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# The American Labor Movement

## A Short History

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By MARY RITTER BEARD ~ ~ ~  
*Joint Author of "The Rise of American Civiliza-  
tion"* ~ ~ ~

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## PREFACE

This little book is intended as a brief and simple story of the labor movement in the United States from the day of independence to the present time. Although there are many special studies, there is no single, comprehensive volume of moderate size for the busy citizen. It seems hardly necessary to dwell upon the importance of more exact and more widespread knowledge of the history, aims and methods of labor organizations in this country.

This volume is largely based upon the monumental *History of Labor in the United States* by John R. Commons, David J. Saposs, Helen L. Sumner, E. B. Mittelman, H. E. Hoagland, John B. Andrews, and Selig Perlman. Several other books, however, have been used with the aforesaid text, especially for the history since 1905. Among these supplementary books may be mentioned: P. F. Brissenden, *The I. W. W.: a Study in American Syndicalism* (Columbia University Studies); M. Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States*; *Reports of Proceedings of the Annual Conventions of the American Federation of Labor*; Stanwood, *History of the Presidency* (Vols. I and II) for all party platforms;

F. Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*; C. Becker, *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York*; Alice Henry, *The Trade Union Woman*; Edith Abbott, *Woman in Industry*; and the writings of Samuel Gompers. Florence Thorne has given invaluable critical aid.

MARY RITTER BEARD.

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# A SHORT HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

## CHAPTER I

### NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

**Labor movement—definition.**—Every modern industrial country has a labor movement; that is, an organized and continuous effort on the part of wage earners to improve their standards of living over a national area. The outward and visible signs of this movement are trade unions, national federations, strikes, boycotts, lockouts, labor leaders, labor conferences and programs, injunctions, legal battles, prosecutions, co-operative societies, labor and socialist parties, a labor press and labor propaganda, the participation of labor in partisan politics, labor lobbies in legislatures, and labor colleges and educational experiments. Considered as a state of mind, the labor movement is marked by growing sympathy among all crafts, trades, and classes of workers—

an increasing belief that their cause is, at bottom, one cause.

**Origin of the American movement.**—The American labor movement began in self-defense—in attempts of workers to protect themselves against the ravages of the rising industrial system as it proceeded step by step to transform the simple agricultural society of the eighteenth century into the urban and industrial society of the nineteenth century. Attempts to trace modern labor organization back to the guilds of the middle ages have been vain. Not until the rise of the merchant capitalist, the factory system, the growth of great industrial cities, mining, and transportation on a large scale did the modern working-class movement emerge.

**Peculiarities of the American labor movement.**—While they have the same origin, the labor movements of the various modern nations differ in their membership, structure, policies and leadership. The American movement has had a distinct character on account of the peculiar political and economic conditions prevailing in this country. Although in early times we had a great planting aristocracy in the southern states, and a landed aristocracy in New York, feudalism never got a strong hold in America.

There never was a powerful landed nobility and clergy to dispute the growing power of the *bourgeoisie* and labor. Our national history therefore had a more purely economic coloring from the start.

The independence of our nation originated in a trade and taxation dispute and in that dispute mechanics and artisans were keenly interested. They played a vigorous rôle in organizing opposition to British rule, in formulating revolutionary policies, and in waging war against royal armies on American soil.\* Although there were, at first, property qualifications on the right to vote, the suffrage was more widely extended than in England; and early in the nineteenth century the workingmen of the northern states were given the ballot without their having to wage a savage struggle against the ruling classes, such as was carried on in Europe.

Many other forces gave a particular trend to the American labor movement. For more than a hundred years there was an abundance of cheap land in the West so that any laborer, with a little capital and some enterprise, who was discontented with his lot as an industrial worker, could readily become an independent farmer. Then the American workers have had to bargain over an immense market area, with extraordinary opportunities for speculation and personal gain. They have had to compete with an enormous and continuous stream of unorganized immigrants from all parts of the world. They have been compelled to carry on their work of organization in every known tongue and to surmount the

\* Becker, *History of Political Parties in the Province of New York* (University of Wisconsin Studies).



