

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

**THE LEGACY OF COOPERATION:
THE EXPERIENCE OF
AMERICAN ORGANIZED LABOR DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

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INTRODUCTION

Not all of America's First World War battles were fought overseas. Perhaps, the battle with the greatest resonance in American history was waged at home. This was the struggle between progressives and their opponents over the federal government's role in a democratic industrial society. Industrialization was increasingly concentrating power in private hands whose interests did not necessarily coincide with those of the larger public. In response to the conflict between private and public interest, progressive reformers sought to end laissez faire — the policy of government non-intervention in the affairs of business. In its place, progressives envisioned federal mediation of conflicting interests in a fashion that promoted the public good. The opponents of this vision defended laissez faire and sought to perpetuate the support for business alone.¹ During the war, at least, President Woodrow Wilson sided with the progressives. As a result, the war created enormous changes in American industrial relations. Business, organized labor and the federal government cooperated on a scale never before imaginable. This cooperation set a precedent for the informal cooperation that became a hallmark of American labor relations by mid-century.

The war had a tremendous impact on American workers. Some of the results of national industrial mobilization were detrimental to the interests of the working class. Federal fiscal policy encouraged high inflation to pay off war debts with cheaper money. As a result, the cost of living doubled between 1916-1920. Wage increases were slow to respond to inflation.² In this environment, working people had to struggle to maintain or improve their standard of living. Even when wages provided for adequate food and clothing, finding shelter could be difficult. A mass migration of war workers into the industrial centers of the Northeast and Midwest created severe local

¹David M. Kennedy, Over Here: The First World War and American Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 97-98.

² Ibid., 30,105.

housing shortages.³ In the workplace, the war aggravated the existing the trend toward big factories, centralized production, and large workforces. While this trend increased productivity

³ A study of the distribution of war contracts found 75% were let to firms in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Massachusetts, Illinois, New Jersey and Connecticut. L.C. Marshall, "The War Labor Program and Its Administration," The Journal of Political Economy 26 (5 May 1918) : 427-428.

and reduced the cost of consumer goods, it also undermined workers' ability to bargain for their labor and eroded their autonomy. These developments inhibited understanding and further alienated the individual worker from management.⁴

Some of the war's other effects were more favorable from the standpoint of labor. Its most tangible benefit was a dramatic reduction in national unemployment. As war production orders poured in from Europe and the federal government, the number of Americans out of work fell eighty-five percent between 1915 and 1918. At the same time, workers turned to organized labor as never before. More workers joined unions during the war than there were men sent overseas with the Army.⁵ The economically disenfranchised like women and blacks found work replacing the millions of white males called to the colors. In a tight labor market with soaring prices, there were tremendous incentives for the restive workforce to strike.⁶

Into this explosive labor situation stepped the federal government, intervening in the economy and on the job as never before. To arm the military and sustain the war-weary Allies, national industrial mobilization demanded levels of production unprecedented in American history. These rates could only be sustained in a workplace free of industrial disputes. Consequently, the fundamental objective of federal labor policy became insuring industrial peace. In an environment where businessmen and many workers had radically different concepts of the basis of industrial relations, preventing unrest proved to be no small task. Achieving industrial peace required an essential reordering of the relationship between labor and business. The administration of President Woodrow Wilson responded by creating multifarious semi-public institutions charged with managing the nation's domestic war effort. The

⁴ David Brody, Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 7-9.

⁵ Joseph A. McCartin. "'An American feeling': workers, managers, and the struggle over industrial democracy in the World War I era." In Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise, eds. N. Lichtenstein and H. J. Harris. 67-86. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 76.

⁶ Jeffrey Haydu, "'No Change in Existing Standards'? Production, Employee Representation and Government Policy in the United States, 1917-1919," Journal of Social History 25 (1 1991) 45.

hallmark of federal agencies that influenced labor policy was the fusion of big business, “legitimate” labor, — meaning cooperative like the American Federation of Labor (AFL) as opposed to uncooperative like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) — and public officials into administrative mechanisms to mediate disputes, extract voluntary compliance, and ensure industrial peace. This trend toward semi-compulsory mediation culminated in the War Labor Administration (WLA) established in early 1918. Under its auspices, the federal government formalized the principles guiding its intervention in industrial relations. To redress the imbalance of power between workers and their employers, it became federal policy to recognize the rights to organize, to belong to a union without losing one’s job, and to advocate a living wage and the eight hour workday. What these principles omitted was equally important: collective bargaining *through a union* and the closed shop.⁷

With these measures, the federal government created an "armed truce" in the struggle between organized labor and business over industrial relations.⁸ This truce maximized wartime production and advanced national interests pursuant to the war. As post-Armistice events showed, the truce was short-lived. What then was the legacy for American organized labor of the wartime cooperation between government, labor and business? Any attempt to answer this question should begin with a survey of the historiographic terrain. This identifies three interpretive traditions that can be labeled as positivist, negativist and balanced according to their characterization of the war’s consequences for industrial relations.

