HERE COMES LABOR

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CHAPTER I

WHO IS LABOR?

AMERICAN Labor is on the March. Millions of men and women, working people, are fighting for a chance to live better lives. Whenever they win, life is better for all of us together. This book is about Labor and what it is doing. But the word "labor" is sometimes confusing. Suppose we put it this way: If you spell labor with a small "l" you mean work. If you spell Labor with a capital "L" you mean people. So this book is really about human beings engaged in a dramatic struggle.

But Labor does not include everybody, or even everybody who works. Doctors, scientists, and other professional men often work longer hours than any

strong union would permit its members to agree to. Business men and bankers often work very hard. They have a right to say that they, also, help the people of the United States to live. And that is what work is for, to enable the people of a country to live. But professional and business men do not work for wages. And they are usually employers of others. The word Labor means wage-earners.

Some people hold that Labor is a class, the "proletariat," which owns nothing; the slaves of the capitalists or "bourgeoisie" who control everything. But it would be hard to convince an American locomotive engineer who owns his own home, perhaps some shares of stock in a good company, and whose son is studying in college, that he belongs to the proletariat or ever has belonged to an oppressed "class." American workers just do not think in those terms.

There are about fifty million men and women in this country who work—or would like to work—for wages. They do not employ others; they are not members of the professions. No doubt they are workers, but one cannot say what the whole mass of them wants, or where they are going, or what they are trying to do. They have never gotten together and decided on these things. They have no one to speak for them, or to lead them; they have no way of planning and acting together as a whole group to help make the life of each individual better.

So it is only the workers organized in labor unions who can be counted as a force in this country. They

have spokesmen who let their wishes and opinions be known. Acting together, they have developed great power over their own lives, and they deeply affect the life of the country as a whole. When you speak of American Labor, then, you mean organized working men and women. You mean the unions.

Unions are not made up of any one particular sort of person; almost every type of American is represented in their ranks. There are college graduates and people who have never learned to read. There are Negroes and Chinese. There are members of the country's proudest families, and people whose parents never took a bath in winter. There are also men of sound judgment, and fools. There are savage fighters and smooth diplomats. There are those who will gladly lay down their lives for a cause and those who will betray any party or any person for power or money. There are those who see ahead with clear eyes and those who follow blindly after the man of the hour.

In the conventions that order Labor's affairs, the man who digs ditches sits down between the clerk who spends his days juggling columns of figures and the skilled machinist to whom a hair's thickness is greater than the difference between a good job and a bad one. And as these men are different in their work, they are different in their lives and in the problems they have to face. So you cannot say that Labor is this kind of person, or that kind. Labor is Americans, organized to act and think together.

I have spent my life working with American Labor, sometimes as part of its organized body, sometimes as an observer. I have seen its triumphs and defeats from close up; watched it blunder, right itself, go on. I have known its people—members of the rank and file, the officers, and the men and women who have given their whole lives to Labor quietly, with small rewards and no fame.

And I believe in Labor. It has been a force for great good in the United States, socially, economically, spiritually. It has improved the standard of living, maintaining the right of the American worker to all that makes for health and the better things of life. It has helped to keep the United States democratic by fighting against too great a difference between the rich and the poor, by guarding the workingman's freedom, and by seeing to it that workers did not become a helpless mass, without a voice, without defense against exploitation, without a part in the nation's affairs.

Labor truly has taken to itself the principle upon which this country was founded—that all men were created equal before the law and that equal opportunity should be granted to all. And in the long run I believe that Labor has helped the very industries against whose owners and bosses it has struggled.

So I am going to talk about Labor as I have known it. I want to explain Labor's point of view; to tell of its actions and policies as Labor itself sees them; to justify as Labor justifies its own doings; to

criticize as Labor often criticizes itself. I am not an official and so have nothing either to say or to hold back as a matter of policy. And I am not interested solely in the subtle and impersonal problems of sociology and economics of which Labor is a part. The things I have to tell are these: what Labor means to union members, and what Labor means to you.

It is important that you understand the people who make up organized Labor, and how they are organized; what Labor seeks to do and what it helps to accomplish next; how it goes about it; whether or not it keeps step with the nation as the days march by.

This is not a history, but a look backward helps us to remember that what is happening now is in a large part the result of what has been happening through the years. For I am trying to help you see where Labor is going, and show you some of the main directions it is taking. I want you to understand the force of its drive as it goes along, and how these things relate to the nation as a whole.

