

After the Fall X:PC

How Depression Gave A Boost to Big Labor, Changed Its Strategy

Unions Organized Industries, Not Just Trades, Crafts; Won Major Political Role

Is Their Influence Waning?

① 9-20-79

By ROBERT W. MERRY

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. Shaun McGillin Maloney—Jack to his friends—remembers vividly the day long ago when he ran at full tilt around a Minneapolis street corner and into the American class struggle, Depression-style. It greeted him with flying buckshot and bullets.

It was 1934, and life was tough for the men who drove trucks and, even then, teams of horses for the huge distribution center based in Minneapolis. Work was long, hard and poorly paid when you could get it, and most of the time you couldn't get it. With drivers plentiful and loads scarce, employers didn't worry about workers' problems.

So Mr. Maloney and other drivers decided that they needed a labor union. When the Minneapolis business community resisted, the drivers sought to close down the trucking industry. Warfare broke out in the streets.

"We ran up the alley when we saw a truck being escorted by about 25 police cars," recalls Mr. Maloney, now a retired union official in Seattle. "And there was a cop, kneeling down with some sort of riot weapon, not 30 feet away."

According to Mr. Maloney, the officer "let fly" at him and two companions. In the shooting, Mr. Maloney says, "Harry DeBoer got it in the leg. Ben Koski was hit in the arm, and blood was spurting out all over the place. I was lucky; I got it in the stomach area but wasn't hurt bad."

Two men were killed and dozens more sent to hospitals in that battle, which followed an earlier skirmish in which two anti-union businessmen were bludgeoned to death. Organizing unions wasn't easy in those times.

But, as we approach the 50th anniversary of the 1929 stock-market crash—the harbinger of the hardest of this country's hard times—the American labor movement of today clearly stands as one of the lasting legacies of the 1930s. The Depression shattered, at least temporarily, the country's faith in corporate managers and their free-enterprise philosophy. It transformed worker attitudes on politics, economics and the need for collective action. It provoked a series of major labor battles—among them the 1934 Minneapolis trucking strike. And it spawned the New Deal, which eventually became organized labor's political patron.

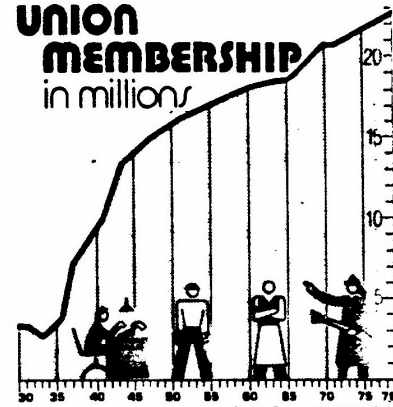
Rise in Membership

"The Depression triggered the atmosphere for action," says Jonathan Grossman, the Labor Department's chief historian. Adds Irving Bernstein, a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, and

author of a history of organized labor in the '20s and '30s, "There was such a general gloom and pessimism in the whole system that it inevitably increased the propensity of workers to join unions."

Labor Department statistics show the Depression's impact. In 1920, about five million nonfarm workers in the U.S. were union members. The total declined slowly during the prosperous '20s to 3.4 million in 1929, and then plummeted with the widespread layoffs early in the Depression. By 1933, only 2.7 million nonfarm workers were union members.

But then workers were spurred to join up by a combination of hard times and some



favorable new laws that never could have cleared Congress during the booming '20s. By 1939, nearly nine million workers—about 30% of the nonfarm work force—were unionized. The numbers shot up further during World War II, surpassing 14 million—about 35% of nonfarm workers—by 1945. Today, 22.8 million are union members, but the percentage figure is down to 26.6%.

Moreover, the labor movement that emerged from the Depression and the war scarcely resembled earlier unions, which had been organized largely according to trades and crafts—the various building trades, for example. Before the 1930s, most industrial laborers—the burgeoning numbers of assembly-line workers—remained unorganized.

The Depression, however, unleashed social and political forces that made the growth of industrial unions possible, indeed inevitable. A prime example was the Minneapolis trucking strike, led by a group of radical unionists who rejected the old organizing methods. The Minneapolis leaders wanted all drivers and warehousemen in the same union; they were resisted by national Teamsters officials, who clung to the old

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tradition of separate locals for haulers of milk or ice or poultry.