The positivist interpretation holds World War I labor policy established a precedent for the advances in labor relations that accompanied the New Deal. Melvyn

⁷ Marshall, 433-447; “Report of War Labor Conference Board to the Secretary of Labor,” 29 Mar 18. Case File 4341, Reel 366, Woodrow Wilson. Papers, 1826-1961 (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1969), microfilm. (hereafter Wilson Papers); and Clark L. Wilhelm, "William B. Wilson: The First Secretary of Labor" (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University, 1967), 168-170.

⁸ John Lombardi, Labor's Voice in the Cabinet: A History of the Department of Labor From Its Origin to 1921 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 249.

Dubofsky writes "the Wilson years had provided a full dress rehearsal for the labor program of the New Deal."⁹ Gerald Nash argues that one of the roots of the New Deal was Roosevelt's experiences as a labor policy maker and administrator in the Navy Department during World War I.¹⁰ Of the adherents to the positivist interpretation, perhaps Howell Harris argues most clearly. He writes that the war was "both the false dawn and forcing house for the ideas and institutions which shaped the development of the American industrial relations systems in the 1930s and 1940s."¹¹ Harris notes that during the nineteenth century, the legislative and judicial branches had dominated the federal government and supported capital interests over those of labor. The war enhanced the executive branch's power by increasing the centralization of key industries like the railroads. From the perspective of the national economy, this centralization increased the price of unrest in core industries and necessitated federal involvement in efforts to secure industrial peace. Harris argues that wartime labor policy changed the character of federal involvement in the workplace. Whereas previously it had focused on defending organized labor from the worst excesses of a hostile business community, Harris observes that the government became more interventionist during the war. He notes that the federal government asserted the positive right of unions to represent workers in collective bargaining arrangements. Harris concludes that World War I labor policy was the origin of "the mature industrial-relations system, the institutionalized industrial conflict involving orderly, predictable strikes..." that characterized American labor in the mid-twentieth century.¹²

⁹ Melvyn Dubofsky. "Abortive Reform: The Wilson Administration and Organized Labor, 1913-1920." In Work, Community and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925, eds. J. E. Cronin and C. Sirianni. 197-220. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 216.

¹⁰ Gerald D. Nash, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and Labor: The World War I Origins of Early New Deal Policy," Labor History 1 (1 (Winter) 1960) 39-52:

¹¹ Howell Harris. "The Snares of Liberalism? Politicians, bureaucrats, and the shaping of federal labour relations policy in the United States, ca. 1915-1947." In Shop floor bargaining and the state: Historical and comparative perspectives, eds. S. Tolliday and J. Zeitlin. 148-191. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 156.

¹² Harris, 156-157.

The negativist interpretation holds that wartime domestic and labor policies introduced “corporatism” to the United States. Alan Dawley describes corporatism as "a far-reaching development in twentieth-century capitalist societies defined as rule through quasi-public institutions based on large-scale producer groups ... rather than through elected officials."¹³ Corporatism meant the usurpation of the power in a democracy by interest groups. Wartime governmental policy changed the balance of power in American life, dramatically expanding the power and influence of the state, ending laissez faire and introducing regulatory liberalism.¹⁴ Dawley sees this outcome as adverse for organized labor. The use of nationalism to promote labor interests during the war, he argues, amounted to a recognition the right of the state to define legitimacy. This arrangement worked until the post-war definition of nationalism shifted to favor business interests. The war legitimized "enforced consent" created by the federal government. Where it deemed worker militancy illegitimate, as in 1918 strike by shipyard workers in Bridgeport, Connecticut, the state brought its full coercive power to bear to end strikes.¹⁵ James Weinstein puts an even darker spin on this interpretation. He sees World War I as the testing ground for a new liberalism that extended the hegemony of business elite over workers and incorporated the middle class as the elite’s unwitting allies.¹⁶ He writes,

The war... provided Wilson with the opportunity to show the business community that a liberal administration could be sensitive and responsive to the 'natural' requirements of business without being anti-labor, and even allowing reformers and an occasional radical to sit on some government boards.¹⁷

A final historical interpretation views the legacy of World War I for American

¹³ Alan Dawley, Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 216.

