

History of Trade Unionism in the United States

By EARL BROWDER

(NOTE: The article printed below is an introduction prepared by Earl Browder for the Russian translation of Selig Perlman's *History of Trade Unionism in the U. S.*—EDITOR).

This book is the most reliable and well-written general history of the American trade-union movement available in a single volume. It presents the main outlines of trade-union development from its beginnings in the opening years of the XIXth century down to the close of the World War, in a brief but intelligent manner. It will prove of great value for all who find it necessary or interesting to fully understand that more modern American trade unionism which today is taking upon itself the hegemony of world reformism in much the same manner as American imperialism has assumed the dominant role among the capitalist powers of the world.

American trade unionism has been molded by many forces. Some of these are the same as, or similar to those which formed European trade unionism; others are peculiarly American. The combined effects of all these factors produced "Gompersism," the specifically American form of pre-war trade unionism, as well as its latest phase of labor banks, trade-union capitalism, etc.

Selig Perlman, the author, is a bourgeois professor who is not a Marxist, a fact which will be quite clear to the reader, especially when the final chapters are being read. In his eyes the specific American features of trade-union development constitute a refutation of Marxism, being an expression of "American principles." It is perhaps a waste of time to argue at length against this "American" conception. With the proper discount of the bourgeois point of view, there is much remaining in his book that is valuable.

It is more interesting to inquire into the reasons why American trade unions have taken a different course than even their nearest relatives, the British unions, and why it is that with the highest development of industrial technique the American labor movement has dragged along in the rear as one of the most primitive, undeveloped sections of the world's labor movement.

In spite of the fact that American trade unions began almost simultaneously with the British, they did not obtain the same degree of volume or solidarity, nor so much continuity of tradition and consciousness. The explanation must be sought in the different

social and economic environment, and not, as Mr. Perlman would have it, in the "*uplifting* force" of the Declaration of Independence which separated the United States from England.

England of the nineteenth century was the premier capitalist land, united in territory and tightly bound by her island shores, in close proximity to Europe, leader in the development of machine industry, mistress of world commerce, and building up an overseas empire based primarily upon the intense exploitation of subject races (India).

During the same period, the United States was, on the contrary, expending all its forces in the settlement and consolidation of its own vast territory, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans, separated by thousands of miles of water from the rest of the capitalist world; in world commerce mainly a purveyor of agricultural products (wheat, cotton) and a purchaser of industrial commodities; building an "inland empire" in which the original inhabitants (American Indians) were few in number and soon practically exterminated.

The greatest differences in results upon the working class followed. In England the workers were fixed geographically and in social status; in America there was a constant draining off from the working class of all the most energetic, rebellious, and intelligent elements, away from the cities to the "frontier" and free lands, and away from the working class to agriculture and middle-class positions in society.

From this followed another characteristic difference. The British labor movement, after the storm of Chartism, entered upon the long period of junior partnership in the British Empire, consolidated by the high development of industry in the compact territory of the island country, but robbed of militancy by the seduction of a share in colonial super-profits. The "Chartist" phase of the American movement was, however, broken up and spread, geographically and chronologically, by the tremendous territory of the country and the almost unlimited local variations in the stage of development of economy. After the phase of the Knights of Labour, and up till the World War, it was characterized by a "militant opportunism" or "opportunist militancy," by means of which there gradually grew up a more or less stable trade-union structure, which alternated between the crassest class collaboration on the one hand, and on the other, sharp class struggle to the point of civil war (Homestead, Pullman, Ludlow, West Virginia).

These contradictory phases of American trade unionism before the World War reflected the contradictions of an uneven and stormy development of American industry, contradictions which

in the case of England had been largely crystallized into the contradiction between the metropolis and the overseas colonies.

The lack of class consciousness, and the generally primitive intellectual and organizational state of the American trade unions, follows as a result of the factors before mentioned.

The constant shift and flux in the working class, the draining off of the militant elements, prevented the class as a whole from crystallizing the results of its really rich experience. It was impossible for the working class to bring into existence a well-knit body of leaders closely bound up with the class and embodying the class aspirations and experience. This contrasts sharply with the British trade-union movement, which created what was probably, up until the World War, the most solidly organized and stable working-class organization and leadership that had existed (with the possible exception of the German social democracy).

It is sometimes argued against this conception that the American trade unions have themselves gone far beyond the British in the matter of solidity and continuity of leadership; and in support of such a statement is pointed out the more than 40 years' domination by Samuel Gompers over the American trade unions, for which there is no parallel in British trade-union history.