Naturally, I cannot give all the details of this tremendous picture in a short book. But if you and your fellow citizens, who together make up America, know something of the main outlines, the most important facts, and something of the human side of it all, then you will be better prepared to understand what is happening here—and how it affects you.

The power of Labor depends upon the number of workers who are organized. All of Labor's hopes,

dreams, and aims are bound up with the strength of numbers. Thinkers and leaders do not always know exactly what they will do with a mighty membership, but they are certain that it will give them the power to accomplish whatever aims Labor may decide upon.

I know of nothing that illustrates all this so well as a drama, small in itself but great in meaning, that took place more than twenty years ago. Samuel Gompers, who did more than any other man to bring Labor together under one banner and give it a voice in the country's affairs, stood alone with me one night on the open porch of a hotel in Atlantic City. In the starlight we could watch the waves sweep in, an endless procession, powerful and majestic.

As he watched, Samuel Gompers saw in those rolling waves a symbol. It was during the World War, and organized Labor was growing with a great forward surge. Gompers stretched out his fist in a gesture that showed how eager he was, and how baffled, and said in a voice tense with emotion:

"If we only had ten million organized——"

There are not yet ten million organized. But during the last few years Labor has again surged forward. Dark and troubled days came after that night when Gompers saw Labor's future in the rolling waves. Except for the period of the World War, there was very little change in the nation's way of thinking about Labor over the twenty-five years before the coming of the New Deal.

Labor could be expected to do certain things, and

it was generally felt that certain things could safely be done to Labor. The "yellow dog contract," which bound the worker not to join a union, was upheld and protected by the courts.

Labor injunctions were issued, preventing men from doing, as organized groups, the things they had a lawful right to do, and compelling them to do the things they had a lawful right to refuse to do. "Private detective agencies," as they were called, fought to break strikes ruthlessly and on a grand scale. The Bergoff Agency, leader of them all, reached the pinnacle of its battle-axe success.

There were periods when Labor gained and periods when it lost, but not much change in the large, important parts of the picture. There was a great deal of talk, but not much was done that was new.

With the autumn of 1929 came unemployment in great, man-swallowing waves. Union treasuries went down; union dues fell away. Labor ranks shared the woes of all the country's banks. Great ambitions went into the dark of economic night like ghosts of grandeur.

Then came Franklin D. Roosevelt—and action. The nation turned its face away from old ways. Freed by New Deal laws and spurred by New Deal policies, Labor surged forward. From a scant three and a half millions, the unions grew to more than seven millions. This new surge brought great changes, and more are coming.

It will not be a rash, rampaging Labor any more.

Most of the strong-arm days of reckless moblike action are over. The coming days are likely to be a time of well considered, constructive action, of cooperation for the making of a sounder nation. The future will see less yawning gaps between the "haves" and the "have-nots"—a fairer distribution of the rewards of American industry.

The march goes on. Today America can look down the road and say, in truth, "Here comes Labor!"

CHAPTER II

WHAT LABOR WANTS

ONLY a few workers, those especially gifted or especially fortunate, can get what they need and want if they have to act alone. The only way for all of them to get their fair share of America's plenty is to band together and use the power of numbers. They must "bargain collectively." Large groups must sell, through spokesmen, the services of all their members on better terms than individuals could command.

But workers must collect in groups before bargaining can start, and employers must accept the fact that they are to deal with a group before an agreement can be reached.

Freedom to organize, a freedom long denied by law and by custom, has always been the first thing Labor wanted. And the second thing has been the recognition by employers of unions as the agents with whom they have to deal. Most other things that Labor may need or want can be gained only when collective bargaining is possible.

Freedom to organize is guaranteed by law, now, and employers are compelled to deal with unions. Labor today has thrown most of its strength into the

effort to get for its members the practical benefits that collective bargaining brings within reach.

First are the material needs, such as food, shelter, clothing, the things every man and his family must have in order to live decently. This is, in spite of its evident justice and economic soundness, a large order. It means, among other things, steady work and continuous income for workers. As the weeks rush along, this problem is shaking American political life to its roots.

High up among Labor's wants are the natural ambitions for power. Also important is the desire for what are called the spiritual and ethical experiences, the desire for a full life. What a person needs for rich, full living, each must measure and define for himself. But we may say generally that workers, like all Americans, want education, pleasure, travel, as much freedom as possible, and an understanding of the world about them.

