A HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

SELIG PERLMAN, PH.D.

Assistant Professor of Economics in the University of Wisconsin; Co-author of the History of Labour in the United States

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

THE present *History of Trade Unionism in the United States* is in part a summary of work in labor history by Professor John R. Commons and collaborators at the University of Wisconsin from 1904 to 1918, and in part an attempt by the author to carry the work further. Part I of the present book is based on the *History of Labour in the United States* by Commons and Associates (Introduction: John R. Commons; Colonial and Federal Beginnings, to 1827: David J. Saposs; Citizenship, 1827-1833: Helen L. Summer; Trade Unionism, 1833-1839: Edward B. Mittelman; Humanitarianism, 1840-1860: Henry E. Hoagland; Nationalization, 1860-1877: John B. Andrews; and Upheaval and Reorganization, 1876-1896: by the present author), published by the Macmillan Company in 1918 in two volumes.

Part II, "The Larger Career of Unionism," brings the story from 1897 down to date; and Part III, "Conclusions and Inferences," is an attempt to bring together several of the general ideas suggested by the History. Chapter 12, entitled "An Economic Interpretation," follows the line of analysis laid down by Professor Commons in his study of the American shoemakers, 1648-1895.[1]

The author wishes to express his strong gratitude to Professors Richard T. Ely and John R. Commons for

[1] See his *Labor and Administration*, Chapter XIV (Macmillan, 1913).

their kind aid at every stage of this work. He also wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mr. Edwin E. Witte, Director of the Wisconsin State Legislative Reference Library, upon whose extensive and still unpublished researches he based his summary of the history of the injunction; and to Professor Frederick L. Paxson, who subjected the manuscript to criticism from the point of view of General American History.

S. P.

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CHAPTER 1

LABOR MOVEMENTS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR

(1) *Early Beginnings, to 1827*

The customary chronology records the first American labor strike in 1741. In that year the New York bakers went out on strike. A closer analysis discloses, however, that this outbreak was a protest of master bakers against a municipal regulation of the price of bread, not a wage earners' strike against employers. The earliest genuine labor strike in America occurred, as far as known, in 1786, when the Philadelphia printers "turned out" for a minimum wage of six dollars a week. The second strike on record was in 1791 by Philadelphia house carpenters for the ten-hour day. The Baltimore sailors were successful in advancing their wages through strikes in the years 1795, 1805, and 1807, but their endeavors were recurrent, not permanent. Even more ephemeral were several riotous sailors' strikes as well as a ship builders' strike in 1817 at Medford, Massachusetts. Doubtless many other such outbreaks occurred during the period to 1820, but left no record of their existence.

A strike undoubtedly is a symptom of discontent.

However, one can hardly speak of a beginning of trade unionism until such discontent has become expressed in an organization that keeps alive after a strike, or between strikes. Such permanent organizations existed prior to the twenties only in two trades, namely, shoemaking and printing.

The first continuous organization of wage earners was that of the Philadelphia shoemakers, organized in 1792. This society, however, existed for less than a year and did not even leave us its name. The shoemakers of Philadelphia again organized in 1794 under the name of the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers and maintained their existence as such at least until 1806. In 1799 the society conducted the first organized strike, which lasted nine or ten weeks. Prior to 1799, the only recorded strikes of any workmen were "unorganized" and, indeed, such were the majority of the strikes that occurred prior to the decade of the thirties in the nineteenth century.

The printers organized their first society in 1794 in New York under the name of The Typographical Society and it continued in existence for ten years and six months. The printers of Philadelphia, who had struck in 1786, neglected to keep up an organization after winning their demands. Between the years 1800 and 1805, the shoemakers and the printers had continuous organizations in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore. In 1809 the shoemakers of Pittsburgh and the Boston printers were added to the list, and somewhat later the Albany and Washington printers. In 1810 the printers organized in New Orleans.

The separation of the jorneymen from the masters, first shown in the formation of these organizations, was emphasized in the attitude toward employer members. The question arose over the continuation in membership of those who became employers. The shoemakers excluded such members from the organization. The printers, on the other hand, were more liberal. But in 1817 the New York society put them out on the ground that "the interests of the journeymen are *separate* and in some respects *opposite* to those of the employers."

