

## **Dignity and Democracy**

### **By David Montgomery**

"I tell you this," said Nick DiGaetano in 1959, reflecting on his twenty years as a shop-floor militant in the United Auto Workers at Detroit's Chrysler Jefferson plant, "the workers of my generation from the early days up to now had what you might call a labor insurrection in changing from a plain, humble, submissive creature into a man."<sup>1</sup> DiGaetano had put his finger on the heart of the labor movement's contribution to life in twentieth-century United States. Through collective action women and men learned to overcome both the subservience to bosses and the rivalry with each other that had been instilled by their need for a job. Together they achieved some mastery over their own lives within the impersonal and "market-driven" institutions of the modern economy. For all the shortcomings, contradictions, and reversals evident in the labor movement's complex history, that achievement remains its most important legacy for denizens of the century to come. It is, therefore, the main target of the systematic assault now being waged in the name of the "market economy" against every form of human collective activity.

The union movement has been but one of many forms of group solidarity used by working people during this century to gain some control over the uncertain circumstances under which they tried to make a living and raise children. Workers have also called on family connections, racial and ethnic organizations, women's organizations, and neighborhood networks; and they have been aided by individuals who enjoyed some influence with local employers, such as clergy, politicians, labor contractors, and social workers. At times those intermediaries served as alternatives to labor unions or were even enlisted in anti-union campaigns. In many other instances, however, some or all of them provided important threads in the fabric of union strength and vitality. In fact, during every period when union membership and influence expanded rapidly in the United States (1898 to

1903, 1916 to 1920, 1937 to 1947, and—in the public sector—1962 to 1975), other social networks that framed the lives of members and potential members had also become energized for social change.

As the twentieth century comes to a close, corporate executives and business-sponsored think tanks are engaged in a systematic campaign to privatize governmental undertakings and to pulverize all human bondings and collectives that stand in the way of individual choice in buying or selling products, services, talents, and personal futures. Social security, poor relief, education, the creation and dissemination of ideas, the punishment of criminals, and the care of the sick and infirm are all targeted for conversion into profit-making enterprises. For free market true believers, social networks are but focus groups, to be used in shaping advertising and electoral campaigns.

But we are social beings. The dignity and self-respect of which Nick DiGaetano spoke were won by people thinking through what measures would promote everyone's welfare and then acting together to achieve the goals on which they had agreed. Although workers could not create the world they wanted, they did honeycomb the ruthlessly competitive industrial order with practices based on their own egalitarian and social values. Through solidarity and deliberation, workers won for themselves a voice in determining the conditions of their employment, running their government, setting important constraints on the arbitrary authority of their bosses, and gaining time to spend as they wanted. Only through solidarity now and in the future will they be able to fend off the peril to our community life and physical environment lurking behind the free market utopia illusion.

## **A Voice at Work**

Although what nineteenth-century Americans called the labor question had shaped American life and thought from the struggle against chattel slavery through the great strikes of the late 1800s, it was only during the first two decades of the 1900s that union membership grew by bursts to more than one-fifth of all nonagricultural workers. The twentieth century had opened with a surge of economic growth, which provided a happy contrast with the protracted depression of the 1890s. Key features of that growth were the consolidations of corporate enterprise and of global empires, which decisively framed the contours and goals of the labor movement.

A wave of mergers combined formerly competing firms in steel, farm machinery, meatpacking, electrical equipment, and other industries, though women's clothing, bituminous coal, and cotton textiles remained highly competitive. By 1909 fewer than 5 percent of all firms in manufacturing (all of them corporations) employed more than 62 percent of manufacturing workers in the United States. Leading business figures explicitly repudiated their predecessors' faith in unfettered price competition.

The ascendant Republicans campaigned as guardians of "The Full Dinner Pail" and lost control of Washington only when they fell out among themselves over major questions of economic and social policy. European immigrants crossed the Atlantic in record numbers, while investment capital from North America and Europe poured into the world's more southerly regions to extract their diamonds, gold, copper, rubber, coffee, tea, and sugar for use at home. Conflicts among expanding empires made governing officials and intellectuals in all the "Great Powers" seek ways not only to improve their countries' military and naval strength but also their citizens, health, social cohesiveness, and patriotic ardor.

