

Labor's Untold Story

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By Richard O. Boyer

MAGICIAN OF THE LAW

THE DARK SHIP

By Herbert M. Morais

THE STRUGGLE FOR AMERICAN FREEDOM: THE
FIRST TWO HUNDRED YEARS

DEISM IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

GENE DEBS: THE STORY OF
A FIGHTING AMERICAN (*With Bill Cahn*)

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BY

Richard O. Boyer

AND

Herbert M. Morais



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Authors' Note

This book is intended to be a survey of the struggles of American working men and women for a better life and a more democratic society for all Americans. It does not purport to be a complete account of the conflicts of labor and capital over the years; it does seek to tell the main line of that story from the Civil War, when industrial capital began its hegemony over American life, to the present, when that thrall may be at the highest peak it will ever attain in America.

Labor's Untold Story is actually an introduction to a dramatic and important part of American history too often untold, to a part important to all Americans but which is often concealed by scholarly class bias because working men seldom write labor history.

We believe the story will make good reading for all kinds of Americans; we hope it will find a specially interested audience among men and women who believe organization in free labor unions is a prerequisite to a truly democratic America.

R. O. B.

H. M. M.

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CHAPTER I

"Be Jubilant, My Feet!"

"All that harms labor is treason to America. No line can be drawn between these two. If any man tells you he loves America, yet he hates labor, he is a liar. If a man tells you he trusts America, yet fears labor, he is a fool."

"I am glad to see that a system of labor prevails under which laborers can strike when they want to. . . . I like the system which lets a man quit when he wants to and wish it might prevail everywhere."

"The strongest bond of human sympathy, outside of the family relation, should be one uniting all working people of all nations, tongues and kindreds."

FROM THE SPEECHES OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

1. In the Beginning

Labor's story, still untold and largely missing from textbook and conventional history, is more than an account of strikes, spies, and frame-ups, of organizing and building unions, of men and women fighting and dying for better lives in a better America. It is more than the grim drama of Big Bill Haywood shooting it out with hired gunmen in the mine wars of the Rockies; or of Parsons crying with his last breath as he stood on the gallows, "Let the voice of the people be heard!"; or of the sit-down strikers at Flint whose bravery fanned the flame of CIO sweeping across the land with the speed of a prairie fire.

Fundamentally, labor's story is the story of the American people. To view it narrowly, to concentrate on the history of specific trade unions or on the careers of individuals and their rivalries, would be to miss the point that the great forces which have swept the American people into action have been the very forces that have also molded labor.

Trade unionism was born as an effective national movement amid the great convulsion of the Civil War and the fight for Negro freedom. From that day to this the struggle for Negro rights has been important to labor's welfare. Labor suffered under depressions which spurred the whole American people into movement in the seventies, in the eighties, and in the nineties. It reached its greatest heights when it joined hands with farmers, small businessmen, and the Negro people in the epic Populist revolts of the 1890's and later in the triumph that was the New Deal.

For labor has never lived in isolation or progressed without allies. Always it has been in the main stream of American life, always at the very crux of American history, with none more concerned than it at the ever-increasing concentration of American corporate power. Labor's story, by its very nature, is synchronized at every turn with the growth and development of American monopoly. Its great leap forward into industrial unionism was an answering action to the development of trusts and great industrial empires.

Labor's grievances, in fact the very conditions of its life, have been imposed by its great antagonist, that combination of industrial and financial power often known as Wall Street. The mind and actions of William H. Sylvis, the iron molder who founded the first effective national labor organization, can scarcely be understood without also an understanding of the genius and cunning of his contemporary, John D. Rockefeller, father of the modern trust. In the long view of history the machinations of J. P. Morgan, merging banking and industrial capital as he threw together ever larger combinations of corporate power controlled by fewer and fewer men, may have governed the course of American labor more than the plans of Samuel Gompers.

It is of all this, then, that labor's untold story consists. It is a story of great gains won and of labor's rank and file; of the sobbing desperation of Mrs. Munley as she shook the gates of Pottsville Prison where her husband and other Molly Maguires were being hanged as foreign agents because they had formed a trade union; of the railroad strike of 1877 and of how it was broken with the charge of Communist conspiracy.

It is the story of Eugene V. Debs running for the Presidency from a prison cell in his fight for world peace and of the movement for amnesty that grew until it freed him. It tells of the great love of Lucy Parsons and of her lonely fight for the life of her framed husband. In its pages are men and women, unknown to history but the very heart of the labor movement, distributing leaflets, arranging meetings, collecting dues, and spreading the word and the seed which built the trade union cause. It tells of the millions of immigrants arriving in steerage on a strange American shore; of the singing Wobblies, a union on wheels, the iron wheels of speeding freights; of the bloody struggles of the unemployed which were climaxed by the triumph of the CIO and New Deal.

