes de la scission entre l'U.A.W. et la direction de la grande centrale syndicale américaine.

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Avec la suspension des U.A.W. nous pouvons difficilement parler d'un mouvement syndical aux États-Unis. C'est donc un retour à la division.

Il se peut cependant qu'il y ait des effets dans cette séparation. Il nous semble que l'avenir du syndicalisme américain dépend de la façon dont les syndicats attaqueront les problèmes suivants :

- 1.—la pauvreté ;
- 2.—les noirs ;
- 3.—la jeunesse
- 4.—les universités ;
- 5.—les associations professionnelles.

Forces Influencing the American Labor Movement : Past, Present and Future

Jack Stieber

It seems appropriate for students of industrial relations to look back on the events of the last thirty years to see what where the major influences shaping the labor movement over this time and to look ahead a decade or so and speculate on the major issues which will have to be faced by labor in the foreseeable future.

Introduction

In Canada, a Commission on Constitution and Structure has recently submitted a report to the Executive Council of the Canadian Labor Congress, dealing with « structure, mergers, affiliations and unity. » There are many recommendations in this report which, if adopted, will undoubtedly have a significant effect on the Canadian labor movement. I do not consider myself well enough acquainted with the labor situation in Canada to discuss these recommendations. Let me simply note that one of them, if adopted in the United States, would have a major impact on the structure and government of the AFL-CIO. I refer to the recommendation that « No delegate who has reached age 65 may be nominated for any of the Executive Officer positions in the Congress. » Need I say more ?

Turning to the United States, where I feel more at home in discussing the labor and industrial relations scene (though perhaps no better qualified to evaluate what is going on inside the labor movement), the major recent development is, of course, the suspension (or withdrawal) of the UAW from the AFL-CIO. Walter Reuther has likened this to the withdrawal of several unions from the AFL in 1936 and the subsequent formation of the CIO. In response to a question at a press conference on May 10, 1968 he said:

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« In the 1936 the CIO came into being because the AFL was historically obsolete. . . . I believe the AFL-CIO structurally today is historically obsolete. It does not reflect the basic needs of the American labor movement, and in a broader sense the needs of American society So I do believe historically there is a parallel between what happened in '36 with the birth of the CIO and what we are trying to do in 1968 . . . »

It is not my intention today to judge the validity of Mr. Reuther's statement. The UAW suspension from the AFL-CIO, however, in and of itself, marks a milestone in the American labor movement of the order of the 1936 formation of the CIO and the 1955 merger of the AFL and the CIO. As such, it seems appropriate for students of industrial relations to look back on the events of the last 30 years to see what were the major influences shaping the labor movement over this time and to look ahead a decade or so and speculate on the major issues which will have to be faced by labor in the foreseeable future.

I divide the past into two periods, 1935-1955 and 1955-1968. The look ahead will cover roughly the next decade.

1935-1955

This era was ushered in by the split in the federation over the issue of craft versus industrial unionism. Though personalities were important then, as they are today, the differences were over issues which could not be resolved without compromising the principles of trade unionism espoused by the contending labor leaders and their unions. The result, as we all know, was the formation of a separate federation which was to be on the labor scene for twenty years.

During this period numerous forces helped to shape the structure of the American labor movement. The following would seem to me to be among the most important:

FEDERAL LABOR LEGISLATION

The Wagner Act of 1935 provided the protection needed by unions, especially the new ones, to grow, and encouraged workers to join unions without fear of employer retribution. It assured the existence of the CIO as a viable organization and, through the principle of exclusive representation, which permits only one union to represent all employees in a particular bargaining unit, gave impetus to the competitive struggle

between the rival federations. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, while amending the Wagner Act in significant ways, did not change the exclusive representation principle which has been so important in shaping the structure of the American labor movement.

