

UNDER REVIEW

There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America

By: Dray, Philip, (2010).

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Abstract

Dray has provided us with an historic account of the labor movement in the United States from the industrialization of textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1820's to the present day and beyond. He has done this through descriptions of individuals and details of many events, often confrontational and violent. Dray makes it clear that it has not been easy for workers to have their desires and needs fulfilled in the workplace. He also documents the influences within the labor movement that have served as ideals, distractions, and motivations. In addition to the 674 pages of text there are over 90 pages of end notes and indexes and 32 pages of photographs. The book is interesting to read and a reference for those who would investigate further.

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Review

Technology is broader than the machines, tools, and techniques used to make and service things. There is also concern for resource utilization, environmental impact, sustainability, and human interaction. It is within this framework that Philip Dray has written a comprehensive study of labor organizations. It goes well beyond a simple description of how workers have organized and the means they have used to influence decision making by employers, politicians, the public and those who control capital.

Lowell, Massachusetts was the first industrial city in the United States. The textile mills attracted young women from New England farms to the opportunity for a well paid job and the pleasures of factory life. The mills and accommodations for the women workers drew visitors, including President Andrew Jackson and frontiersman Davy Crocket, to see and admire this model of industrialization. However, long days (12 to 14 hours), smoke from whale-oil lamps, airborne lint, cuts in wages and raises in rent led to demonstrations and strikes. Mill owners appealed for the support of the community by characterizing the young women workers as ungrateful. Among those who sympathized with the women's cause were abolitionists who connected the morality of practices in the North with those in the South, "the lords of the loom and the lords of the lash". Gaining the understanding and sympathy of the public has been a repeated theme throughout the history of the labor movement and has often determined the success of the cases made by the disputing sides.

The struggle for public approval has been reenacted with workers in coal mining, shoemaking, railroads, steel-making, meat packing, and air traffic control, to name a few. Confrontations have played out in work sites, corporate offices,

court rooms, legislative chambers, pulpits, and the media. Unions and those who would organize workers have often plead to the public for social justice. Owners have with equal vigor made their case against organizing workers by citing law, the negative impact on the public's interest, unreasonable demands, and employee ingratitude.

Political activism has been part of the labor story from early on. Some of the first factories provided housing and other necessities for their workers in a paternalistic manner. Essentially, few saw the need for workers to act collectively when employers took care of them. The friction often came when conditions were changed, such as production speedups, or, more recently, demanding that workers pay a larger share of the cost for their health care. The passage of laws to liberalize or restrict workers ability to bargain collectively, assure safe workplaces, strike against private and governmental employers, and have closed shops have gone back and forth in the halls of congress and state legislatures.

One of the plots in the political play has been the influence of communism in the labor movement. Many immigrant workers came to the United States from countries with communist governments. Others were idealistic about communistic principles which they saw as a means of bettering the lot of all workers. Others were less idealistic, opposed to authority, and more inclined toward rabble rousing. It was easy for critics to claim communist influences among labor unions and this was appealing to a public that had fear of insurrection. Much of this came to a head under the FBI leadership of J. Edgar Hoover, his extensive spy network within organizations of doubtful loyalty, and congressional hearings lead by Joseph McCarthy. Unions reacted in the extreme by half-heartedly supporting and sometimes removing suspicious members. Some early organizers were deported from the U.S. because they were considered to be threats to the

nation. The labor movement compromised social justice goals in the effort to prove that it was “clean”.

Elected politicians and candidates have often benefitted from the support of labor unions. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a union favorite who even brought labor leaders into the White House to serve as advisors. Ronald Reagan, who was a former president of the Screen Actors Guild, offered high hopes for labor and gained their early support. These are two examples of political leaders who eventually came to displease many in organized labor. The Democratic Party came to take the support of labor for granted and Reagan and the Republican Congress managed to undo many of the gains that labor had made in the several preceding decades.

Labor unions have been inconsistent in their support of social justice for workers. Some unions were active in the abolition of slavery and readily accepted blacks and other minority members. Others held restrictions against racially mixed membership. In some cases there were parallel unions for racially different workers. But the divide was not always racial in that there were prejudices against late immigrant arrivals including the Irish and Southern and Eastern Europeans. Some employers seized on language barriers and biases to thwart the ability of workers to organize. The most recent immigrants frequently were willing to work for lower wages.