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almost insuperable obstacles of race prejudices, different languages, alien habits. They have been compelled to battle with gigantic business organizations known as trusts and combinations, commanding billions of dollars and monopolizing markets on a national scale. No industrial workers have had to face fiercer competition, a mightier money power, more temptations to desert the labor movement, and a heavier loss of leaders to politics and other causes. Finally, it may be noted that the long and terrible struggle over negro slavery, which occupied the political arena for more than thirty years and culminated in a fratricidal war of four years' duration, seriously checked the early labor movement and kept it many decades behind the movement in England. It was not until free land was nearly all gone in the early nineties and that avenue of escape closed to workmen that the American labor movement assumed the solidarity that characterizes the movement in other countries.

**The universality of the labor movement.**—In spite of national peculiarities the labor movement has overleaped national boundaries. Economic conditions are swiftly becoming the same the world over. The steam engine and railway are making all nations industrial and, wherever mechanical industry appears on a large scale, there appears also a labor movement. As trade becomes international and the market a world market, the labor leaders in the sev-

eral countries tend to draw together to exchange ideas, work out programs for common action, and protect the workers of each country against the competition of other countries.

International conferences of organized workers have been held at fairly regular intervals since 1864. The American labor movement was drawn into international relations five years later when it sent its first delegate to Basle in the hope that some way might be found to stem the tide of cheap immigrant labor pouring into this country, lowering the wage scale and thereby the standard of living for American workers. Such a powerful factor in the field of international relations had labor movements become in 1919 that the Peace of Versailles provided for an official international labor conference in an effort to equalize and stabilize working conditions throughout the world. The first of these official world labor conferences, composed of men selected by their respective governments, met in Washington, in October, 1919. Thus the strongest governments take cognizance of the international character of labor relations, forced upon the attention of the world by the efforts of organized labor.

**Significance of the labor movement.**—For a long time this wide-spread labor movement was almost entirely ignored by everybody save those who took part in it or were in sympathy with it or at least intellectually curious about it. Members of the pro-

fessional classes, for the most part, thought of it only in times of crisis. It is a significant comment on American intellectuals that it was not until 1918 that there was any authoritative and exhaustive history of the American labor movement. It is still more significant that the preparation of this history was undertaken, not by professional historians, but by economists who could not after all entirely ignore labor in studying industry.

There are, however, occasions when this extraordinary movement sharply engages the attention of the "public"—a term often used in America to indicate the great metropolitan newspapers. In a crisis like the Great War, the general public became suddenly aware that it could not ignore the attitude of organized labor toward the production of ships, munitions, army supplies, and fuel at a high rate of speed and without interruption by strikes and trade disputes. The prosecution of modern wars rests completely upon the operations of labor in mines, mills, and factories, so that labor fights there just as truly as the soldiers do in the trenches. No ships; no transportation of men and supplies. No clothing; a ragged and demoralized army. No munitions; no advance, no defense. Organized labor thus in fact holds the key to the fighting power of modern states. It not only influences, by its policies, the millions enrolled in its ranks; it actually holds in its grip the millions outside of its pale. In

war times, therefore, it is watched with awe, tense and constant, as a mighty power—for good or ill, according to the opinion of the observer.

Again the labor movement is recognized as a factor in national affairs when it breaks out in disturbances or demonstrations of its power; such as, strikes, boycotts, or riots which make trouble for consumers, employers, the government, and the humanitarians. The United States has had its full share of such disturbances. They have been intensified by the violence of the industrial panics which have periodically deranged American business, spreading ruin and bankruptcy far and wide, and resulting in unemployment, misery, and starvation in labor circles.

Labor also arouses public interest when it turns aside from bargaining with employers to demand certain laws and policies at the hands of the politicians, or threatens to break into politics on its own account. At such times, it has to be considered, placated, or, to use the common term, "suppressed." The "labor vote" thus becomes a pawn in the political game or the object of derision on the part of those who seek applause by taking a "firm and uncompromising stand against paltering with class politics." From the days of Andrew Jackson to the present time, labor has been periodically "in politics." From time to time it has wrung from state legislatures and from Congress special concessions in the form of legislation; it has often declared its

independence and elected labor members of boards of aldermen, legislatures and Congress.

The story of the labor movement is not, however, merely a record of spectacular events. Even the most dramatic outbreak—a political campaign, direct action, or violence—must be traced to its cause. It is an uninformed person who ascribes every crisis in American labor to sudden hysteria or alien ferment. Nor can outbreaks be considered apart from results. Sometimes distinct social gains flow from what seems to the outsider to be just aimless unrest; for example, that in 1910 which registered the rise of sweat shop workers in the garment trades from degrading conditions of life and labor.