But the consolidation of business and empires did not end the ruthless competition for jobs faced by workers. They knew all too well that the celebrated right of the individual to quit a job and

seek another had precious little impact on the way either sweatshops or great corporations treated their workers. Union membership swelled from barely four hundred thousands in 1897 to more than two million by 1904, only to be held in check by fierce employer resistance for the next decade. Coal miners and workers in construction and transportation spearheaded the expansion, but scarcely an industry or region remained untouched by the proliferation of craft unions. Although a deservedly famous wave of strikes between 1909 and 1913 brought only a modest increase in union membership, the prominence of women, recent immigrants, and unskilled workers on picket lines and the dramatic tactics evident in mass strikes heralded the advent of what the socialist writer William English Walling called "a revolution in the labor movement," rooted in mass-production industries and vast urban working-class neighborhoods. It also brought politicians scurrying to address the need for "industrial democracy."

The full employment created by World War I unleashed seven years of the most intense and continuous strike activity in the country's history, from 1916 to 1922. The skilled and unskilled; men and women; African-Americans, whites, Latinos, and Asian Americans; and even many clerical and public employees joined in strikes (though often clashing, rather than cooperating, with one another). Union membership grew by 1920 to a larger percentage of the labor force (19.5 percent) than would be reached again until 1937 (22 percent). While the country was at war, important federal agencies encouraged unionization, especially in the mining, railroad, clothing, and armaments industries.

No sooner had the armistice been signed, however, than government bodies supervising mines, railroads, and shipbuilding turned hostile to union demands in the name of fighting inflation. Meanwhile, executives in other industries simply ignored decrees that had emanated from now defunct wartime agencies. During the huge strikes of 1919 the tide turned decisively against the

labor movement. Then two years of massive unemployment, starting in midsummer 1920, enabled employers to savage the earnings and savings workers had acquired during the war and to gut union strength in basic industries by the end of 1922.

When workers organized during those tumultuous years, they did not use the language of "industrial relations," which was then coming into vogue in management circles and business schools (much like today's discourse of "human resources management"). On the contrary, strikers' own rhetoric and the proclamations of both the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) couched workers' claims in terms not only of freedom of speech and assembly but also of the historic overthrow of slavery and involuntary servitude. "There never yet existed coincident with each other autocracy in the shop and democracy in political life," Samuel Gompers had admonished the AFL in 1894.<sup>2</sup> The AFL's 1918 convention upheld the right of "the workers everywhere" to "organize into trade unions," so as to prevent having their lives at work and their incomes governed by "arbitrary and autocratic whim." It demanded "effective legislation . . . which would make it a criminal offense for any employer to interfere with or hamper the exercise of this right or to interfere with the legitimate activities of trade unions."<sup>3</sup>

Union activists of all political persuasions charged that statutes and court rulings outlawing strikes violated the constitutional prohibition of involuntary servitude, while bans on picketing or boycotts infringed on freedom of speech and assembly. They refused on principle to obey such rulings. Even though the AFL's Gompers thought that the only legitimate purpose of strikes was to secure inviolable contracts, and William D. Haywood of the IWW argued that workers should never contract away their ability to strike, both men contended that freedom to organize and to strike was the most elemental human right in an industrial country. Black and white coal miners in

Kansas acted on that belief when they resolved in 1921 that they "would rather go to prison than be a party to enslaving the workers of this State" and, therefore, disobeyed a new state law against strikes. Some twenty-five hundred women marched in support of the men, whom they depicted as "striking against a law to enslave our children."<sup>4</sup>

### **A Voice in Political Life**

Once working-class activists turned from the demand that government leave workers free to act on their own behalf and focused on questions of how the labor movement should involve itself in the political arena and for what goals, however, their concord gave way to sharp disagreements. On the eve of the war, socialists, who could muster a third of delegates' votes at AFL conventions, argued that labor should try to win control of the government and then institute public ownership and management of all major industries. Pure-and-simple unionists replied that workers could best improve their lot by imposing union standards on privately owned enterprises. The IWW contended that through direct action workers of all types could win immediate improvements and could ultimately take possession of their workplaces.