"The concept was to organize everybody equally," says Farrell Dobbs, a leader of the Minneapolis strike and later an official of the Socialist Workers Party. "It came to the fore in Minneapolis, and it was instrumental in our success." The concept also eventually dominated the Teamsters union nationally.

Mr. Dobbs's success, and the success of many similar efforts after 1933, also were due to two laws enacted because of the Depression. One was the Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932, which severely curtailed the use of court injunctions to thwart union activities.

The other was Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. Among other things, Section 7a affirmed the right of workers to join unions. Although limited in scope, Section 7a gave union organizers a psychological boost, by enabling them to suggest to workers that "President Roosevelt wants you to organize." It also foreshadowed the 1935 Wagner Act, which has molded the country's labor-management relations ever since.

The significance of the two earlier laws is illustrated by the career of the late John L. Lewis, the fiery chief of the United Mine Workers and the leading catalyst for unionization of heavy industry. In the 1920s, Mr. Lewis's UMW had fallen into deep trouble, partly because of industry's use of court injunctions to enforce "yellow dog contracts," under which employes promised, as a condition of employment, not to join a union. The UMW's membership declined to 100,000 on the eve of the New Deal from 400,000 just after World War I. But following enactment of the two landmark laws, a coalfield organizing blitz pushed UMW membership back up to 400,000.

The UMW's rejuvenation gave Mr. Lewis the psychological momentum and the resources to carry the organizing battle to other industries, such as steel, autos and rubber. It was a slow, arduous effort, but it eventually created the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CIO to today's AFL-CIO.

Meanwhile, Section 7a, coupled with workers' reaction to the Depression, was sparking battles, and producing victories, elsewhere. The watershed year was 1934, when labor won in the streets of Minneapolis, on the docks of the West Coast and at the plants of Electric Auto-Lite Co. in Toledo. In addition, about 376,000 textile workers in New England and the South struck. In all, that year's work stoppages totaled 1,856, the most since World War I. And accompanying the strikes were social upheavals in Minneapolis, San Francisco and Toledo.

Akin to Class Warfare

Those upheavals may be the closest to class warfare the U.S. ever came. In Minneapolis, for example, "it wasn't just truck drivers," Farrell Dobbs says. "It very swiftly became a raw class slowdown, with the middle class split right down the middle. The higher echelons of the middle class were with the employers, the lower strata aligned with the workers."

ing power. But not long afterward the political advantages also became apparent, Mr. Corcoran, a longtime Washington lawyer, says.

Mr. Corcoran says he himself got a glimpse of the political significance of the growing labor movement in 1936, when he stopped by John L. Lewis's office to pick up a \$500,000 check—a union contribution to the Roosevelt reelection campaign. "That labor money carried a lot of political whack," Mr. Corcoran recalls.

But President Roosevelt couldn't embrace the labor movement too quickly or too vigorously, Mr. Corcoran adds, because Mr. Roosevelt's 1932 victory was based on Southern support and he couldn't risk alienating the Solid South—at least not until after the 1936 election. Following the death of Louisiana's Huey Long, in some ways a political rival, and the President's 1936 reelection victory, all that changed.

Labor Replaces South

"After 1936," Mr. Corcoran says, "Roosevelt substituted the labor movement for the aristocratic South. But the transition from South to labor movement was a delicate political operation. The key was timing, and the Old Man had an absolutely magnificent sense of timing."

Yet even as early as 1934, the President had wooed labor with a solicitude that the Republican administrations of the 1920s had lacked. Mr. Roosevelt's moves to mediate the Minneapolis trucking strike, for example, ended up favoring the union. And although the President was urged to act against the San Francisco strike, he didn't. "He stayed away because he saw the political advantage in a growing labor movement—at least up to a point," says Harry Bridges, now retired from the presidency of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.

By 1940, organized labor was a senior partner in Mr. Roosevelt's governing coalition. Congress had passed the Wagner Act, which went beyond Section 7a by establishing majority-rule procedures for workers to vote for unions. And the great industrial organizing drives were on.