It is a long story and an exciting one. In the beginning there was the country-shaking struggle of the Civil War. Out of its fat war contracts

for the instruments of mass killing came the great American fortunes and the beginnings of monopoly. Out of its hardships on the civilian front, out of the poverty, starvation, and exhausting labor fastened on the North's working class, came the first successful national trade unions and, in 1866, the National Labor Union, the first effective nationwide federation of labor.

2. *Mr. Ruffin Starts a War*

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861, amid a gala atmosphere in the jasmine-filled air of Charleston, South Carolina. At celebrations of the event ladies in crinoline with gaily colored parasols crowded around old Edmund Ruffin, who had asked and received the honor of beginning the bloodiest war in the Western Hemisphere. Because of his long advocacy of treason, slavery, and secession, he had been permitted to fire the first gun at the Union's Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. There had been, as he fired the shot, a long hissing suspense and then a hollow boom swelled out over the quiet blue bay toward the federal fort and the American flag gently stirring in the sweet air of early morning.

The old man saw neither past nor future as his shot went echoing out over the sea, putting forces into motion that he could not comprehend. In the sudden silence there was a little burst of cheering, almost instantly engulfed by an iron roar as battery after battery joined in the cannonading, signaling war, but signaling too the swift growth of an industrial order destined to revolutionize American life.

But Edmund Ruffin, unconscious of this, stood uncertainly for a moment or so at the center of history, and then went his way to a series of Charleston receptions where he was hailed as a hero. There was no thought then of decaying corpses strewn miles of field, of legs and arms blown from bodies until the earth was red and wet, and the dainty belles of Charleston were lovely in minuet and reel as toasts were drunk to Edmund Ruffin, the savior of the South.

All about the savior were the slaves who served him but apparently he sensed nothing of their writhings and strivings for the liberty that 186,000 Negroes would fight for in the Union Army. We can see him down the years, patting his lips with a snowy napkin, filled with wine and certitude and never a single hint of the defeat and death before him.

A great surge of patriotic feeling swept the cities and farms north of the Mason-Dixon Line at the news that the flag and American troops had been fired upon by slaveholders, the most rabid of whom were frankly intent upon fastening their system of unpaid, driven labor upon the entire nation. The *Charleston Mercury*, for example, had declared just before the war's beginning, "Slavery is the natural and normal condition of the laboring man . . . and the Northern states will yet have to introduce it. The theory of a free society is a delusion." When President Lincoln called for

volunteers the entire membership of trade union locals enlisted in single groups, knowing well that there would be no free trade union movement if the slaveholders triumphed.

Seldom in all history had there been such a war, not only for bloodiness, bitterness, and far-flung battle line but for the momentous issues involved. As it swayed back and forth across half the country, men dying by the scores of thousands at Wilderness and Shiloh, Chickamauga and Antietam, many trade unionists felt that the issue being decided was not only whether 4,000,000 Americans should continue in Negro slavery but whether there was to be any freedom at all for working-class Americans, black or white, North or South.¹ As the war increased in ferocity along a thousand miles of battle front, on mountain top and prairie, in swamp, forest, and burning towns that extended from the Mississippi to the Atlantic, the whole world watched in awe and even "the workingmen of Europe felt instinctively that the Star-Spangled Banner carried the destiny of their class."^{1a}

3. *The Second American Revolution*

When Edmund Ruffin fired his shot across Charleston Harbor he was supremely confident of a slaveholders' victory and his confidence seemed amply justified by the facts. For more than a quarter of a century the slaveholders, through their economic and political allies in the North and their own iron regime at home, had owned the national government. They had dominated the Presidency, directed the Supreme Court, managed Congress, held both major political parties to their will, and controlled to large degree the press, the school, and the pulpit. For more than a quarter century they had passed the laws, formulated the nation's policies, and balked the rising industrial capitalist economy of the North.

Always bold, audacious, confident, they had progressed from victory to victory. As the area of slavery steadily increased, they threatened the great West, which had almost doubled in size after the seizure of nearly half of Mexico in 1848 and which was so necessary for capitalist expansion. And in 1857 their United States Supreme Court declared in the Dred Scott decision

¹ The *Iron Platform*, a New York labor paper, indicated, for example, in November, 1862, that if the slaveholders won the war "all laborers, white or black" would be "and ought to be slaves." It said: "There is one truth which should be clearly understood by every workingman in the Union. *The slavery of the black man leads to the slavery of the white man.* . . . If the doctrine of treason is true, that 'Capital should own labor,' then their logical conclusion is correct, and all laborers, white or black, are and ought to be slaves."

^{1a} Address of the International Workingmen's Association to President Lincoln, London, Jan. 7, 1865.

that slavery was legal in all the territories of the United States.² They were the ruling class, and their power was founded on property, on 4,000,000 human beings, owned as cattle are owned and valued at four billions of dollars.