Worker's efforts to organize have often been accompanied by worker violence and militant action on behalf of employers. Many, on both sides of these conflicts, have died in confrontations and several in the labor movement have been executed. It often has been difficult to identify where the violence has begun but destruction has been one outcome. Violence by workers has included the use of guns, bombs, paving bricks, and fire resulting in the death of police officers and other defenders. Employers have used direct force to

protect property or dissuade workers from strikes or other acts against their interests. Henry Ford hired a former boxer, Harry Bennett, to oversee what was called the "Service Department". Thugs under the guise of detective agencies or sheriff deputies have been brought in to "persuade" workers. National Guard, as well as Federal troops, have been used to protect replacement workers and to maintain peace. Perhaps the most tragic has been the execution of labor leaders who were caught up in the public's fear of further violence and insurrection and given a less than fair trial. Many of these claimed their own innocence and naively, perhaps, believed that the justice system would vindicate them.

Unsafe working conditions have been the incentive for many of labor's best efforts. Conditions and practices in the mining industry have regularly caused injury and death to scores of workers. Improved safety was a primary goal in the unionization of electricians. Manufacturing, construction, farm workers, and those in petrol-chemical employment, among others, have organized to reduce the risks of their work. Sometimes the hazards have been obvious but in many cases the effects of the working environment have not revealed themselves immediately. Such has been the case with asbestos, chemical pollutants, inadequate training, and work speed up. The United States Congress has enacted laws for the protection of workers including the Occupational Safety and Health Act and mining safety legislation. Provisions have been made for inspection and training workers about hazardous materials. However, support for safety legislation has been criticized for making the workplace less efficient. Reduced enforcement and the repeal of some laws has resulted.

The ranks of labor have not always been unified. Competing strategies for dealing with owners and making the cause for workers have been frequent. Militancy, advocated by some, has conflicted with compromise. Outspoken, dynamic

leaders have gathered and persuaded followers to act as they would guide, often with negative affects. As union membership has declined and international competition has become more severe, decisions about union actions have become more difficult. The air traffic controllers, PATCO, underestimated the determination of President Reagan and overestimated their own indispensability resulting in the dismantling of that union. Similarly, meat packing members of Local P-9 at Hormel in Austin, Minnesota, acted against the advice of their national union (United Food and Commercial Workers) to accept wage cuts. Instead they followed labor consultant Ray Rogers, “the Muscleman of Labor” with resulting job losses. The extended P-9 strike enflamed the local citizenry and union actions were limited by National Guard troops sent in to protect replacement workers and property. In the meantime, Spam, one of the products of the Austin plant, became more popular than ever and corporate profits reached new levels.

Some of the more notable differences among unions have resulted from their basic organizational philosophy. The Commission for Industrial Organization (CIO) would represent all workers within an industry while the American Federation of Labor (AFL) organized workers within the same craft. A lasting, joining of the two labor confederations was accomplished in 1955. Walter Reuther of the CIO and George Meany of the AFL, both union professionals, had very different personalities, but had reputations as ardent anti-Communists, an important quality at this time in the labor movement. Walter Reuther and his brother Victor were tool-and-die makers at Ford and worked for two years under Ford auspices in a Russian factory. They became disgusted with Russia's appeasement of Hitler and returned to the U.S. George Meany was an intimidating leader and super patriot who supported the anti-Communist oath required under Taft-Hartley. Reuther and

Meany were able to accept each other and lead their unions to join as one. In 1956 the AFL-CIO represented 33.4 percent of the non-farm workforce, the peak in union membership.