¹⁴ Dawley, 210-215.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

¹⁶ James Weinstein, The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State: 1900-1918 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 214.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 251.

organized labor as inescapably mixed. While recognizing what was lost through cooperation, advocates of a balanced perspective argue that the ideals, precedents, and benefits of cooperation should not be discounted. Joseph McCartin argues that wartime policy and propaganda advanced the ideal of “industrial democracy,” a term that equated the fight for democracy on the battlefield with the struggle for a democratic workplace. On the positive side, he states that during the war industrial democracy facilitated labor militancy and “evoked in millions of workers skyrocketing hopes for substantial change in their lives.” In McCartin’s eyes, the flaw of industrial democracy lay in the inability of organized labor to carry it to its logical conclusion without federal intervention. After the war, he argues, business defused the rhetoric of industrial democracy by promoting Employee Representation Plans as the American alternative to trade unionism.¹⁸ David Montgomery echoes the McCartin’s tone describing the war as “years of soaring hopes, fierce class conflict, and ultimate subordination to business’s reinterpretation of the nation’s needs and goals.”¹⁹ David Kennedy also sees a split legacy of the war for labor. Though unions made temporary gains in wages, hours and conditions, they failed to secure “the indispensable right to collective bargaining through union representatives.”²⁰ Kennedy argues that wartime concessions to labor were founded upon the largess of government contracts. “In such an environment, benefits could easily be offered as a substitute for unions, an affordable means to purchase the preservation of the existing power relationships.”²¹

A study of the President’s Mediation Commission, the creation of the War Labor Administration, and the National War Labor Board indicates that World War I’s legacy to American unionism was indeed a mixed one. Working people and the institution of

¹⁸ McCartin, “An American Feeling,” 68-72, 78-79.

¹⁹ David Montgomery, The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State and Labor Activism (1987), 332.

²⁰ Kennedy, 274.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

organized labor profited from the intervention of the government in the wartime workplace. The government compelled reluctant businessmen, albeit temporarily, to recognize fundamental workers' rights. While many of these rights were trampled in the postwar period, the government had both created a precedent and raised expectations for the future. Organized labor purchased these gains at a high price in terms of its long term viability as an independent force in American life. By turning to the state, the AFL and other cooperative labor organizations relinquished control of their own destinies. They accepted the government's terms for establishing the legitimacy of worker's groups and their policies. They recognized the supremacy of nationalism over unionism and the assertion national interests over class interests. Furthermore, AFL cooperation made it a party to the suppression of labor radicals and the demise of the American labor left.

THE WILSON ADMINISTRATION, ORGANIZED LABOR, AND BUSINESS

Before analyzing the wartime cooperation in detail, there must be an understanding of the general positions of the federal government, organized labor and business during the war. This is not meant to imply that any one of the three were monolithic in their stance. Each party to wartime cooperation had its dissenters and the ability of each to achieve any consensus is in and of itself a major triumph. The role of the Wilson Administration in industrial relations was more pragmatic than principled. While the Cabinet was saturated with businessmen and their allies, William B. Wilson (WBW), the Secretary of Labor was the sole advocate for working people. As a tool for promoting the welfare of workers, his fledgling department was hamstrung by Congressional resistance, business distrust, and inter-departmental rivalries. Though he flirted with socialism in his early life, WBW's approach to trade unionism was very conservative. An experienced Congressman and union organizer, he worked within the existing political system to secure a more equitable distribution of wealth

and power. The burden strikes placed on working families deeply troubled WBW. Consequently, he was a life-long champion of conciliation and mediation.²²

President Wilson's overriding concern was to achieve a balance in the relations of labor and capital that ensured maximum, sustained war production. He pursued a policy that conceded enough — especially on wages — to placate workers, but did not threaten business sufficiently to turn it against him.²³ Initial government attempts to balance production and industrial peace were haphazard and inefficient. A wave of strikes in crucial war industries like shipbuilding and military construction during the summer of 1917, led to the creation of a number of emergency war boards to regulate industrial relations.²⁴ The Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board, the Cantonment Adjustment Commission and others strove to prevent unrest from disrupting the nation's hasty mobilization, but lacked unified policies and procedures. In a measure of the effectiveness of prewar federal mediation efforts, these emergency boards usurped the jurisdiction, role and authority of the existing Division of Conciliation in the Labor Department.²⁵

Samuel Gompers' pragmatism seems to have brought organized labor — in the form of the AFL — into a wartime marriage of necessity with the government. In a quid pro quo arrangement, Gompers traded a no strike pledge and the political loyalty of the AFL for the ability to influence war labor policy.²⁶ Gompers studied the response of European organized labor to the war. He believed that the war could allow federal government to expand the reach of trade unionism and that resistance to government war policy would be futile. As David Montgomery writes: "to oppose the government's war preparations would be to invite destruction, Gompers reasoned, whereas to

²² Wilhelm, 10-11, 18.

²³ Kennedy, 266-269.

²⁴ Nash, 41.

²⁵ Robert D. Cuff, "The Politics of Labor Administration During World War I," Labor History 21 (4 (Fall) 1983), 547-548.

²⁶ Montgomery, 375.

participate actively in mobilization might ensure governmental support for union standards and union growth."²⁷ This is not to imply that Gompers' position was easily accepted within the AFL or by organized labor in general. Within the AFL the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, for example, was a prominent dissenter whose cooperation Gompers only secured by raising the specter of federal compulsion.²⁸ Some organized labor groups were beyond the reach of Gompers' persuasion. The IWW and Socialists rejected the AFL's support for the government and attempted to rally workers against the war.