But wartime appeals to fighting for democracy and wartime demonstrations of governmental power reshaped disputes over political action within the movement. As union membership in mass production swelled, so did the strength of a "progressive" bloc, based in the mining, railroad, machinist, maritime, textile, and clothing unions, and in many cities central labor unions. Progressives advocated public ownership of railroads and coal mines, a thirty-hour week, state or national health insurance and old-age pensions, the release of all wartime political prisoners, and diplomatic recognition of the revolutionary governments of Mexico and Russia.

The champions of a more inclusive and assertive unionism also sought to dismantle the empires that dominated the world, to reduce the burden of armaments, and to democratize international diplomacy. They lent special support to independence for Ireland and India, and they cultivated their own economic relations with Soviet Russia and Mexico, in defiance of the bans imposed by the U.S. government. The journal of the Chicago Federation of Labor protested, in words that resonate for our own time: "American capitalism intends to establish once and for all, that foreign governments are of no consequence whatever when they stand in the way of . . . capitalists."<sup>5</sup> Robert M. La Follette, whom labor supported for U.S. president in 1924, proclaimed the paramount issue of his campaign to be breaking the grip of "private monopoly" at home and its twin "dollar diplomacy" abroad.

No part of labor's own legacy proved more damaging to all these efforts on behalf of democracy at home and abroad, however, than the deep-rooted custom within its ranks of identifying "labor" with white men and depicting people of color as instruments of rapacious capital and "cheap labor." Black, Japanese, Filipino, and Mexican workers on America's docks, railroads, and farms were more likely before the 1930s to form their own unions or segregated locals within national unions than to be welcomed into those dominated by whites. Every year the few black delegates to AFL conventions protested in vain against the exclusive practices of many constituent unions and against the federation's failure to challenge the legal disfranchisement and segregation of African-Americans. The IWW had also consistently denounced and ridiculed racist practices.

Even more devastating were the murderous attacks by many thousands of white workers on their black neighbors, from the East St. Louis race riot of 1917 through the bloody 1921 destruction of the African-American community in Tulsa, Oklahoma. At times, as in Chicago in 1919, the

city's labor movement denounced the assaults but failed to mount any effective opposition. At other times, as in East St. Louis, white rioters actually assembled in union halls. Even the machinists and the railroad brotherhoods, which played prominent roles in progressive politics, barred non-whites from membership. Moreover, they used their influence on the Railway Labor Board to see to it, in the words of the Attorney Charles Hamilton Houston, arguing on behalf of the excluded workers, "that the Negro's work ends where the machine begins."<sup>6</sup>

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) participated in the Conference for Progressive Political Action, despite the exclusive practices of some of its constituent unions. The 1924 campaign handbook, *The Facts About La Follette and Wheeler*, advocated "all the rights and privileges of citizenship" for African-Americans and contended that "if twelve million Americans can be disfranchised, driven from decent employment, lynched and insulted because of race and color, no class of American citizens is really safe." But white supremacy remained firmly institutionalized within the labor movement, as well as in the Democratic Party and in society at large. No aspect of the reshaping of labor's legacy by the new industrial unions of the 1930s proved more important than their policies of enrolling workers of any race, gender, or occupation and of openly fighting for civil and political rights for African-Americans, Mexicans, and Asians.

### **Unions and Intellectuals**

The progressive impulse in the labor movement attracted the support of prominent writers and scholars. Even while the union movement declined in strength, a workers' education movement grew within unions and labor colleges, most notably, Brookwood College in upstate New York. The Workers' Education Bureau operated in tandem with the monthly magazine *Labor Age*,

founded in 1921. It was edited by the Catholic scholar Louis F. Budenz, and its diverse board of directors was chaired by James H. Maurer, the socialist president of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor.