WORLD WAR II AND THE KOREAN WAR

These emergency periods pointed up the difficulties faced by a government trying to secure the cooperation of a divided labor movement in time of war. Having two major labor federations meant dual membership on committees and boards, accommodating to pressures of rival unions and union leaders, according equal and comparable representation to the rival federations in staffing war agencies, and added an additional complicating dimension to the difficult task of getting labor and management to cooperate in all-out production without disruption during the war emergency. These experiences made the national administration, regardless of the party in power, a strong believer in a unified labor movement and led to numerous efforts by Government to bring about merger of the AFL and the CIO.

POLITICAL FACTORS

Political leaders, especially in the Democratic Party, had other reasons, as well, for wanting to see an end to a divided labor movement. Even when they were on the same side, the rival federations were less effective politically than they would have been speaking as the voice of a united labor movement. And sometimes the AFL and the CIO did not see eye to eye on specific legislation or on candidates for office, with unfortunate consequences. The relative weakness of a divided labor movement in political action was an important influence leading to eventual merger of the two federations in 1955.

IDEOLOGICAL FACTORS

The existence of several Communist-dominated unions within the CIO was an obstacle to merger until 1949. In that year the CIO expelled these unions, thus eliminating what might have been a major impediment to a unified labor movement even if agreement could have been reached on other matters.

BLURRING OF CRAFT AND INDUSTRIAL DEMARCATATIONS

Inter-union competition, changing industrial patterns, and technological developments led to the erosion of the sharp distinctions between

craft and industrial unions. AFL craft unions, such as the Machinists, the Electrical Brotherhood, the Carpenters and others, were enlisting increasing numbers of workers on a plant — and company-wide basis, on the one hand, while CIO unions, under pressure from skilled tradesmen, established special units and sections within their unions to accommodate the needs of this growing and important part of their membership. By the early 1950's the craft-industrial union issue, which had led to the formation of the CIO, was no longer a significant problem warranting the existence of separate federations.

1955-1968

Writing in 1954, just before the beginning of this thirteen year period, Sumner Slichter foresaw « the strong, though perhaps declining, influence of the powerful trade union movement » as one of five principal factors shaping the future of the U.S. economy. In 1968, Slichter's prediction seems to have been reasonably accurate. Labor certainly has been and remains a strong influence on economic and political affairs. But its membership has not grown commensurate with the economy. Total union membership in 1966, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, has not increased over 1955, and more significantly, has declined as a percentage of the total labor force and non-agricultural employees. Politically, the AFL-CIO has been accorded a prominent place in the counsels of the Democratic Party, particularly in the present administration. At the same time there is evidence that individual union members often do not follow the advice of their leadership in voting or in their stance on particular economic and social issues.

The following factors have had a significant influence on the American labor movement during this period:

AUTOMATION AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Union membership has been hard-hit in a number of industries as a result of automation and rapid technological change. Greatest declines, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, occurred in railroads, mining, textiles, communications, transportation equipment and metal working industries. With the resurgence of the American economy since 1965, some unions have been able to reverse the negative trend in their membership and a few have shown phenomenal gains, particularly those active in government employment. The fact remains, however, that American unions have not yet found the key to organizing

professional, technical and white-collar employees who represent a growing proportion of the labor force.

MCCLELLAN COMMITTEE HEARINGS

Labor has never completely recovered from the tarnished image it suffered as a result of the Senate hearings in 1957 chaired by Senator McClellan. The hearings led to a healthy self-examination on the part of the labor movement, the promulgation of the AFL-CIO Ethical Practices Code, and the expulsion of the Teamsters and a few smaller unions. Shortly after the hearings, the UAW established its own Public Review Board, a seven member body of distinguished citizens, as an impartial appeals tribunal to assure union democracy to individual union members. The failure of other unions and the AFL-CIO to follow the UAW example was a disappointment to Walter Reuther, and the establishment of a Public Review Board within the AFL-CIO was part of the UAW program for « Internal Reform and Democratization of the AFL-CIO, » which eventually led to the union's withdrawal. I noted with some interest that the CLC Commission on Constitution and Structure had before it a proposal to establish a Public Review Board but did not include this among its recommendations. The legislative result of the McClellan Committee hearings was the passage of the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959, more popularly known as the Landrum-Griffin Act, dealing with the internal government of trade unions.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The hard line taken by the AFL-CIO and particularly by its President towards « international communism » and East European Communist countries has been one of the issues dividing the UAW and the AFL-CIO leadership. In international bodies like the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the International Labor Organization, American trade union representatives have often found themselves at odds with their counterparts from West European democracies and even with their own government. AFL-CIO support of the Vietnam war has, more than anything else, served to alienate American youth from the labor movement and has created a rift between many liberals, who have always identified with labor, and their trade union friends. While American labor is sufficiently strong and secure to withstand these defections, the long-run effects of these developments may be more significant than is immediately obvious.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS REVOLUTION