Business's primary concern in wartime industrial relation was the maintenance of the status quo ante. At its heart, this meant the open shop and individual bargaining in a market-place free from government interference. Deviations from this position might be accepted, but only as a temporary wartime measure. Some like Western Union's owners resisted change to the point of surrendering the wartime control of their business to the government rather than submitting to federal labor mandates.²⁹ Others employed legal delays and foot-dragging to blunt the impact of federal intervention in their affairs. Many businesses formed company unions and took other steps designed to limit the ability of organized labor to penetrate their workforces.³⁰ To protect the open shop, business provided higher wages and improved working conditions as a substitute for unionism. The willingness of the government to underwrite these costs in wartime contracts made these concessions possible. If the wartime relationship between organized labor and the government can be characterized as a marriage of necessity, then business came to the altar with a shotgun in its back.

²⁷ Ibid., 358.

²⁸ Samuel Gompers to William Hutcheson, 19 Aug 17, American Federation of Labor Records: The Samuel Gompers Era, 1877-1931 (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1979), microfilm. Hereafter AFL Records.

²⁹ Wilhelm, 171-172.

³⁰ Montgomery, 347-356.

THE PRESIDENT'S MEDIATION COMMISSION

Throughout the summer of 1917, the President, Congress, and cabinet members received many requests for help resolving industrial disputes.³¹ Despite Gompers' no strike pledge, workers greeted America's entrance into the war with a wave of strikes. The first six months of the war saw as many strikes as had occurred in the entire previous year. The tiny Division of Conciliation, though their assistance was sought in only fourteen percent of strikes, was overwhelmed by requests for their conciliators.³²

Unrest touched many industries and regions, but the West was particularly restless. Western business leaders and politicians were vocal in their demands for federal assistance in suppressing the IWW. The IWW was the most cohesive radical labor organization opposing the war effort. The IWW, or Wobblies as they were known, discouraged compliance with the draft and refused to submit their disputes to federal mediation. Though radical in their ambitions and rhetoric, the Wobblies proved very practical in their strike demands and organizing. They focused on organizing regions where business refused to provide acceptable work conditions and was especially virulent in its opposition to any form of trade unionism. Thus, the war allowed them to exploit their footholds in the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest and copper mines of Arizona and Montana.³³ The response of the federal government to the IWW "threat" to wartime cooperation demonstrated both the limits of voluntary cooperation and the ends to which the state would go to secure uninterrupted war production.

³¹ See for example Telegram Gulf Coast District Oil Fields Workers to Woodrow Wilson, 13 Nov 17, Case File 4341, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

³² Wilhelm, 149, 160.

³³ Alexander M. Bing, War-Time Strikes and Their Adjustment (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1921), 255-272.; and Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall All Be: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 358-360.

While waiting for federal intervention, Western businessmen made use of two potent weapons in their efforts to preserve the status quo. First, they accused the Wobblies of acting as enemy agents by reducing the production of lumber and copper, materials key to the production of warships, munitions and airplanes. Though AFL leaders actively encouraged members to cross the picket lines of Wobbly-led strikes, Western businessmen tarred all unions, not just especially the IWW with the brush of disloyalty. When Wobbly leaders in Bisbee Arizona, for example, refused to display the American flag at their union headquarters, they played right into the businessmen's hands.³⁴ Fearing the campaign to discredit labor's support of the war effort, Gompers and WBW sought to provide workers in the disputed industries with a "legitimate" AFL union that could resolve their grievances without disrupting production. As two Western AFL men stated in a letter to Gompers, the "only solution of the I.W.W. problem lies in partial recognition of legitimate unions."³⁵ To this end, Gompers and WBW enlisted President Wilson in an unsuccessful bid to solicit the voluntary cooperation of Western businessmen with AFL organizers.³⁶

The Western businessmen's second response to federal inaction was to sponsor a campaign of vigilantism directed at strikers. The worst example of this vigilantism occurred in Bisbee, Arizona. There on 28 June 1917, both IWW and AFL miners struck the Copper Queen Consolidated Mining Company and the Calumet & Arizona Mining Company over multiple grievances including wages, conditions, and the right to organize. The governor and local authorities immediately sought federal troops to put down the strike. Three separate investigations by military officers found no justification for sending in troops and even described the situation as peaceful. On

³⁴ "Report of President's Mediation Commission to the President of the United States," 9 Jan 18, Papers of the Presidential Mediation Commission, 1917-1919, (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America), 13-15. microfilm. Hereafter PMC Papers.

