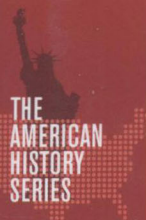


WORKING HARD FOR THE AMERICAN DREAM

Workers and Their Unions,
World War I to the Present

Randi Storch



WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Back to the Future

When I think back on my undergraduate courses, I cannot recall one instance when a professor uttered the words “class conflict,” “labor movement,” or “union struggle.” Growing up in a working-class neighborhood as a daughter of a union electrician and housewife, I took it for granted that history in general and US history in particular were not about me, my family, or my neighbors, but instead, about people with power who somehow controlled national events.

What a surprise, upon entering graduate school, to find that United States Labor and Working-Class History was an actual course being offered. It seemed as though I had entered some parallel universe where one’s reality is turned upside down. In this case, working-class people, replete with their own ideology, politics, and movements, determined the historical narrative. Students discussed how different American history looked when examined from the perspective of people who lacked family wealth or access to higher education and instead had to rely on their own hands and labor to put food on the table and pay the bills. From the first day of class, I was hooked.

Working Hard for the American Dream: Workers and Their Unions, World War I to the Present, First Edition. Randi Storch.

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Introduction

Over the course of my graduate training I learned about new subdisciplines, including social history and the new political history. They showed that labor historians were not alone but part of a generation of historians trained in the 1960s and 1970s who conceptualized an entirely different way of doing history. Labor history pioneers of the 1920s penned an institutionally driven picture of the past with a heavy emphasis on major labor unions and leaders: this new generation struggled to understand how ordinary people experienced work and how class shaped their lives, their interactions with others, and their relationship to the state. Yet despite all the time passed, books written, songs sung, websites created, and films produced, the predominantly working-class students who enter my classes still do not have an inkling that labor and working-class history is a dynamic field of interest and, study, and, even more sadly, these students lack an understanding of the role that working-class people play in American history.

Perhaps these observations are not surprising. Most young people in college today do not identify with the working class or as working class. My students even feel uncomfortable with the term “working class” and reveal their biases when they choose to write and speak the term “low class” instead. It is not that they cannot connect to the history of the working class, but they would rather see themselves as upwardly mobile members of an amorphous, but all-American, middle class. At first glance, they cannot see how steel workers’ struggles back in the 1930s have anything to do with their twenty-first century lives. In addition, there are not many working-class groups, such as unions, clubs, musical groups, political parties, or mutual aid societies, clamoring for their attention. Shopping at Wal-Mart, for example, is much closer to their experience than picketing at one. And classes in high school and college, for the most part, do not bother to connect workers’ struggles of the past for dignity and power with students’ concerns of today.

Because of this situation, this book, and the themes of labor and working-class history upon which it is based, are critical to share with today’s student. These themes directly shaped the life of working Americans at the onset of the Great Depression just

as they do today. This book will ask the following: How did working people experience the US economy's changing nature? What was the relationship of the state to working people? How did global economic and political forces affect working Americans, and how did they shape these same forces? How has the changing composition of the US working class affected working-class agency and protest, ideologies, and organization? Understanding how these issues developed in the twentieth century encourages us to rethink America's past from a different vantage point. Seeing US history through the lens of class promotes critical thinking and awareness of alternative voices in our history, including those of different races, ethnicities, and sexes. Sharing this perspective creates an opportunity to connect the conflicts and drama of the past with contemporary issues.

The period from 1920 to 2011 is a little longer than the average American lifespan, and yet the average working person of 1920 would find little in their everyday living comparable to their 2011 counterpart. In 1920 the census indicated for the first time that most Americans lived in places defined as "urban," but that still meant that approximately half of them resided on farms or in towns populated with less than 2,500 people-and many did so without access to cars, highways or passenger trains. No one surfed the Internet, ate fast food, hung out at the mall, or owned a credit card.

"Work" took place both inside and outside the home. In 1920 only one third of the homes in the country had electricity. Basic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and other housework consumed between sixty and seventy hours a week. With few options available to pay the bills, many women earned wages in their homes by doing such "homework," or "piecework," as finishing garments, for which they were paid for each piece completed. Some took boarders, cooked, laundered, and offered lodging for single men or provided domestic service for others. One quarter of women worked in low-paid clerical, service, and sales jobs. Meanwhile, almost half of the male population (45 percent) labored in mines, construction, transportation, or manufacturing industries. Skilled male workers clocked an average of 50.4 hours a week and the unskilled put in 53.7 hours a week. Steelworkers

Introduction

worked on average 63.1 hours per week. Some jobs in the steel mills, however, required workers to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, including one 24-hour continuous shift. These workers had only one day off every two weeks and had yet to earn an overtime rate.