Moreover, it is easy to magnify the stormy scenes in labor history. Historians make a grave mistake when they dwell solely on its turbulent features. Achievements gained by militancy often form the basis of constructive work in times of peace. The story of the movement cannot be told in head lines, but is a chronicle of steady and patient organization, moderate legislation, loyalty to thousands of contracts, prompt supply of skilled labor, standardization of practices, vast productiveness in industry, and unmistakable mental growth.

Naturally a movement of so many phases produces varied types of leaders—from the harsh and indomitable man of action to the shrewd and hard-headed organizer engaged in the humdrum work of daily

constructive effort. As labor grows more conscious of its historic mission, it is inevitably thinking more about the character of its leadership in all parts of this country. To play a rôle in the state requires statesmanship.

Finally the labor movement is more than an economic enterprise or a field for energetic leadership. It has a deep social and spiritual significance. It draws men and women together in a great coöperative undertaking which grows in strength day and night and develops ideals of peace and well-being in society as well as practical contests of force. The form of labor's organization and its program change from time to time but its numerical strength increases and its growing solidarity gives more and more weight to its counsels. Even though it may always remain a minority movement in point of membership among the workers, it will exercise the power that a minority always exercises in proportion to its clearness of purpose, its efficiency of organization, and the integrity of its directors. A mere counting of heads is not the essence of democratic achievement. Indeed the labor movement, with such numbers as it gets, takes on the form of a great social force akin to titanic forces in the natural world. Anything so fundamental, so impressive, so fraught with possibilities for the future surely deserves an intensive study by those outside the labor movement as well as by those who work within it.

## CHAPTER II

### ORIGIN OF AMERICAN TRADE UNIONS

**Local labor organizations in colonial times.**—There were no trade unions in the modern sense in the American colonies under British dominion. There were labor organizations in the towns but they were friendly and benevolent societies formed by mechanics and journeymen. They were similar in spirit to those formed among master employers. Their main purpose was to take care of members in times of illness or financial distress. They were friendly societies in an age when public hospitals, homes for the aged, poor farms, pensions, and charitable institutions were not sustained on a large scale by public taxation. They were formed by the new town-dwellers—printers, shoemakers, smiths, and carpenters,—who had been separated from the soil and therefore had no individual resources to fall back upon in an emergency. Just as members of the same church, race, or neighborhood drew together for mutual aid, so the mechanics drew together to help one another. As there were no banks or credit societies, these early trade societies kept chests for

the deposit of money and, on occasion, loaned money to members in need. In addition to their benevolent features, they acted as censors of the quality of the work of their members and even censored morals as well as workmanship. When they were legally incorporated, it was with the express stipulation that they were not to interfere with wages, hours of labor, and similar economic matters. In short, they were not trade unions as we understand that term to-day.

**Independence opens a new era in industry and labor.**—With American independence, an entirely new set of forces came into play. Great Britain had supervised and restricted American enterprise in the interest of the mother country. When her restraints were thrown off, Americans thought they could develop their own industries in their own way. They could trade with all countries of the world and thus widely extend their markets, increasing the demand for their goods. Great Britain, being anxious to retain industries for herself, had sought to keep the colonies agricultural in character. British control being broken, the Americans leaped with zeal into the industrial field. They had an abundance of natural resources of all kinds, and they no longer had an outside force to stay their hands.

**The adoption of the Constitution marks a commercial revolution.**—The period that followed independence (1776) was one of war and weakness, but when the new form of government was established in



1789, giving strength to the union of states and security to business, American enterprise was soon manifest. Under the Constitution, a national bank was founded to give a common medium of exchange throughout the country; uniform currency was introduced; treaties with foreign powers were negotiated; the tariffs which the states had formerly imposed on goods coming from other states were broken down. In a word, the American market was extended over the entire United States. Commercial warfare between the states was stopped. Finances were put on a sound basis. American credit abroad was established firmly and foreign capital to develop iron, steel, ship building and other industries was secured in abundance. With social order guaranteed, plenty of capital at hand, unlimited natural resources, a national market available, a world market opened, a generous supply of European labor assured through immigration, American business men could swing forward with their industries on a large scale.

**The great market opened by the merchant capitalist.**—The great market was first opened by a peculiar type of business man, the merchant capitalist. He was not usually the owner of industries nor the employer of artisans. He was a trader and middle-man, mediating between the producer and the consumer. He specialized in buying and selling. His motto was: "Buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest market." He therefore bought up