Now the Roosevelt coalition governs no longer, and many observers wonder about the future of organized labor. Some see the labor movement in decline—representing a smaller and smaller share of the work force, losing popularity and suffering political setbacks.

Mr. Dobbs, who years after the trucking strike still considers himself a radical, thinks that unions' fortunes will continue to decline until labor leaders strive to unite workers politically as they once were, but no longer are, united to win economic goals. The current aim, he suggests, should be to free workers from the Democratic Party and, in fact, the confines of the two-party system; he wants a political party based on worker solidarity.

Showdowns Rare

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The same was true in San Francisco, where the only successful general strike in U.S. history was mobilized in support of striking longshoremen. "You couldn't call it anything but class warfare," says Harry Bridges, the flinty union radical who emerged from the 1934 uprising as the leader of West Coast longshoremen. "There was a recognition that we were all working stiffs and were all in this together. There's no doubt about the power of that feeling."

Undoubtedly, many workers did turn into genuine radicals in what they perceived as their hour of need. Mr. Dobbs and his major Minneapolis collaborators, the Dunne brothers, were avowed Trotskyites. The Toledo organizers were followers of a Marxist theorist, A. J. Muste, and Harry Bridges was a Marxist of undefined orientation.

"The Depression taught militancy to the workers," recalls Larry Rogan, who adopted the socialist views of his parents and later became a union organizer. He recalls the frustrations of socialist activists of the 1920s who viewed industrial unionism as crucial to their political effort but who were ignored by American workers. "In those early socialist meetings, we were mostly talking to ourselves," he concedes.

Radicals' Opportunity

But the worker militancy spawned by the Depression gave the activists an opportunity, and they seized it. "It was the radicals who organized this worker anger and militancy," he says. "It didn't happen spontaneously or by accident."

Still, Mr. Dobbs speaks for most labor observers when he says, "Our battles didn't mark the political radicalization of the workers. The workers were looking for a trade-union consciousness and leaders who would fight. They found what they were looking for in us."

That view is shared by UCLA's Prof. Bernstein, who suggests that leadership fell to union radicals by default because traditional union officials failed to take the lead in protecting workers from the ravages of the Depression. "The old-line leaders didn't fit the times, so workers decided leaders such as Harry Bridges were a better bet," he says.

Prof. Bernstein adds that even the more radical unionists set moderate goals—to organize unions to struggle for better wages, better working conditions and protection from employers' whims. Even then, he says, the idea of radically restructuring society didn't inspire workers.

Norman Thomas's Decline

Thus, it was left to Franklin Roosevelt to harness the political energy generated by the frustrations of the times. And he did, as voting figures show. In 1932, Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party candidate, won 884,781 votes in his race for the presidency—a showing that was the biggest Socialist Party vote since 1920 and reflected the anti-business sentiment of the early Depression. But in 1936, Mr. Thomas's vote plunged to 187,000, and it continued to drop every four years as the New Deal took shape in the '30s and '40s.

Yet labor's political significance dawned on Mr. Roosevelt's brain trust slowly. Thomas Corcoran, known as "Tommy the Cork" during his days as a close adviser to Mr. Roosevelt, recalls that at first Section 7a and later the Wagner Act were seen primarily as important economic moves, part of the effort to pump up workers' purchas-

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However, Prof. Bernstein terms such efforts futile. American workers, he notes, never developed the kind of class consciousness that dominates European politics or that emerged only briefly in Minneapolis and elsewhere in the 1930s. Such rare class showdowns, he adds, aren't likely to recur in the U.S. without another economic catastrophe.

"Individualism is deeply rooted in this country, and it affects people without regard to class," he says. "On the whole, this has been a rich country, and it was always possible to argue that you don't have to reorganize society to raise the standard of living."

Meanwhile, he says, the labor movement will continue to play an important role through collective bargaining. "People talk about labor's political clout, but politics is really just the tip of the iceberg, and the iceberg is bargaining," Prof. Bernstein says. "It's a limited role, but the unions do a pretty good job in it for their members. And it isn't a whole lot different from the job that fellas like Harry Bridges tried to do back in 1934."