³⁵ G.G. Brown and E.P. Walsh to Samuel Gompers, 9 Aug 17, AFL Records

³⁶ Dubofsky, We Shall All Be, 385, 381, 411.

the evening of 11 July, a group of Bisbee citizens and mine managers conspired to break the strike by force. Early the next morning, the sheriff and two thousand deputies rounded up 1,186 striking miners and placed them on a train bound for Columbus, New Mexico, some 150 miles distant. As the round-up began, the conspirators took steps to censor the telephone lines out of town to prevent word of the deportations from spreading. The authorities in Columbus refused to allow the train to unload and sent it back toward Bisbee. The guards abandoned the deportees and left them to sit in the desert heat for two days without food or water. To deter the deported strikers, the vigilantes held out the threat of arrest or worse for those who returned to Bisbee. The miners lingered in an Army camp in Columbus until mid-September, waiting to see if the federal government would help return home.³⁷

The day after the deportation, word reached Washington of the events in Bisbee. Despite the pleas of private citizens and Arizona's AFL leaders, the federal government failed to take any meaningful action to restore the rule of law in Bisbee or to protect the constitutional rights of the deportees. The national leaders to the IWW threatened a general strike if the President did not federalize the copper mines. This threat by the IWW spurred Wilson to action. As Melvyn Dubofsky writes:

The Bisbee deportation precipitated two major decisions by the Wilson administration. First, ...threats of a general strike [the IWW] convinced Wilson and the Justice Department that "IWW-ism," not vigilantism, must be repressed. Second, the blatantly unconstitutional actions taken by Bisbee's vigilantes provoked protests from Gompers and other prominent American patriots that Wilson could not ignore. In order to mollify the protestants and to establish the federal government's commitment to harmonious industrial relations, Wilson appointed a special mediation commission to investigate wartime industrial conflicts and to suggest equitable remedies. The President's first decision would demonstrate the effectiveness of federal power when it determined to crush radical labor organizations; the second decision would illustrate the government's weakness when it attempted to protect the basic rights of

³⁷ "Report of President Wilson's Mediation Commission on the Bisbee, Ariz., Deportations," 5 Nov 1917, PMC Papers., 4-9.

powerless workers.³⁸

President Wilson sent his five man President's Mediation Commission headed by WBW to "the localities where disagreements have been most frequent." Wilson directed the commission to secure future industrial peace "particularly during the period of war" on the basis of fair treatment of both sides of disputes. While he explicitly instructed the commission to determine underlying causes of unrest through face to face discussion instead of public hearings,³⁹ it also had a hidden agenda to attend to. The commission's true purpose was to curb the IWW. WBW and Felix Frankfurter, the PMC's secretary, disguised this task by adding disputes not involving the Wobblies to the commission's schedule. In hearings, WBW and other PMC members openly stated they planned to only work with unions willing to comprise and operate within the system. These were two tests the IWW was guaranteed to fail.⁴⁰ To this end, Gompers' fear of both radicalism and vigilantism aided WBW. Gompers had long pushed for federal policies to curb radicals and protect "legitimate" unions. Together, WBW and Gompers stacked the commission with pro-AFL men. For the two business representatives, WBW selected a coal operator with a good reputation in United Mine Workers of America, and a liberal Roman Catholic. Both labor representatives selected by Gompers were state federation of labor leaders.⁴¹

The PMC traveled widely in the West and Midwest from September through December 1917. It investigated and resolved several strikes and threatened strikes including the one in Bisbee. The commission's efforts in the lumber producing regions of Pacific Northwest illustrated the government's use of the PMC to encourage cooperation and mediate disputes. The situation in the logging industry also

³⁸ Dubofsky, We Shall All Be, 385-389.

³⁹ WBW to Woodrow Wilson, 10 Sep 17, Case File 4341, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁴⁰ Dubofsky, We Shall All Be, 415-419.

⁴¹ Martin Schipper and Robert Lester. The President's Mediation Commission, 1917-1919 (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1985), v-vi.

demonstrated the lengths to which the government went to break the IWW and to promote AFL-style unionism.

Industrial relations in the forests of the Pacific Northwest were particularly difficult. The 70,000 men working there led a miserable existence. Their camps were very primitive and they held few pleasures for the men. One official described the lumberjacks as “womanless, voteless, and jobless.” The combination of the absence of social bonds within the camps, low wages and poor conditions produced a 600 percent annual turnover in the workforce.⁴² Management fiercely resisted all attempts at unionization. The employers’ inflexibility lent credence to the criticism of management by labor militants and promoted the organization of workers by the IWW. The AFL’s reluctance to organize the relatively unskilled lumbermen further aided the Wobblers’ cause.⁴³ Though many loggers joined the IWW, the PMC’s investigation found that “membership in the I.W.W. by no means implies belief in or understanding of its philosophy. To a majority of the members it is a bond of groping fellowship....a very small percentage of the I.W.W. are really understanding followers of subversive doctrine.”⁴⁴ While the commission’s hidden agenda no doubt influenced its perceptions of workers’ adherence to Wobbler doctrine, their report probably is a correct in assessing the cause of unrest in the logging camps as being more practical than ideological. The loggers’ unrest was an assertion of their dignity in the face of harsh conditions and exploitative employers.