The racial conflict of the 1960's has been compared with the industrial conflict of the 1930's between unions and management. There are similarities and differences between the two which some of you may wish to explore in the Spring 1967 *Proceedings* of the U.S. Industrial Relations Research Association. While the AFL-CIO has almost without exception supported the civil rights and economic demands of Negroes, a number of unions have had to be pushed very hard before lifting their restrictions against Negro members, and some have still not opened up their organizations on an equal basis to Negroes and Whites alike. Resistance to Negro incursions into jobs and occupations previously closed to them is based on strongly-held social attitudes but is also mixed in with economic fears of White union members. Union leaders are far ahead of their members in their attitudes towards Negro social and economic aspirations. But militant Negroes are not in any mood to make fine distinctions between labor leaders and ranks and file members. They only know that certain trades and occupations are hard to break into and they blame the unions for this situation. American unions, like American society generally, are under great pressure to match promises with performance in their treatment of Negroes.

EMERGENCE OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEE UNIONS

The fastest growing unions in the United States are those active in public employment at the federal, state and local levels. As in the case of private sector unions in the 1930's, these unions have been greatly assisted by government. At the federal level, by Executive Order 10988 issued by President Kennedy in 1962, and in the states by laws recognizing and protecting the right of public employees to join unions, to engage in collective bargaining and to have written contracts setting forth their conditions of employment. The right to strike is denied all government employees. Nevertheless strikes occur, especially at the local government level, presenting a dilemma for government administrators, politicians, and students of industrial relations to whom the practitioners look for answers. For the labor movement, the emergence of the public sector as a fruitful source of new members is obviously welcomed, both because it adds to the strength of labor and it shows that professional and white-collar employees can be organized. However, it has also led to a resurgence of competition among unions for new members which has strained fraternal ties among AFL-CIO

affiliates. Public employee unions have resented the readiness of some leaders of private sector unions to question the appropriateness of strikes by government employees and to suggest arbitration — which they emphatically reject for their own unions — as the solution to impasses in public employee disputes.

The Next Decade

The suspension of the UAW leaves the AFL-CIO without the affiliation of the two largest unions in the United States — the Teamsters and the UAW. With about 13.5 million members out of some 18 million, the AFL-CIO is still a powerful federation, but it can hardly speak with the voice of a unified labor movement. Its authority will be even more diluted if the UAW is successful in forming a new federation as intimated by Mr. Reuther in his May 10 press conference.

The return to a divided labor movement may lead to more jurisdictional disputes, inter-union raiding and weakened political influence. On the other hand, there may be some positive results if the competition among unions generates new and imaginative approaches to organizing the unorganized as it did in the 1930's and 40's, to the war on poverty and to a more rational posture in world affairs. Reuther has said that he foresees a restructuring of the American labor movement to « more realistically reflect the structure of American industry » and to deal on a more equal basis with « conglomerate corporations. » During the last few years IUD unions have tried to deal with conglomerate corporations through coalition bargaining, with the UAW playing a key role in many such coalitions. Unless AFL-CIO unions are willing to cooperate with an unaffiliated UAW, coalition bargaining will have been dealt a serious blow. In its place the UAW may seek to expand its jurisdictional claims to encompass all workers employed by major corporations with which it bargains, regardless of product or industry classification. This would make the UAW more like the Teamsters, both serving as « general unions, » a concept of unionism which is sure to bring it into direct conflict with a number of AFL-CIO unions.

