

Why Political Democracy Must Go

By John Reed

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DURING the War the American Labor Unions were attacked under the pretense of "military necessity," their union regulations broken down, and results of years of organization wiped out. Pleading "patriotism," the employers' associations represented in the Council of National Defense and other bodies secured the suspension of labor legislation in some states. Men who were persistently active in labor organization, or who failed to buy Liberty bonds or contribute to the Red Cross, were thrown out of work, and rendered liable to the Army draft. Whole striking factories were threatened with instant conscription into the Army. In some parts of the country such workers, not only for opposing the war, but even for opposing the ruthless profiteering of employers, were blacklisted by the Councils of National Defense. At the same time private police and detective organizations, composed of business men and manufacturers, and authorized by the Department of Justice, used their power to crush labor organization wherever possible.

The Government created a joint body of workers' and employers' representatives called the War Labor Board, to settle industrial disputes. In many cases the awards, presumably binding upon the employers, were either accepted and not applied, or else partially disregarded. The most powerful corporations, such as the United States Steel Corporation, which has always resisted with terrorism and brute force all attempts of its employees at organization, the War Labor Board did not dare openly to affront.

Protests of the workers against unfair awards of arbitrators during the War were met by defiance and threats from Government officials—such as the flat refusal of Charles Piez, Director of the Emergency Fleet Corporation, to reconsider the Macy award to the Shipyard Workers of Seattle, and his ferocious denunciations of the men.

These measures proceeded from an Administration which Organized Labor had united almost solidly to elect, and whose leader—President Wilson—had flattered the vanity of the workers by reviewing the Labor Day parade with Samuel Gompers in 1916; and during a War which Organized Labor in America had voted overwhelmingly to support in the name of democracy.

A typical sufferer during the War was the Machinists' Union. The employers discovered that a skilled, highly-paid machinist was a useless luxury. Four unskilled workers could be taught each one part of a machinist's job, in a very short time. These four comparatively unskilled workers could do the work of four machinists, and do it much cheaper—thus destroying the union wage-scale, and throwing the skilled workers on the street.

It is interesting in this connection to quote from an article in *Fincher's Trades' Review*, written by William H. Sylvis, the first great American labor leader, in 1863, describing the same process applied to the Stove-Moulders:

"Simultaneous with this was introduced the 'helper system' . . . the stoves were cut up, that is, each man made one piece . . . Thus this system went on until it became necessary for each man to have from one to five boys; and . . . prices became so low that men were obliged to increase the hours of labor, and work much harder; and then could scarcely obtain the plainest necessities of life . . ."

It was directly from these conditions that the first powerful national labor union sprang—the Molders' International Union. Likewise, it was the replacing of skilled men with young apprentice-boys, at starvation wages, which was the chief grievance resulting in the second great union—the National Union of Machinists and Blacksmiths, under the leadership of another of the famous early American labor leaders, Jonathan C. Fincher.

The beginning of the Civil War,* with its industrial paralysis and widespread unemployment, wiped out whatever tentative labor organization had begun, except for the two great national unions above mentioned. But in 1862 the Government began its issuance of hundreds of millions of dollars in "greenbacks," which, accompanied by the high war tariff and the tremendous demand for army supplies, caused a hectic revival of industry, and laid the foundations for a class of capitalist employers. As in the European War just concluded, all classes profited except the wage-earners; for while wages in 1864 had risen 30%, the average of retail prices had risen 70%.

*Mass meetings of workmen to protest against the Civil War were held in Philadelphia, Reading, Norfolk, Peterborough and Richmond, Va., Cincinnati, St. Louis and Louisville, Ky., at which latter place a resolution was adopted declaring that "workmen had no real or vital issue in the mere abstract questions used to divide the masses." A national convention of workers met in Philadelphia in 1861 to oppose the War.

The frightful pressure on the working-class at this time led to an era of labor union organization, most of the unions being local, and affiliated in trades assemblies, which supported one another in strikes and boycotts. The local and scattered character of these small unions corresponded exactly to the conditions of production at the time. But by the end of the war the manufacture of standardized products, and the establishment, though the new railroads, of national markets, created rapidly, one after another, the great national unions. This was the real birth of the American Labor Movement.

Before the Civil War the Government was controlled by the Southern slave-holding class. This control was challenged by the small capitalists of the North, opposing the interests of wage labor to those of chattel-slavery. It was as a representative of this small property-holding class that Abraham Lincoln was elected to the Presidency, and as a representative of this class that he conducted the war. He feared the growing ruthless power of Wall Street, and warned against it again and again. And when the war was ended, with the slave-power destroyed, he wished to see Reconstruction in the South proceed rapidly and generously, so that the rising class of small property-holders there could unite with the same class in the North to keep control of the Government. But Lincoln was assassinated, and there is no small evidence to prove that the bullet which killed him was fired from the direction of Wall Street . . . And the capitalists, seizing control of the Federal Government, proceeded to loot the South, and to create there such bitter sectional and racial antagonism, that it made co-operation between the small property holders of the North and South impossible and enabled a small group of capitalists to settle themselves firmly in the saddle. Finally, abandoning the ruined South, the ruling class turned its attention to looting the public domain, natural resources, and the Government—State and National. Great political machines were built up throughout the country, resting on political patronage and Governmental graft, whose power to this day has never been shaken off.