Workers are people in no way different from those about them. Ordinary men themselves, they want what other ordinary men want. And they expect to get these things in the same way and by the same means. They strive to satisfy their ambitions and their desires.

That brings them, through their unions, to these questions:

How much do things cost?

How much has Labor got, or how much can it get, with which to pay the bill?

To answer, Labor must consider just about every factor that goes to make up what we call economics. The list includes taxes, both seen and unseen, real wages, the services and costs of government, profits, operating costs, and so on down the line.

These are the factors out of which we get a sum total called National Existence. Organized Labor faces a real job in supplying what the workers want, and the demands increase as our national life becomes more complicated.

We have said that all workingmen are not alike. Neither are all bankers, all merchants, or all doctors. Among union members we can find almost the whole range of human ability and human capacity for thinking and understanding. The ranks of Labor no longer contain only men who wear overalls—though sometimes men who wear overalls have great powers of mind and magnificent qualities of soul and spirit.

By and large, the mind of the worker is the product of his time; and we are living in a time of machinery and of science. A great share of the work of today has been shifted from human backs to marvelous machines. It takes many intelligent and highly trained workers to run those machines and keep them in repair.

It does us good to remember that there was a time in the past when all workers labored with their hands, when they tilled soil, tended flocks, wove at their looms, or handled simple tools. For century after century there was almost no change.

Look at your own family records to see how recent was the breakaway from living directly by hand. A scythe, a cradle, and a flail were the workaday tools of the farm when my grandfather was a young man. All of the tools and materials for making a house out of trees were simple; all except the nails, hinges, locks, and glass. And there was great debate in those days about whether the new wire nail which came with the machine age was really any good, as compared to the old square-cut nail of tradition. In the parade of the centuries, that time of my grandfather's was only yesterday.

Just back over the hill, in the later eighteenth century, men began to apply steam to machinery. The result was the greatest change in the speed of living since the human race began. Eighteen centuries had been running on and on, each very much like the last, so far as the average man was concerned. Then in less than two centuries came the amazing world of today. And so we have to think about what Labor did to meet the new conditions, and about the whole Labor problem. The speed of change has been no less for Labor than for others, but Labor has had a harder time keeping up. Today change is so rapid that we have problems which must be settled in a week, whereas in earlier times—if there had been such problems then—they might have waited for years.

Year by year the speed of change grows faster. I should like to emphasize that phrase, Speed of

Change. It needs to be fixed in our mind. Look at it over the last ten years; look ahead a little. Speed of Change. And the catalogue of what Labor wants is changing in the same way. The Knights of the Round Table had no such complicated issues as those which face the executive board of a 1939 union.

So we have new demands today which are not material needs in terms of food and clothing and housing, but which are just as important. On many a day in the past, gunpowder was the principal requirement of Daniel Boone. With another workingman of that day, the broken ax handle was a tragedy. He had to have a new one or stop work.

Today the great need may be a decision by the National Labor Relations Board, and it may well be that until the decision is handed down all wheels are stopped and all hands are idle.

A change in the rate of a tariff schedule may mean the difference between work and no work for a large group. A Supreme Court decision may alter the course of life for thousands. An act of Congress may constitute something vastly more important in the lives of workers than a revolution would have accomplished a hundred years ago.

The means by which needs are satisfied have changed, and are changing, with the speed of lightning. The result has been to let down the bars, to create new rights, and to send organized Labor driving ahead with the greatest speed of growth it has ever known.

Labor's wants thus can be defined only in terms of today. They do not stand still. They are not wrapped in packages and laid neatly away upon shelves, from which they may be taken one by one, last year, this year, or next year, always the same. If we are to understand them at all, they must be regarded in terms of life. And life never stands still. Inventions create new needs. New needs frequently require new laws. New laws have their imperfections—and again change is demanded.

Beneath the shifting pattern of economic life are two basic things that are unchanging because they are now, always have been, and always will be part of life in America: first, freedom; second, the material things necessary to provide a high standard of living.

Freedom has, through all the history of organized Labor, been number one on the list, and at least so far as the present generation is concerned it will stay at the top. As for material things, Labor wants all it can get and isn't afraid to say so. As a matter of fact, Labor's official declarations have repeated a thousand times the principle that workers must receive, for services given, a return that is ever larger and larger.

Any ideas that there are certain enjoyable things which workers should not want may as well be dismissed. Definitely, the organized Labor movement wants every good thing there is, and wants every good thing there is just as soon as it can be had legitimately