In 1914 the United States Commission on Immigration conducted a survey of wage earners. In that year, the average annual earning in the country totaled between \$550 and \$600, but among 10,000 wage-earning men an average annual earning of \$413. Half of the men surveyed earned less than \$400, and women fared worse. Two thirds of the women made less than \$300 a year, most earned half as much as men.

Low wages were exacerbated by dangerous working conditions and job insecurity. Between 1880 and 1900, working people experienced 25,000 workplace deaths per year. They also faced recessions, depressions, and seasonal factory shut downs. Huge waves of immigration from Europe and migration from rural regions meant there was always a fresh supply of people who employers could cajole to work more for less. Workers today face hazardous conditions and insecurity, but before the 1930s job insecurity was a particularly onerous stressor given that the federal government offered no public relief and private charity was provided under demeaning circumstances.

While many of the particulars of making a living in the 1920s may seem different to most working people today, trends in today's economy, politics, and society should sensitize us all to the changes a person living in the early twentieth century faced.

Like the people in this narrative who lived through World War I, World War II, an international economic depression, and the Cold War, today's working people face global challenges. Global forces have shaped the experience of working people throughout the twentieth century, but not always in consistent ways. Global forces have promoted more diverse workplaces and working-class ideologies, increased workers' power at particular moments, and fostered a close identification of working peoples' efforts with America's national cause. They have also increased government repression and undermined working people's civil liberties,

increased citizens' fear of foreigners and politics labeled as un-American, and encouraged government and employers to use race and ethnicity as a wedge to divide working people against one another. Toward the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, global economic forces are taking an enormous toll on working people's job prospects, work culture, union activity, and overall sense of security.

Technological change and reorganization transformed the workplace in the 1920s, as it continues to do today. Back then workers watched as managers applied science and technology and asserted their personal control to reshape the work experience. Workers saw older sectors of the economy struggle even as new technology-based ones surged onto the scene. They also witnessed an intense merger movement and the development and use of new technologies that made certain jobs (and the people who did the work) obsolete. Today workers face similar challenges in new ways. Computer technology has changed the nature of how work is done and sometimes where it is done. Rather than contribute to a growing, developing industrial economy, working people today struggle to pay their bills in a de-industrializing one. Retail and service jobs are easier to come by than industrial or extractive ones; and science, technology, and management's strong hand often make for mind-numbing work. Attacks by employers and the state on unions coupled with global competition make these sub-par jobs less than secure.

Throughout the twentieth century, working people have seen the role of the state in their affairs increase, for good and ill. In the 1920s, through its laws and politics, the state worked closely with corporate America. Business leaders reached new levels of national and international power and used it, in part, to turn every American's primary identity into that of a consumer. The state also worked in tandem with corporate America to undermine and silence pockets of dissenters who publicly questioned the morality of capitalism and its government. These radicals—always smaller in numbers than in their impact and “radical” mostly in the sense that they wanted a new economic system

rather than superficial fixes-articulated a class politics that valued those who worked with their hands and their central role in the economy and society.

The Great Depression provided the context for a major reshuffling of political partners. In the face of a national discourse about capitalism's shortcomings and the need for a more robust state role, the government moved away from its unilateral, pro-business approach to the economy. Instead it began to create structures to help working people achieve more voice at work and to assist those who fell through capitalism's cracks. Its results were mixed, but even what was considered at one time as successful is today viewed much more critically. In the 1930s and 1940s, the federal government began protecting some workers' civil rights and liberties at work and their general welfare and security in society through the creation of legislation, federal boards, and agencies. Almost as soon as these changes were enacted, however, political forces bent on undermining workers' power, and silencing the working-class dimension of society's issues, usurped them. Today, when real socialist movements are few and powerless, any attempt of the state to pass legislation with such class dimensions as healthcare, is publicly (and incorrectly) attacked as socialist.

Like today, few workers in the 1920s had union representation. In fact, union density is similar today to that at the end of World War I. The difference, however, is that in the 1920s working people were on the verge of growing a major union movement that offered them protection, power, and relevance. Today, unions are on the decline. They and the people they represent are on the defensive and under siege. Big business and capitalist values are in such vogue that in many quarters the word "union" has once again assumed an unfavorable stigma. The pressure for working people to identify primarily as consumers is still strong, but increasingly difficult to realize without lots of credit cards and deep, deep debt.

Given that unions are the only vehicle with the potential to inject democratic principles into our working life and give working people a chance at real staying power and voice while