Before the Civil War there were no great capitalists. Industry was largely localized, the products being consumed where they were manufactured. There was plenty of free land in the West to which the exploited could go, and the workman could always become a small manufacturer and merchant on his own account. Literally speaking, there was no wage-earning working-class as such in the United States. But the free workmen of America who enlisted or were drafted into the Union armies, leaving a society in which the manufacturer came to them, returned after the war to find gigantic new centralized industries, to which they must travel and beg for work. With the development of power, transportation and great factories, industry after industry left the country and moved to the city; and the worker was forced to follow. This concentration in the cities was intensified by the waves of immigration from Europe. Free land was gone; not even the Homestead Law, breaking up the great land-holdings and creating millions of small land-owners, could prevent the growing concentration of labor power and capital. In fact, the new free-holders were at the mercy of the railroads, marketing facilities and banks, which were already in the hands of the great capitalists.

From before the Civil War to this day, the psychology of the American worker has been the psychology not of a class-conscious laborer, but of a small property holder. The evolution of industrial society in America has been so swift, that the American worker still has in his mind the idea that he may climb into the capitalist class.

Why?

Not the least of the reasons is, that two or three generations before Labor in other countries had received the first privilege for which it fought, the American worker had been given the political vote. The first manifestations of his class consciousness were political manifestations. In spite of unending disappointments, in spite of the hollowness of all his legislative victories, the American worker continues to believe the promises of the capitalist political parties, and vote, vote, vote.

It is to be noticed that the beginnings of American economic labor organization were dictated by the necessity for defense of his class interests—never offense. The Knights of Labor was founded to defend standards of living; the American Federation of Labor was formed to defend Labor's interests. Except comparatively lately, as partially in the I. W. W., American Labor has never supported any economic organization with a political object—that is to say, with the object of gaining control of the State. Its efforts at political conquest of government have

been in the form of political action—and this political action has never been a class-conscious proletarian movement, but always the joining of forces with the small property holders, in their efforts to conquer power. Such was the Union Labor Party, the Greenback Labor Party, the Populists, the Bryan Free-Silverites, the Progressives, and finally the Wilson Democrats. And, as we have noted in a preceding installment, these movements, which in essence were nothing more than revolts of debtors against the strangling greed of the great capitalists, failed utterly. The control of Government by the great capitalists was too strong to break.

In all these debtor-revolts, the farmer, who feels the pressure the most severely, was the most prominent element. Union labor followed the farmer—not as the propertyless industrial worker, but as the owner, or prospective owner, of a little property. The latest of these revolutionary movements of small property holders is the Non-Partisan League, with its program of State banks, State-controlled elevators and transportation lines, and its combination of the farmer with Union Labor in the cities to wrest control of the State from the great financial interests. It, too, will fail. . . .

For more than half a century American Labor has turned its attention alternately from politics to economic organization. Says John R. Commons, in his "History of American Labor":

"The repeating cycle of politics and trade unionism, political struggle and economic struggle, political organization and economic organization, marks out the course of this history of labor."

In the last two decades before the European War, Union Labor, disenchanted with the failure of political action, adopted the course of adjuring politics, and developing the economic organization alone.

In the last decade before the European War, Houses of Congress, and was using the Courts to the Employers' Association had captured both Houses of Congress, and was using the Courts to revive "conspiracy" charges against labor organizations, and to defeat them by means of the injunction, turned its attention to politics in order to protect its economic action. Political pressure was brought to bear upon legislatures; lobbies were maintained at Washington, and in the State legislatures; the policy of "voting for our friends and defeating our enemies" was largely practised; Mr. Samuel Gompers and other labor leaders were familiar figures in Congressional Committee rooms, arguing for or against such and such a bill.

The legislative achievements of Union Labor are impressive. A Department of Labor in Washington, and State bureaus in almost every State; eight-hour laws in Government work, on the railways, and in many States; Federal Boards of Arbitration and Conciliation; Workmen's Compensation laws in most States; restriction of foreign immigration, and exclusion of Oriental laborers; Factory laws of all sorts, legislative safeguards, and legalization of strikes and picketing; and the Clayton Act, which declares that Labor is not a commodity, and professes to abolish the use of injunctions in industrial disputes—a law which Mr. Gompers hailed at "the new Magna Charta."

But in the last analysis, what does all this come down to? The Department of Labor in Washington represents nothing but the interests of the upper strata of skilled workers; it is headed by a former workman, William B. Wilson, who acquiesces in the persecutions of striking miners by the copper barons of Arizona, and defends the deportation from the country of foreigners active in labor organization, on the ground that they are "Bolsheviks"; in other words, it faithfully serves the capitalist Government. Long before the Eight-Hour laws were enacted, it was recognized by the more intelligent capitalist-employers that they would increase the efficiency of workmen; and even now they are not obeyed by corporations whose interests they do not serve. Boards of Arbitration either "arbitrate" in favor of the employers, who will not relinquish an atom of their power, or fail. Most Workmen's Compensation laws are subject to decisions of Industrial Commissions, or similar Government bodies, and to appeal in the capitalist courts. Factory laws are generally disregarded, and strikes and picketing, though legalized, are still practically outlawed by the police. The Clayton Act is not worth the paper it is printed on.

In spite of the phenomenal growth of the American Federation of Labor, and its increase of power, nevertheless industry has grown faster yet. Even before the war, that great achievement of the American Federation of Labor, the "trade agreement," a sort of partnership between organized labor and capital,—in which contracts were signed between bargaining groups to cover a period of time—had been abolished in the largest companies, such as the United States Steel Corporation. Little by little