As early as mid-August, employers rebuffed attempts by Department of Labor mediators to secure the owners’ consent to an eight hour day.⁴⁵ When the IWW-led strike failed to secure any meaningful gains, the workers returned to work and

⁴² "Report of President's Mediation Commission to the President of the United States," 9 Jan 1918, PMC Papers.

⁴³ Lombardi, 212-213.

⁴⁴ Report of President's Mediation Commission to the President of the United States," 9 Jan 1918, PMC Papers.

⁴⁵ WBW to Joseph Tumulty, 28 Sep 17, Case File 4341, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

mounted a slowdown. In continued negotiations, management expressed a willingness to compromise on wages and conditions, but clung to the refusal to allow an eight hour day even went to the point of withholding lumber from mills whose employees had that standard.⁴⁶ The intransigence of the employers on this issue stymied the PMC's efforts to redress the logger's grievances. Though WBW thought he had achieved a breakthrough in December, the PMC failed to resolve the issue before the commission members returned to the East in mid-December 1917.⁴⁷ The PMC's report reflected the ongoing efforts to resolve the dispute. It noted that while a strike lasting for several months during the summer was over, lumber production was still not at the desired level. "For, while the strike of 1917 was broken and the men went back beaten for the moment, the conflict was only postponed and not composed."⁴⁸ When the commission departed it left the stalled negotiations in the hands of a federal mediator, hoping the impasse over hours would be resolved. In an effort to force the resolution of this issue, the PMC recommended requiring an eight hour day in all government lumber contracts. ⁴⁹

To loosen the hold of the Wobblies and introduce "legitimate" AFL-style unionism to the lumber camps the government resorted to sponsoring what would become a company union. Lieutenant Colonel Brice P. Disque, an Army officer sent by the War Department to survey the situation impressed Gompers with a plan of his. He proposed to deliver the lumber industry into the AFL's hands by creating the Loyal Legion of Loggers and Lumbermen. To start this new union, Disque used 10,000 former lumberjacks all then serving in the Army. Though technically soldiers under Disque's command, these men wore civilian clothes and were paid union rates. Once

⁴⁶ Ibid. and Bing, 270.

⁴⁷ Telegrams WBW to Woodrow Wilson, 7 and 14 Dec 17, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁴⁸ Report of President's Mediation Commission to the President of the United States," 9 Jan 1918, PMC Papers.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

established in the region, Disque betrayed Gompers and prevented both the IWW and the AFL from attempting to organize Legion men. In return for Disque's docile, non-union workforce, the employers finally conceded the eight hour workday, paid union wages, and improved camp conditions. The Legion rapidly absorbed other loggers, reaching 120,000 members by the Armistice. With the demise of both the IWW logger's union and its AFL rival, a temporary calm settled over the logging camps. The Legion extended a semblance of union standards throughout the industry and the employers preserved their valued status quo.⁵⁰

The report of the PMC summarized its view of the state of industrial relations nationwide and recommended actions to alleviate the unrest. The cause of the industrial unrest, the commission reported, was to be found in long standing problems in the relationship between capital and labor. The employers' refusal to accept collective bargaining placed workers at a disadvantage and poisoned relations between the two. The lack of a disinterested referee to resolve disputes encouraged violence on both sides. Neither side understood the other's position, a situation that was attributable to a mentality of business that saw labor as a crisis issue not a regular facet of management. Government intervention usually took the form of repression that alienated workers and advanced labor radicalism. Labor radicalism was not the cause of these problems, but certainly exploited them. The commission concluded that America's workers were not disloyal, and asserted that workers' contributions and suffering in support of the war effort were second only to those of soldiers. In an appeal for industrial democracy, the report noted that, "too often there is a glaring inconsistency between our democratic purposes in this war abroad and the autocratic conduct of some at home."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Dubofsky, We Shall All Be, 412-414; Bing, 271. and Kennedy, 256-266.

⁵¹ "Report of President's Mediation Commission to the President of the United States," 9 Jan 18, PMC Papers.

The PMC recommended a number of measures to ensure industrial peace in the war industries. It proposed that the government offer workers a number of concessions in return for an end to strikes and slow downs. This meant a crackdown on war profiteering to boost workers' morale and recognition of the right to collective bargaining. It further recommended the government create a mechanism to adjust labor disputes and defuse unrest before it occurred. The report advocated a national eight hour work day and the unification of war labor policy. Finally, it pointed to a need to educate workers about their roll in the war effort.⁵²

As seen by the plight of the IWW's lumber and copper unions, Gompers' fears of federal repression were well founded. Under the government's carrot and the stick approach to securing cooperation from organized labor, legitimacy was everything. The Wobblies anti-war rhetoric and obstruction of war production earned then the enmity of their government. Without the benefit of federally granted legitimacy, the IWW lost the protection of law. In Bisbee and elsewhere, the Wilson Administration knowingly turned a blind eye to vigilantism, using it to achieve what the President was unwilling to commit the blunt instrument of federal armed force to accomplish. Where vigilantism was not an option as happened in the lumber camps of the Pacific Northwest, the government was prepared to use its troops as scab labor to secure uninterrupted war production. Yet the President's Mediation Commission also illustrates the incentives that the federal government offered cooperative labor. In both its report and its field work, the commission provided a reasonable diagnosis of the problems plaguing American industrial relations. Its findings and settlements addressed many of the wage, hours and conditions grievances that led to the strikes. The PMC's promotion of communications between workers and management through both shop committees and federal mediation services began the process of resolving the causes underlying industrial conflict.