Regardless of the immediate effects of the UAW withdrawal on trade union structure, it seems to me that the future of American labor over the next decade — and I speak now of all labor not just the AFL-CIO — will depend on how unions deal with the following issues:

UNIONS AND POVERTY

In the midst of an unprecedented prosperity for the vast majority of all Americans and most trade union members, the U.S. Commerce Department reported that, in 1966, 35 per cent of all Negro families and 10 per cent of all White families — a total of some 30 million Americans — were living in poverty. Several proposals have been advanced to deal with this problem, including the negative income tax, family allowances, wage supplements, and a guaranteed annual income, but so far no single approach has succeeded in winning the necessary support to make it a political reality. The AFL-CIO has supported improvements in existing welfare programs and increased government expenditures to provide manpower training, jobs and other benefits for poor people and the unemployed. Given the large costs of the Vietnam war, increases in government expenditures for social measures cannot be realistically anticipated at this time. However, once the Vietnam war is over, as we all hope it will be very soon, the American people will have to decide how far they are prepared to go to abolish poverty. An effective program will cost billions of dollars for many years — money which will have to come out of the pockets of rich and middle-class families, many of them headed by union members. The labor movement can play a decisive role in developing such a program and marshalling mass support for one of the most important objectives of our time.

UNIONS AND NEGROES

Despite significant improvements in union attitudes towards Negroes and AFL-CIO support for civil rights legislation, many Negroes believe that such traditional trade union concepts as seniority, apprenticeship training and even grievance procedures operate to keep Negroes from higher skilled, higher status and better-paying jobs. They also believe that Negroes have not been accorded leadership and staff posts in unions commensurate with their membership. As long as these feelings persist, there will be schism between the labor movement and Negroes which will keep unions from truly representing all American workers. The next decade will be crucial in determining whether or not this breach can be healed and Negro workers integrated fully in the American labor movement.

UNIONS AND YOUTH

Those of us who grew up in the 1930's are struck by the contrast in the attitudes of young people today towards unions as compared

with our own attitudes at the same age. In the 1930's the labor movement was the most exciting thing happening in America. Students manned picket lines and dropped out of school to help organize steel workers, textile workers, auto workers, etc., in much the same way as college students in the early 1960's were going into the deep south to help register Negro voters, demonstrate for civil rights and sit-in at lunch counters. Even after the early excitement wore off and trade unions were strong enough to make it on their own, the labor movement still retained the sympathy and support of young people in the 1940's and 1950's. Again there is some similarity with the current situation when white students continue to support Negro activists, even though they are often no longer welcome to participate with black people in their demonstrations, marches and other activities.

But labor has not retained its hold on American youth. Students would no more think of working without pay for a union today than unions would consider having them, with or without pay. Even graduate students who specialize in labor and industrial relations and want to work for unions usually wind up working for industry because there are no jobs for them in the labor movement. Anyone who has worked for a union in a professional capacity knows of the pressures to place staff members, without the requisite training or experience, or even relatives of union officers, in research, public relations, education and other professional positions for which they are unqualified, rather than hire a bright young man fresh out of college or graduate school who does not hold a card in the union or have an « in » with the leadership. It is regrettable but nonetheless true that, even allowing for the many more jobs to be filled in industry than in the labor movement, business offers a better career opportunity for an ambitious hard-working university graduate, whatever his political and social philosophy, than do unions today.

Organized workers are identified as middle-class, and union leaders are considered part of the Establishment by modern youth. Labor has not shown enough interest in the problems and grievances of young people, especially those still in school. Young people, in turn, « could care less » (as the saying goes) whether the steel workers will get a 6% or 8% increase this year or whether Canadian auto workers will achieve parity with their American counterparts. There is a wide gulf and almost a complete absence of communication between labor and youth.

This is a sad state of affairs, both for youth and the unions, but more for the latter than the former. Young people are potential union members, management executives who will be faced at the bargaining table, political leaders who will make laws regulating labor-management relations, and government employees who will administer those laws. For selfish reasons, if for no other, it is important for the labor movement that young people understand and sympathize with unions. But beyond that, the future of the labor movement will be influenced by the degree to which youth identifies with or is alienated from the goals and objectives of the trade unions.