The contradiction is, however, only apparent, not real. The dominating position of Gompers is another expression of the weakness of trade-union leadership generally in America. Gompers was able to create an illusion of strong leadership on his part precisely because of the weak character of the union leadership as a whole, weak from the point of view of its class nature, and intellectually; while one of the means of his ascendancy was also precisely the strict maintenance of an antiquated craft unionism which was itself a reflection of weak class consciousness and lack of a leadership closely connected with the masses.

It is worthy of especial note that in its early days the American trade-union movement was not afraid of contamination by contact with the international movement. In this history it is to be seen what a profound influence was exerted upon it by Karl Marx and the First International. In the '80s and '90s of the last century, in spite of its geographical isolation, the American labor movement was keenly awake and hospitable to ideas and influences from the international movement; and if it is cited against such a statement that the First International died when its headquarters were removed to America, the answer is that it had died even before in Europe.

This international orientation coincided with the period of most rapid mechanization of industry, the most severe dislocation of social life, the consolidation of a national market and national economy by the suppression of the rebellion of the south and by

the unification of transport (railroad lines, canals, etc.). It disappeared at the later period when, internationally consolidated politically and economically, the United States had emerged as a world power (war with Spain, 1898), had itself begun to acquire an overseas colonial empire (Philippines, Hawaii, etc.), and had entered the monopolist stage of industrial development (organization of the Steel Trust, 1901; the Standard Oil Co., 1900, etc.).

The American Federation of Labor established itself precisely during the period when capitalism had consolidated its forces (1897-1905). But also in this period occurred a development which was decisive for its future course; the U. S. Steel Corporation, representing the latest, basic and most typical phase of industrial development, defeated the trade unions and excluded them entirely. On the railroads, only the aristocratic independent "brotherhoods" were well established (by means of an alliance with the employers against the mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers). And only in coal unions, among the basic occupations, did unionism of the pre-war "opportunist militancy" establish itself. For the rest, the A. F. of L. was composed primarily of skilled craftsmen in the building trades, printing trades, etc. During this period was established the trade-union movement as the expression of the labor aristocracy.

It is worthy of note that just in this period, in Britain, began the emergence of the semi-skilled and unskilled workers as active forces in British unionism.

Up until this period the number of workers in the trade unions was so small that the developments were symptomatic of the future rather than decisive. During the "storm and stress" period of the struggle of the unskilled masses for hegemony (Knights of Labour, 1886) it is true, the skilled craftsmen had come through victorious, but still with relatively a very small proportion of the workers organized. By 1905, when membership rose to two millions, their hegemony was established.

The year 1905 marked a pause in the rise of the craft unions, and thereafter only a slow growth up until the World War. It also marked another effort of the revolutionary elements to organize the masses of unskilled and semi-skilled workers outside the craft unions. The first effort in this direction had been the Knights of Labour (1886) under entirely reformist leadership; the second was the revolutionary attempt headed by Daniel de Leon and the L. P. (1895) in the form of the Socialist Trades and Labour Alliance, which soon flickered out and never gained any real vitality.

The third attempt was in 1905, with the founding of the Industrial Workers of the World (I. W. W.). It must be said that this body deserves more attention than is given it in this history, largely because for sixteen years it dominated the minds of all the

class-conscious and revolutionary workers and determined their activities. It drained away from the mass trade unions all of those elements which had the possibility within them of crystallizing an alternative leadership against the Gompers bureaucracy, and of giving the trade-union movement more of a left orientation, while organizationally the I. W. W. was itself a complete failure.

This phase of the American movement is very inadequately treated by Perlman. The only author who has given it detailed attention is Wm. Z. Foster in his brochure *The Bankruptcy of the American Labour Movement*. But this is perhaps more of a problem in revolutionary tactics than of the actual course taken by American trade unions.

From its beginnings in the early 1800s, down to the period of the World War, American trade unionism reacted to the industrial cycle (prosperity—crisis—recovery—prosperity) in a very uniform fashion. The trade unions grew and expanded in periods of industrial prosperity; in periods of industrial crisis they were destroyed or marked time while the workers turned their attention to political action or co-operative efforts. Thus in the long depression before the Civil War of 1861-65 the trade unions were wiped out almost entirely. Beginning with the "war prosperity" of 1862, they grew and blossomed forth again. Until 1873 this was a period of founding national unions with a brief interruption of crisis in 1867-68. With the great financial crash of 1873 almost all these organizations were again wiped out and the labor movement appeared largely as a political movement in alliance with the farmers in what was known as the "Greenback" movement, a movement for cheap currency. After the great revival of 1886-87, again there was a shift to political and cooperative endeavors, although this time only the Knights of Labour was destroyed while the American Federation of Labor held its gains awaiting the next opportunity for expansion.

And this was the invariable reaction of trade-unionism to industrial fluctuations up until the period which closes this history, 1921. But it is precisely after 1921 that American trade-unionism marks a sharp departure from its previous course.

(To Be Continued)