The crusty socialist humorist Oscar Ameringer explained the connection between developments in academia and those in the labor movement:

*We had a rich vein to mine. The best professional brains of the nation were in those postwar days quartered in academic doghouses. . . . Just after the war, fugitives from the chain gang of Nicholas Murray Butler [of Columbia University], and others, as distinguished as Professors Charles Beard, John Dewey, and the many-times-exiled Thorstein Veblen, were putting new life into old academic bones.*<sup>7</sup>

Although these prominent scholars contributed to many labor papers, no single union attracted more support and involvement than the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Its educational director, J. B. S. Hardman, assembled thirty-two union activists and supporters, most of them connected to Brookwood College, to produce in 1928 an assessment of the state of the labor movement and proposals for its revitalization. The book *American Labor Dynamics in the Light of Post-War Developments* previewed the strategies and tactics that would characterize labor's resurgence in the 1930s. Those essays reflected a surge of efforts between 1926 and 1930 by Brookwood staff and students and by the Communist Party to sink roots of industrial unions in automobile works, steel mills, and southern textile mills. From within the hobbled and shrinking labor movement of the "Coolidge Prosperity," new thinking and new forms of action were laying the foundations of a revitalized labor movement. That revival, coupled with the emergence of writers, musicians, and graphic artists with roots in immigrant and African-American life, in turn

gave rise to an unprecedented flowering of American cultural life during the thirties, rooted in the vitality and struggles of the working class.<sup>8</sup>

### **A New Generation Made Itself Heard**

The resurgence of union strength and influence during the 1930s added new ingredients to labor's legacy both through its accomplishments and through such defeated efforts as the thirty-hour work week, universal social insurance, and federal licensing of corporations, which remain parts of our century's thwarted but still appropriate agenda for social improvement. The older men and women whose actions reshaped American industrial, political, and cultural life were themselves veterans of the postwar battles. But a younger generation was also much in evidence, and its role grew as the thirties progressed. The youthful activists were products of American urban life after the entrance of new immigrants from Europe had been reduced to a trickle, entry of Asians barred completely (except Filipinos, before 1934), and millions of black and white Americans had left farmlands to seek a better life in town.

The younger generation was also likely to complete high school. Indeed, the brutal unemployment wave of the 1930s enabled companies to require a secondary education for anyone they hired. Paradoxically, the public schools had infused a common culture among the descendants of many different lands, although the children of immigrants also remembered these schools as cultural battlegrounds. Mexican-American organizations, which were closely linked to the new industrial unions, drew heavily on an educated cadre, whose school experiences had been especially bitter.<sup>9</sup> A remarkable number of the industrial union vanguard had even had a taste of college education, before the depression drove them from the classroom. The sociologist C. Wright Mills found in 1946 that the average schooling of CIO leaders was slightly over twelve years, in

contrast to nine years for officers of older craft unions. Unions did not then need to recruit organizers on college campuses, nor did workers' education any longer rely on creative but beleaguered professors. Hardship had driven would-be students toward factory gates, where their youth and education often made them more attractive to employers than others who were clamoring for the same jobs.<sup>10</sup>

The struggles of young workers and their elders made American political life during the 1930s very different from that of other lands. Most independent countries of Europe, Asia, and Latin America responded to the depression by turning sharply to the right. Those that did not fall under fascist rule installed conservative regimes or national coalition governments. Thus, the short-lived swing to the left under Popular Front governments in France and Spain, and the more durable one in Chile, stand out as brief moments of hope in a war-bound world of reactionary nationalism and closed empires. In the United States, however, party rivalries for office remained vigorous, right-wing nationalism was confined to the role of opposition (epitomized by the Hearst press), and official policy actually encouraged workers of all races in manufacturing and mining to organize.

Despite the grip of the segregationist South on the Democratic Party, most American workers saw the new deal as a ray of hope, not only during the depression but also later, during World War II and the cold war. That belief also became an important part of labor's legacy, fueling both reform impulses and union support for the government's foreign policy.

### **Civil Society, Desegregation, and Economic Planning**

Three aspects of labor's New Deal are especially important to recall today. First, despite the major expansion of the role of the state, workers acted on their own behalf in reforming life on the job. Second, African-American and Chicano workers used the new unions and their political links

for an increasingly comprehensive assault on the institutionalized practice of white supremacy.

Third, the new unions articulated a vision of government committed to providing jobs, goods, and services where the market economy had failed and to making security of income a basic entitlement of citizenship.