⁵² Ibid.

THE WAR LABOR ADMINISTRATION AND THE WAR LABOR BOARD

While the PMC was in the West, the Council of National Defense (CND) worked to unify federal labor policy. The Council was under pressure from its Labor Committee, the War Industries Board, and private groups to bring reason, uniformity, and coherence to federal labor policy. Both the press and government gave wide publicity to the measures Great Britain had taken to solidify its labor policy. This publicity, largely uncritical and unsophisticated in its analysis, strongly influenced the Council's efforts to bring consistency to labor policy.⁵³

Earlier efforts within the Labor Committee had failed. WBW and Gompers each put forward similar plans. Both plans combined employee, employer and government representatives on national arbitration boards, but varied in the specific number of representatives and their qualifications. Though the CND approved WBW's plan, Gompers objected because the plan required neither the employee representatives to be union men nor the use of union wage and hour scales as the basis for all awards.⁵⁴

Frustrated by its own inability to unify federal labor policy, the CND in November 1917 created an interdepartmental commission to study the problem. From the commission's discussions four options emerged. First, the creation of a British-style ministry of munitions that would coordinate all war procurement and production. Within this ministry would be a component bureau charged with coordinating federal labor policy. The business progressives who dominated the federal wartime production apparatus lobbied hard for this proposal. Nonetheless, for some undetermined reason the commission believed President Wilson was set against this option and rejected it. A second option was to create a new committee or board specifically to coordinate labor policy. The commission discarded this choice because it felt the board would become redundant given the profusion of labor boards that

⁵³Lombardi, 228-230.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 232-233

already existed. Another option was to expand the so far limited role of the Labor Department. Proponents argued that the Department had the support of organized and unorganized workers alike. Opponents expressed concern that it was out of touch with business and was widely viewed with suspicion by the same. In a telling comment that revealed the transitory nature of all the reforms contemplated by labor policy makers, opponents of this option voiced the opinion that entangling the Department in wartime labor policy would threaten the postwar position of the Department.⁵⁵ The commission's final option was to create a separate war labor administration patterned after the existing Fuel and Food Administrations. The business progressives preferred this action because it separated wartime policy from a Department of Labor they perceived to be tainted by close association with the AFL. Organized labor's preference for something within the Department offset business opposition.⁵⁶

The commission's final report described current labor policy as unsatisfactory, fragmented and inefficient. The report called for a new policy that established principles to govern labor relations. It proposed the creation of a new labor policy body, charged with direct, proactive federal mediation to prevent work stoppages. Among other things, this body would ensure the war industries maintained labor standards and conditions. The commission failed to reach a consensus of which form of organization to adopt. The report's wording clearly favored either an enlarged Department of Labor or munitions ministry option.⁵⁷ The CND deferred action on the report until WBW returned from his work with the President's Mediation Commission. On 3 January 1918, with WBW present, the CND the Council endorsed the creation of a war labor administration and forwarded the report to the President. The next day, Wilson appointed WBW War Labor Administrator and charged him with establishing

⁵⁵ Marshall, 437-439. Marshall gives no explanation for this rationale.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 439.

⁵⁷ "Report of Interdepartmental Committee," 20 Dec 17, quoted in Marshall, 439-441.

the War Labor Administration.⁵⁸

WBW created an advisory commission to assist him in implementing the President's decision. Keeping with the pattern of wartime cooperation, he appointed two representatives each of business and labor, and one representative each of women and the public. The commission faced the daunting task of establishing policy in an environment where neither labor nor business spoke with a unified voice. It quickly tackled the task to establishing principles to guide federal labor policy. It recommended WBW call a conference of labor, business and public leaders to draft these principles. This War Labor Conference Board was to be composed of five business representatives selected by the National Industrial Conference Board, five labor representatives chosen by the AFL and two public members. With guidance from WBW, business and labor would each name one of the two public representatives to the Conference Board.⁵⁹ In subsequent memorandums, the Advisory Commission outlined the mechanics of restructuring the federal war labor bureaucracy to bring it under the umbrellas of WLA control without disrupting their ongoing work.

In the meantime the War Labor Conference Board began its work. The AFL and business each named their representatives and WBW selected lawyer Frank Walsh and former president William H. Taft as the public members. The selection of Walsh and Taft was an astute political compromise on the Secretary's part. Walsh was a prominent Democrat and labor lawyer considered a radical by many businessmen. His counterpart, Taft was a Republican reputed to be inimical to labor. By selecting these two, WBW certified his commitment to organized labor, extended a hand in friendship to business, and set an example of fairness for the board.⁶⁰ At its first meeting WBW emphasized the importance of the WLA's wartime strike mediation role noting, "It

⁵⁸ Marshall, 441.; and Cuff, 559.