UNIONS AND THE UNIVERSITIES

Much of what I have said about union-youth relationships applies to the relationship between unions and the universities. With some 50% of all high school graduates going to college in the United States, unions can no longer look upon the university as a remote institution, unconnected with the lives of their members. Already a surprising number of union leaders have had some exposure to a university education. A current study found over half of all international union officers with some college education, although 65 per cent of this number did not graduate. More importantly, unions must increasingly attract college-educated workers, if they are to grow with the economy and maintain and increase their influence in the economic and political life of the country.

In the last decade unions have started to utilize the resources of the universities to educate their members. For the most part university-based labor education programs are centered in the large state universities and the curriculum consists of non-credit courses in areas of practical concern to the union. More recently some university programs have successfully broadened their offerings to include courses in the social sciences, humanities, and even philosophy. But so far the labor movement has not availed itself of the full resources of the university to train and develop future leaders or to broaden the outlook and knowledge of existing leadership. In this respect, too, labor has lagged behind management which has sent thousands of its middle — and top-level personnel to executive development and other university programs. In Canada you have done more than we have through your labor college in Montreal. The AFL-CIO is now thinking about a similar venture but so far it is still in the talking stage. I am well aware of the obstacles

to such programs — time, money, etc. — but the major obstacle is the « will » to get on with the job. Hopefully this missing ingredient will be provided in the next decade.

UNIONS AND THE PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

In the United States we do not consider professional and civil service associations to be part of the labor movement. This makes our trade union movement appear to be smaller in size than some in Western Europe where professional, technical and government employees are organized into unions and included in total union membership. In the last few years, as a result of the Federal Executive Order 10988 and state legislation giving municipal employees the right to be recognized and to engage in collective bargaining, some professional and civil service associations have begun to behave like unions. Up to now unions have looked upon these associations at best as competitors and at worst as company unions. Some government employee unions have hoped and continue to hope that they can win over the members of these associations. But it is doubtful that the unions will ever be able to replace such associations as the National Education Association, the American Nurses Association and others which appeal to many professional employees more than do unions. The next decade will determine whether teachers, nurses, and civil service associations will exist side by side with unions claiming the same jurisdiction, or whether the rival organizations will succeed in working out some mutually acceptable arrangement to bring these organizations into the labor movement.

Conclusion

This ends my speculation on some of the factors which may significantly influence the labor movement in the foreseeable future. If I seem to have been overly critical of the labor movement, it is because, considering trade unions to be one of the most important forces for progress and economic justice in modern industrial society, I hate to see any of their potential go unrealized. The record of trade union accomplishments, both in the United States and Canada, is too lengthy to review at this conference. Besides, it is well known to this audience and need not be belabored.

You have no doubt noticed that I have carefully refrained from discussing the role of individual labor leaders in influencing the struc-

ture and direction of the labor movement. I am more inclined to believe that history is made by events than by people. Yet as one looks at the labor movement in 20th century America the names of Sam Gompers, John L. Lewis, William Green, Philip Murray, George Meany and Walter Reuther loom very large. Who would say that the labor movement would have been the same without them? Take the period discussed today: Would the CIO have been born without a John Lewis? Would the AFL-CIO merger have occurred when it did had not William Green and Philip Murray died within a few months of each other in 1952? Who would blame a man from Mars, coming fresh upon the earth in 1968, if he evinced surprise that George Meany and Walter Reuther were the same two men who resolved the knotty leadership, staffing and policy issues dividing their federations only three years after they assumed the top posts of the AFL and CIO in 1952?

With this suggestion that men can influence, if not make, history, it may be appropriate to remind ourselves that in 1978 we shall all be ten years older, including even the distinguished leaders of the AFL-CIO and the UAW. Who can say what the labor movement will be like a decade from now? I suggest that we meet again to assess the situation at that time.

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