The writer Steven Fraser was certainly right to argue that "the CIO was a quintessentially political creature whose origins and fate were entirely bound up with the rising and receding of the 'second New Deal.'"<sup>11</sup> The connection was a two-way street. Unions continued to run their own affairs, in the American tradition, while the ranks of labor produced political tribunes at all levels of government. Labor kept wage bargaining in its own hands by lobbying against efforts in Congress to legislate wage scales (beyond establishing a minimum wage and requiring prevailing wages on government contracts). Moreover, the decisive breakthrough of unionization occurred before the Wagner Act of 1935 went into effect: the victorious strike of the Pacific Coast Maritime Federation, the General Motors sit-downs, and union recognition at United States Steel and Schenectady General Electric.

The Wagner Act prohibited interference by employers with workers' efforts to unionize and provided for certification of bargaining agents chosen by a majority of the workers. The crucial point about the law, however, is that it encouraged workers to act for themselves. It is hard to imagine another act of Congress since the Thirteenth Amendment that did as much to invigorate civil society. The original point of the law was majestically simple: workers who wanted a union could form one without any interference from the boss, and the government's role was to facilitate their choice, not to make it.

Over the years court decisions, new legislation, and National Labor Relations Board rulings have fenced in that freedom of workers to exercise their own voice, while allowing employers and

government ever-greater roles in the decision-making process. Those developments make it easy to forget the crucial lesson of the 1930s: government action can take forms that expand the domain of human freedom.

That lesson was powerfully reinforced by the struggle for civil rights. Harry Truman expressed that point clearly in June 1947 when he became the first president ever to address a convention of the NAACP and explained that "new concepts of civil rights" meant "not protection of the people against the Government, but protection of the people by the Government."<sup>12</sup> That a president belonging to the Democratic Party—the historic party of white supremacy—should make such a pledge was a compelling tribute to the political impact of working people and their unions on American life at midcentury.

The Great Depression had actually reduced the number of African-Americans working in industry, while New Deal agricultural programs had stimulated the removal of sharecroppers from the land. Consequently, the major demands of black working people during the thirties focused on winning access to jobs and ending police brutality and lynchings. These aspirations galvanized popular support behind the March on Washington movement and behind innumerable local initiatives to make use of the Fair Employment Practices Commission. Although many black and Chicano workers had participated in forming the new unions, it was the war economy and the ensuing migration to the cities that both increased their influence in union ranks and drew CIO unions into a broad range of struggles to end segregation and undermine the influence over the Democratic Party wielded by Southern foes of labor's program.

In May 1943, President Philip Murray contributed to a major public debate on war aims in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* by calling for a "substantial down payment on the Four Freedoms," starting with democracy in the American South. The CIO's 1946 convention elaborated that call

with resolutions favoring concerted action within every union against job discrimination, a federal law against lynching (noting that twenty-six African-Americans had been lynched since V-J Day), a campaign to register black voters in the South, and a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission with powers to enforce its rulings. These demands encountered formidable resistance from within the ranks of white workers and craft unions, while a crusade by business groups to "unleash enterprise" prevented the enactment of any of the CIO's 1946 legislative demands.

Subsequently, the decisive action for civil rights unfolded outside the arena provided by the labor movement, and civil rights activists became increasingly critical of the merged AFL-CIO, especially after the 1958 recession produced severe long-term loss of industrial jobs. Nevertheless, the assistance some major unions lent to civil disobedience against segregation and joint lobbying efforts in support of the civil rights acts of 1963 and 1964 produced a high watermark of alliance between union leadership and civil rights organizations.<sup>13</sup>

### **Labor in Deep Freeze**

By the time the civil rights laws were enacted, the union movement was losing members in manufacturing, mining, and construction. Also, the cold war had curbed the activities and aspirations the movement had manifested at the close of the war. With a third of the labor force unionized by 1946, strikers had shut down all basic industries and won major wage increases, while beating back employers' demands for greater managerial authority. The strike wave featured massive acts of solidarity, including citywide general strikes by organized workers helping others form or preserve new unions in Rochester, Stamford, Lancaster, Pittsburgh, and Oakland. Congress had replied with the 1947 Taft-Hartley law, which banned mass picketing, sympathetic strikes, and secondary boycotts, while once again authorizing federal injunctions against strikes.