Dray's writing is enlivened by his recounting of many major events in worker rights history. In 1834, 800 Lowell, Massachusetts women textile workers struck against a 15 percent cut in wages. In New York City the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was a nonunion shop mostly employing young women. It was located in the top three floors of the Asch Building. With exit doors locked to prevent theft, 146 panicked workers died from burning or jumping as flames engulfed the factory. At Carnegie Steel's Homestead Works gunfire, clubs, and knives were used to injure and kill strikers and opposing Pinkerton agents. At Ludlow, Colorado, miners and their families, evicted from company housing occupied a tent city. Escalating confrontations between miners, mine guards, Baldwin-Felts agents, and eventually the National Guard brought the deaths of 22 people. Following the Haymarket Square rally and trial in Chicago, five labor activists were hung. The public sought revenge for seven police officers who were killed. However, sympathies changed as biases in the trial were revealed. In a lengthy standoff between workers and employers in Lawrence, Massachusetts the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) arranged to have children of striking workers sent away to sympathetic homes in order to lessen the economic burden on their families thereby embarrassing local citizens. Karen Silkwood, employed at the Kerr-McGee Nuclear Corporation became a whistle blower as she witnessed poor radiation safety practices. She probably was intentionally poisoned with plutonium and ultimately died in a suspicious automobile accident. Dray chronicles these and other historic labor events that shaped unions, influenced public opinion, and lead to legislative actions.

There is a richness in Dray's descriptions of prominent organizations and characters in the labor movement. The IWW, often called the "wobblies" was an early union with many impassioned leaders and members. Among those was Joe Hill, a Swedish immigrant merchant marine. His labor songs were written to inspire workers and build their confidence in the labor struggle. Though he professed his innocence, he was tried, sentenced, and executed by firing squad for a murder in Utah. Another wobbly was "Big" Bill Haywood, a one-eyed miner also known as a saloon brawler. He was the principal inspirational organizer for the IWW who was accused of conspiring in the murder of the former governor of Idaho and taken by nighttime extradition across the state line to face trial. He was successfully defended by Clarence Darrow and emerged as a folk hero who drew huge crowds as he continued to build the IWW. Carlo Tresca, another IWW organizer often spoke to striking workers in Italian confusing police spies about what had been said. "Mother" Jones, who raised the consciousness of the American public about child labor, traveled the country on behalf of worker causes. "I abide where there is a fight against wrong", she testified before Congress.

In more recent times John L. Lewis, who mined coal as a boy in Iowa, became president of the United Mine Workers. He was a bushy eyebrowed bristly man who advocated for mine safety and generally was a thorn in the side of conservative politicians. Cesar Chavez was able to organize farm workers, largely Latino, in an industry with workers on far spread farms. Gains for workers were achieved through consumer boycotts, picketing, sit-downs and other non-violent means. Dray acquaints the reader with these and many others who played roles in the shaping of the labor movement, including: FDR's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. owner of western coal mines, Andrew

Carnegie, Samuel Gompers, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Emma Goldman, George Meany, Philip Murray, Henry Ford, Eugene Debs, W. E. B. Du Bois, Harry Bridges, Jimmy Hoffa, Lewis Pullman, A. Philip Randolph, Walter, Victor, and Roy Reuther are among those who Dray has used to tell the labor story. References to Presidents of the United States from Andrew Jackson to Barack Obama are included.

Dray raises the question, “does the American labor movement remain relevant enough to transition as it must?” The easy access to replacement and contingent workers as well as overseas production often has broken the loyalty of firms to their employees. The PATCO and Hormel strike experiences have been sobering for unions. As this review is being written, the governor and legislative majority in Wisconsin are poised to reduce the power of that state’s public employee’s union and perhaps set an example for other states to follow. Union members, not just those directly involved, have demonstrated with a level of vigor not seen recently.

There are some factors, as suggested by Dray, that will help unions to continue to represent worker interests. They need to take the high ground on issues of the length of the work week, underage employment, health coverage, and retirement. A global perspective can be facilitated by boycotts of sweatshop products, for example, benefiting workers in foreign locations where there are few labor regulations. Solidarity with other unions has been shown to be effective, particularly if the combine of workers are engaged in providing essential services. Gaining the approval of the public for the union’s case is critical but difficult in tough economic times. Unions need to educate their members to be effective contributors in the workplace and in their collective future.

Dray has written a history of the labor movement in the United States. He has thoroughly researched events and presented them from the view of labor. Among other things, it

is possible to trace the role of technology in the labor movement. The long record of interaction between workers and technology continues to evolve. Where does that interchange go from here? Are there parallels between the strength of labor unions, especially those representing non-governmental workers, and support for programs in technology in the schools? Those interested in education in technology will gain from the perspective presented by Dray.