The strike was the chief weapon of these early societies. Generally a committee was chosen by the society to present a price list or scale of wages to the masters individually. The first complete wage scale presented in this country was drawn up by the organized printers of New York in 1800. The strikes were mainly over wages and were generally conducted in an orderly and comparatively peaceful manner. In only one instance, that of the Philadelphia shoemakers of 1806, is there evidence of violence and intimidation. In that case "scabs" were beaten and employers intimidated by demonstrations in front of the shop or by breaking shop windows. During a strike the duties of "picketing" were discharged by tramping committees. The Philadelphia shoemakers, however, as early as 1799, employed for this purpose a paid officer. This strike was for higher wages for workers on boots. Although those who worked on shoes made no demands of their own, they were obliged to strike, much against their will. We thus meet with the first sympathetic strike on record. In 1809 the New York shoemakers, starting with a strike against one firm, ordered a general strike when they discovered that that firm was getting its work done in other shops. The payment of strike benefits dates from the first authenticated strike, namely in 1786. The method of payment varied from society to society, but the constitution of the New York shoemakers, as early as 1805, provided for a permanent strike fund.

The aggressive trade unionism of these early trade societies forced the masters to combine against them. Associations of masters in their capacity as merchants had usually preceded the journeymen's societies. Their function was to counteract destructive competition from "advertisers" and sellers in the "public market" at low prices. As soon, however, as the wage question became serious, the masters' associations proceeded to take on the function of dealing with labor—mostly aiming to break up the trade societies. Generally they sought to create an available force of non-union labor by means of advertising, but often they turned to the courts and brought action against the journeymen's societies on the ground of conspiracy.

The bitterness of the masters' associations against the the journeymen's societies perhaps was caused not so much by their resistance to reductions in wages as by their imposition of working rules, such as the limitation of the number of apprentices, the minimum wage, and what we would now call the "closed shop." The conspiracy trials largely turned upon the "closed shop" and in these the shoemakers figured exclusively.[1]

Altogether six criminal conspiracy cases are recorded against the shoemakers from 1806 to 1815. One occurred in Philadelphia in 1806; one in New York in 1809; two in Baltimore in 1809; and two in Pittsburgh, the first in 1814 and the other in 1815. Each case was tried before a jury which was judge both of law and fact. Four of the cases were decided against the journeymen.

[1] See below, 147-148.

In one of the Baltimore cases judgment was rendered in favor of the journeymen. The Pittsburgh case of 1815 was compromised, the shoemakers paying the costs and returning to work at the old wages. The outcome in the other cases is not definitely known. It was brought out in the testimony that the masters financed, in part at least, the New York and Pittsburgh prosecutions.

Effective as the convictions in court for conspiracy may have been in checking the early trade societies, of much greater consequence was the industrial depression which set in after the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars. The lifting of the Embargo enabled the foreign traders and manufacturers to dump their products upon the American market. The incipient American industries were in no position to withstand this destructive competion. Conditions were made worse by past over investment and by the collapse of currency inflation.

Trade unionism for the time being had to come to an end. The effect on the journeymen's societies was paralyzing. Only those survived which turned to mutual insurance. Several of the printers' societies had already instituted benefit features, and these now helped them considerably to maintain their organization. The shoemakers' societies on the other hand had remained to the end purely trade-regulating organizations and went to the wall.

Depression reached its ebb in 1820. Thereafter conditions improved, giving rise to aggressive organizations of wage earners in several industries. We find strikes and permanent organizations among hatters, tailors, weavers, nailers, and cabinet makers. And for the first time we meet with organizations of factory workers—female workers.

Beginning with 1824 and running through 1825, the year which saw the culmination of a period of high prices, a number of strikes occurred in the important industrial centers. The majority were called to enforce higher wages. In Philadelphia, 2900 weavers out of about 4500 in the city were on strike. But the strike that attracted the most public attention was that of the Boston house carpenters for the ten-hour day in 1825.

The Boston journeymen carpenters chose the most strategic time for their strike. They called it in the spring of the year when there was a great demand for carpenters owing to a recent fire. Close to six hundred journeymen were involved in this struggle. The journeymen's demand for the ten-hour day drew a characteristic reply from the "gentlemen engaged in building," the customers of the master builders. They condemned the journeymen on the moral ground that an agitation for a shorter day would open "a wide door for idleness and vice"; hinted broadly at the foreign origin of the agitation; declared that all combinations intending to regulate the value of labor by abridging the working day were in a high degree unjust and injurious to the other classes in the community; announced their resolution to support the masters at the sacrifice of suspending building altogether; and bound themselves not to employ any journeyman or master who might enforce the ten-hour day. The strike failed.

The renewed trade-union activities brought forth a fresh crop of trials for conspiracy.[1] One case involved Philadelphia master shoemakers who combined to reduce wages, two were against journeymen tailors in Philadelphia and Buffalo and the fourth was a hatters' case in

[1] See below, 148-149.