The CIO's November 1946 convention had translated the spirit of those strikers into an audacious program of legislative and bargaining demands designed to reshape the postwar economy around the needs of working people. The program was also designed to institute United Nations control of atomic explosives and civilian development of atomic energy, while fostering "continued unity" of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union (especially among their trade unions), for the sake of "the continued existence of the human race."

If almost twenty years elapsed between the CIO's 1946 demand for legislation securing voting rights and equal employment and their enactment, the portions of its program dealing with economic planning and social insurance not only went down to defeat but passed out of the public memory. Murray had argued in 1946 that leaving the economy to be directed by market forces alone meant that first priority in allocation of resources would go to satisfying the desires of people who had lots of money. He called for economic planning to favor the needs of working people, federal funding for a complete system of natal and child care, and single-payer national health insurance. While cold war anticommunism provided business the cover for loud and effective denunciations of these proposals, it also hobbled labor's efforts to campaign in their favor. The turn of CIO unions toward negotiating health coverage and pensions directly with corporations signaled their weakness on the political front. It was, in fact, the AFL that kept alive the battle for national health insurance through the 1950s, because so many of its members worked for employers who were too small to institute corporate benefits packages.

Productivity became the watchword of American public discourse. Workers' memories of the hardships of prewar life, a drumbeat of media demands to "unleash enterprise," and the insistence of the government and of both political parties that communism could be rolled back only by a strategy that combined military might with rapid economic development all lent credence

to the cult of productivity. As it turned out per capita output in industrialized countries (including those under Communist rule) grew between the late 1940s and the early 1970s at a pace rivaled only by the industrial expansion of 1848 to 1875. Beginning with the highly publicized 1948 "Treaty of Detroit" between General Motors and the United Auto Workers, union wages were commonly pegged to the index of productivity improvement for the economy as a whole, in return for union acknowledgment of management's prerogatives in the quest for ever-higher output. Trade unionists who continued to espouse class struggle had difficulty in surviving investigations by the FBI and congressional committees, noncommunist affidavits, security clearances, IRS audits, Smith Act indictments, and NLRB rulings that flagrantly favored their less controversial union rivals.

Despite the Taft-Hartley Act, union strength in American manufacturing grew to its all-time peak (42 percent) in 1953, and pattern bargaining kept wages abreast of increases in productivity while also reducing regional pay differentials and inducing nonunion employers to reshape their own personnel practices along the lines that unions had established. Median family incomes doubled between 1950 and 1973. A steady rise in the labor force participation of women was both an effect and a major cause of this advancement: by 1981 46.6 percent of the income of families with moderate earnings (\$15,000 to \$19,000) was contributed by women, as was 69 percent of low family incomes (under \$10,000). Bargaining over fringe benefits, legitimated by the Supreme Court at the end of the 1940s, infringed on the domain in which corporations had cultivated "the loyal employee" but kept pensions and medical payments tied to the job. The associated costs mounted, businesses have battled fiercely to unload them during the 1990s.

Both labor federations lent their support to the foreign policy of "containing Communism," enunciated by President Truman and continued by his successors. By 1949 the CIO had expelled nine unions that refused to conform and led an anticommunist secession from the World Federation

of Trade Unions, which it had hailed in 1945 and 1946 as the touchstone of workers' hopes for a just and peaceful world. Under the direction of Jay Lovestone, the AFL-CIO pursued both overt and covert anticommunist activities in every continent.

By the end of the 1950s few prominent intellectuals associated their hopes for social reform with the workers' movement. The influential sociologist Daniel Bell wrote that, despite abundant evidence of "discontent" in the workplace, the "publics" that defined political life no longer took shape around the relations of production, and reform initiatives were led by "cosmopolitan" elites, over the opposition of the "localistic" popular masses.<sup>14</sup> When the Johnson administration proposed a War on Poverty, its economic adviser Walter Heller contended that "the poor inhabit a world scarcely recognizable . . . by the majority of their fellow Americans."<sup>15</sup> No longer did academic discourse even make poverty part of "the labor question."