Through their influence upon the press they had convinced much of the public, even in the North, that the Abolitionists were not primarily concerned with the elimination of Negro slavery but were instead a treasonable conspiracy to overthrow the government by force and violence for the benefit of "our hereditary foreign enemy," Great Britain.³ For almost thirty years the Abolitionists had been described as "Communists and Socialists" using the cry of Negro liberty as a shield to hide their plot of Socialist insurrection. Typical of the diatribes against them, as frequent as similar attacks against labor today, was that of George Fitzhugh, Southern sociologist, who declared in 1857:

"We warn the North that every one of the leading Abolitionists is agitating the Negro slavery question as a means to attain their ulterior ends . . . Socialism and Communism . . . no private property, no church, no law . . . free love, free land, free women, and free children." ⁴

² Northern labor was particularly alarmed by the Dred Scott decision, in which Chief Justice Taney declared in effect "that Congress had no power under the Constitution to prohibit or abolish slavery in the territories of the United States anywhere at any time." The decision seemed to mean that free labor would have to compete with slave labor in all the great area of the West, from Washington and the Dakotas to Arizona and New Mexico, from California to Kansas. The Dred Scott decision was only one of a long series of victories won by the slave power in the critical decade leading to the Civil War. In 1850 the slaveholders pushed through Congress the Fugitive Slave Act which provided for federal government assistance in the return of runaway slaves from the North. There were thousands of runaways each year, aided in escaping on the so-called Underground Railroad, by thousands of otherwise law-abiding Negro and white citizens of the North as well as of the South, despite the violation of federal law.

³ In 1835 Harrison Gray Otis, former Senator from Massachusetts and a leading citizen of Boston, told a huge pro-slavery audience meeting in Boston's Faneuil Hall that the American Anti-Slavery Society was "a revolutionary society for the purpose of undermining . . . the government of our sister states." He further declared the Abolitionists were a conspiracy "to trench upon the provisions of the Constitution by overt acts." As a result of these charges, often repeated in the public press, the Abolitionists were exposed, according to the sons of William Lloyd Garrison in their biography of their father, "to public odium, as disorganizers, seeking unconstitutional ends by unconstitutional means, aiming to excite a servile insurrection . . . and calling to their aid the hereditary foreign enemies of the republic. . . ."

⁴ Another typical utterance was that of Dr. James H. Thornwell, a religious and educational leader of South Carolina, who declared in 1850: "The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake." The words somehow have a modern ring.

The slaveholders had diverted attention from their own treasonable designs by hanging John Brown and his men for treason even as they themselves were plotting it. Prime movers in Brown's execution on Dec. 2, 1859, for his attempt to free Virginia's slaves were Jefferson Davis, soon to be president of the slaveholders' Confederacy, Governor Wise of Virginia, and Senator Mason of that same state, all three of whom were leaders in the treasonous assault less than two years later against the Government of the United States.⁵

Reactionaries, both North and South, concealed their own plans by charging that the foreign-born, particularly the Irish, were plotting to seize the White House and the nation under the leadership of agents of the Papacy.⁶ As for the young labor movement, it had been charged many times with being a foreign, un-American conspiracy, since 1805 when the Philadelphia shoemakers' union had been held to be "a design against the freedom of the nation."⁷

From the organization of the very first local trade unions in the United States in the 1790's, it was found difficult to raise wages for shoemakers, shipbuilders, and bricklayers when a few hundred miles to the south shoes were made, ships were built, and bricks were laid for no pay at all to the slave worker. It was difficult to gain shorter hours in Rhode Island when in Maryland a worker might be driven until he fell exhausted, only to be whipped to his feet again. As early as 1844 textile workers in Fall River,

⁵ In October, 1859, John Brown led a band of twenty-two men, five of whom were Negroes, in an attempt to capture the United States government arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The raid, which was part of a much larger plan involving the destruction of slavery by the arming of its victims, was unsuccessful. Brown and six of his followers—ten were killed during the raid—were hanged for criminal conspiracy and treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. On Dec. 2, 1859, Brown was executed.

⁶ In 1835 Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor, published a book, *The Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States*, in which he charged that Catholics were foreign agents conspiring to overthrow the United States government. This book, and similar agitation, was used to distract attention from the main issue, slavery, diverting it instead to the foreign-born. Under the stimulus of such propaganda Catholic churches were assaulted, incited mobs declaring that they contained arms and ammunition for an uprising. So general was the feeling that Catholics were foreign agents that it was proposed that they be excluded from holding public office. During the 1850's a political movement, confined to the native-born and called the "Know-Nothings," became widespread in the East, its chief article of faith opposition to Catholics and foreign-born.

⁷ From 1805 when eight shoemakers were indicted by a grand jury in Philadelphia for "a combination and conspiracy to raise wages," employers with the help of pliant courts repeatedly branded the labor movement as a conspiracy using force as its method of subverting society. Judge Edwards declared in New York in 1836, for example, that trade unions were un-American. "They are of foreign origin," he said in holding New York's tailors guilty of conspiracy, "and I am led to believe mainly upheld by foreigners." Similar charges were prosecuted against trade unions in 1821, 1823, 1827, 1829, 1834, 1835, and 1836, union tailors, hatters, spinners, shoemakers, and carpet weavers being the victims.