The New Left followed suit. It drew its inspiration from the personal commitment of the men and women in the civil rights movement to active repudiation of the oppression, inequality, and inhibitions embedded in postwar life. The 1962 Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) issued a ringing summons to a moral revitalization of American society, but (unlike European student movements) it envisaged no role for the working class or organized labor in that effort, despite the financial aid and expressions of support the SDS had received from some major unions.

The alienation of radical intellectuals from labor was converted to venomous hostility by the war in Vietnam. At the December 1965 San Francisco convention of the AFL-CIO, not a single delegate arose to oppose the official support for President Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy. Students from San Francisco State and from the University of California at Berkeley, who were watching from the galleries, became increasingly irate at the one-sided proceedings, shouted

slogans against the war, and finally began to chant: "Debate! Debate! Debate!" In response delegates on the floor shouted "Get out of here!" and "Get a haircut!" The interchange was cut short when George Meany pounded down his gavel and ordered: "Will the sergeant at arms clear these kookies out of the gallery."<sup>16</sup>

Over the next five years, however, calls for an end to the carnage became increasingly loud within major unions, while growing numbers of students aided rank-and-file struggles of workers, despite the famous hard-hat assaults against peace demonstrators in May 1970. The huge demonstrations of October and November 1969 calling for a Moratorium on the war were endorsed by a dozen major unions and drew enormous crowds, regardless of the tension between union delegations and the radicalized student contingents. Robert Kennedy's victories in the 1968 presidential primaries of Illinois and California revealed the possibility of a popular coalition that might have redefined American liberalism and brought the war to an end. His assassination on the very day of his triumph in California cut that prospect short.

Throughout these years, however, workers' demands for economic improvements remained irrepressible (as did their informal challenges to managerial authority on the shop floor). Moreover, union membership grew in the public and service sectors, offsetting its shrinking base in manufacturing, augmenting the numbers of women and people of color in labor's ranks, and fueling the demands for pay equity. After 1968 what British economist E. H. Phelps-Brown called "a pay explosion" driven by rank-and-file militancy in both Western Europe and the United States pushed up wages faster than productivity could rise, provoking a major contraction in returns to capital invested in production and trade by 1973, and producing a season of wage freezes and income policies. Businesses responded by moving manufacturing operations out of the country, shifting

capital into the lower-paid service sector and into finance, and aggressively demanding concessions and "flexibility" from unions.

By the 1980s strikers could again expect to see scabs herded through their picket lines and to stay out for month after hungry month. Strikes involving more than 1,000 workers dropped from a then normal level of 381 in 1970 to 54 by 1985 and 32 in 1995. Total union membership in the private sector fell from its 1953 high of 37.5 percent to 12.1 percent by 1994. Employers both scoffed at NLRB charges of unfair labor practices and counted on Nixon's and Reagan's appointees to change NLRB rules in their favor. Even in historically unionized corporations, ever-growing numbers of workers became "independent contractors" or employees of subcontractors, entitled to none of the benefits once designed to stabilize the workforce. Nonunion competitors now set the pattern to which unions were expected to conform. While productivity resumed its upward climb, the living standards of average Americans no longer rose with it.

The assault on unions was coupled with ringing denunciations of everything done by government (except jailing more criminals). The combined impact of military spending and transfer payments to secure domestic stability had made budget deficits front-page news by 1975, when New York City faced bankruptcy and Secretary of the Treasury William E. Simon seized the occasion to launch a crusade against the politics of extravagance, thus plotting the political trajectory later identified with Newt Gingrich. Within two years Simon could boast that even liberal state governors, like Jerry Brown, Michael Dukakis, and Ella Grasso, had made "fiscal responsibility" their political slogan. In response, the AFL-CIO cultivated coalitions with African-American, women's, and environmentalist organizations in defense of the embattled public sector.

By the 1990s corporate executives (who were also under relentless pressure to produce ever greater profits) could treat the whole world as their oyster. International treaties and funding

agencies could now accomplish the goal of which the Chicago Federation of Labor had warned back in 1920: ensuring "that foreign governments are of no consequence whatever when they stand in the way of . . . capitalists."

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the government experimented with new actions to resolve social conflicts in the world center of manufacturing. But the century had ended with the rapid dismantling and dispersal of the production that had generated union growth and with an assault on "big government" as the driving force of national and international politics.

### **An Industrial Legacy for a Service Economy?**

A voice on the job and in government, explicit and enforceable standards for wages and for treatment, freedom from racial subjugation, time to enjoy life and participate in society, pursuit of a foreign policy shaped around workers' needs, and a government committed to securing the daily needs of all its people—these aspirations generated by the labor movement during the first three-quarters of this century are all under attack as the new millennium approaches. They remain as meaningful and necessary as ever to all but the most privileged men and women. But just as capitalist development has created and then destroyed the social foundations of successive waves of workers' struggles in the past, so it has left labor's legacy in the hands not only of the shrinking numbers of people in older craft and industrial unions but also and increasingly of millions of people who toil in newer settings.

According to the World Bank's 1995 report *Workers in an Integrating World*, no fewer than 78 percent of the world's workers in manufacturing are employed today outside of the rich industrial countries. While the contrast in wealth between richer and poorer lands continues to grow obscenely, the migration of workers in quest of a better life has returned on a world scale that

dwarfs even that of the decades before 1914. In many parts of the United States immigrants have once again become the key to labor's rejuvenation. Although workers in construction and transportation continue to play a pivotal role in labor struggles, recent union organizing has been dominated by public employees, clerical workers, and service workers. The prominence of women in recent struggles has given them an unprecedented (though still inadequate) influence in shaping the character and direction of major unions.

For all workers, the climb from powerlessness to the income and dignity that come with having a say in governing their own lives, on the job and in the community, requires a resurgence of collective action, which is now so widely held in contempt. The legacy of generations past reminds us of the goals toward which we must aspire. Only those who grapple with the present can find the way to achieve those goals.

## NOTES

1 DiGaetano interview (1959), Oral History Collection, Reuther Archives, quoted in David Brody, "Workplace Contractualism in Comparative Perspective," in Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise ed. Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 204.

2 American Federation of Labor, Report of the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Annual Convention of the A.F. of L. Held at Denver, Col., Dec., 1894 (Bloomington, Ind.: 1905), 14.

3 Frank Julian Warne, The Workers at War (New York: Century, 1920), 207.

4 James Gray Pope, "Labor's Constitution of Freedom," Yale Law Journal 106 (Jan. 1997): 941-1031. The quotations are on pages 970 and 1,008.

5 New Majority, Jan. 3, 1920, quoted in Elizabeth McKillen, Chicago Labor and the Quest for a Democratic Diplomacy, 1914-1924 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell:, 1995), 151. On union trade links with Mexico and Russia, see Gregg Andrews, Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1914 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), and Steven Fraser, Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor (New York: Free Press, 1991).

6 Quoted in Michael J. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights in Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 59. See also Eric Arnesen, "'Like Banquo's Ghost, It Will Not Down': The Race Question and the American Railroad Brotherhoods, 1880-1920," American Historical Review 99 (Dec. 1994): 1,601-1,633.

7 Oscar Ameringer, If You Don't Weaken (New York: Holt, 1940), 379-80.

8 See Michael Denning, The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century (New York: Verso, 1996).

9 Mario T. García, Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960 (New Haven Conn: Yale University Press, 1989), 145-165; García, Memories of History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

10 C. Wright Mills, The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 71-73. On employers' hiring preferences in age, race, and education, see Richard J. Jensen, "The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression," Journal of Interdisciplinary History, 19 (spring 1989), 557-559.

11 Fraser, Labor Will Rule, 329.

12 Barbara Dianne Savage, Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 224.

13 See Judith Stein, Running Steel, Running America: Race, Economic Policy, and the Decline of Liberalism (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 37-91; Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Free Press, 1994), 17-100.

14 Bell, The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties (New York: Free Press, 1961).

15 Quoted in Stein, Running Steel, 73.

16 Philip S. Foner, American Labor and the Indochina War: The Growth of Union Opposition (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 32, quoting the New York Times.