⁵⁹ Memorandum from Advisory Commission to WBW, 19 Jan 18, quoted in Marshall, 442 -443.

⁶⁰ Cuff, 563.

behooves us... to find some way of adjusting our own family quarrels at least until we have disposed of the common enemy without."⁶¹

The Conference Board's final report recommended the creation of the National War Labor Board (NWLB). Of the many agencies created under the War Labor Administration, the NWLB was the most influential in its legacy to American organized labor. The Conference Board's report suggested the following guidelines for federal labor policy: prohibit strikes and lock-outs for the duration; recognize the right of workers to organize; prohibit employer discrimination against union members and interference in organizing; endorse the idea of a living wage; promote use of a minimum wage; and a voluntary eight hour workday. The report provided that the government could not compel employers to bargain with unions, but only with shop committees of elected worker representatives. It also prohibited unions from coercing workers to join a closed shop.⁶² The board did not reach agreement on these principles easily. In a letter to his wife, Taft explained to get the code approved, "I had to read the riot act to my own people or twice...."⁶³ The employer representatives were very reluctant to support the proposed guidelines fearing that they would forever alter employer-employee relations. It took a great deal of persuasion by the representatives of labor and the public to secure the board's business members approval. Walsh, Taft and the labor members gave assurances that the code would not *permanently* alter the status quo in industrial relations.⁶⁴

WBW submitted the board's final report and a draft proclamation to establish National War Labor Board to President Wilson. WBW submitted the names of the Conference Board's members as the charter members of the National War Labor

⁶¹ WBW to Woodrow Wilson, 8 Mar 18, Case File 4341, Reel 336, Wilson Papers.

⁶² Marshall, 433-447 ; "Report of War Labor Conference Board to the Secretary of Labor," 29 Mar 18. Case File 4341, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.; and Wilhelm, 168-170.

⁶³ quoted in Lombardi, 249.

⁶⁴ Lombardi, 249.

Board and suggested the AFL and National Industrial Conference Board formally name the labor and business members of the board ⁶⁵ On 9 April President Wilson officially created the NWLB. He gave it authority over industrial relations in all war industries. It had no explicit authority as an arbitration board, but used public opinion and the voluntary support of government contractors to extract compliance. Its decisions were seen as quasi-legal precedents and were cited by other labor boards.⁶⁶ Though an effective medium for achieving industrial peace during the war, the National War Labor Board posed a problem for the achievement of the government's goal of appearing impartial in its intervention in the workplace. Many businessmen considered an appeal to the NWLB a foregone conclusion of an award beneficial to labor. From the other end of the political spectrum, the left criticized the board for its willingness to work through company unions and shop committee instead of real unions. The AFL generally approved of NWLB actions, in part because it had few alternatives to submission.⁶⁷

Despite the efforts of the AFL and employers' organizations, the compliance of individual locals and companies was never guaranteed. The simultaneous challenges of NWLB authority by wildcat strikers in Bridgeport, Connecticut and the Smith&Wesson company offered a lesson in the coercion underlying "voluntary" cooperation. Striking shipyard workers in Bridgeport refused to return to work under the terms of a board decision and Smith&Wesson would not reinstate fired union members as ordered. Meeting brazen resistance in each instance, the NWLB appealed to WBW for help. Taft and Walsh believed the refusal of Bridgeport strikers and Smith&Wesson to submit to the board demanded firm action to affirm its powers. The co-chairmen suggested the situation was an opportunity to simultaneously show

⁶⁵ WBW to Woodrow Wilson, 4 and 6 Apr 18, Case File 4341, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁶⁶ Wilhelm, 170-175.

⁶⁷ Lombardi, 255-258 and Philip Taft, The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957),, 357.

labor and management that they must submit to the government. Walsh and Taft recommended that the government take over the Smith&Wesson factory and suggested that President Wilson threaten the Bridgeport strikers with similarly harsh sanctions. The following day, WBW forwarded these recommendations to the President with his endorsement. He fully supported the federal takeover of Smith&Wesson, but suggested President Wilson alter the text of message to the strikers in Bridgeport. WBW advised threatening the Bridgeport workers with being denied work in war industries for only one year, as opposed to the NWLB's proposal to permanently bar them.⁶⁸ WBW's recommendation reflected his concern about the shortage of skilled labor in the shipyards.

The government moved to take over Smith&Wesson on 13 September 1918.⁶⁹ The same day President Wilson sent a strongly worded letter to the strikers, pointing out that by agreeing to accept arbitration by NWLB, they were bound by its award. To demonstrate his evenhandedness, Wilson explained the actions he had taken against Smith&Wesson for their recalcitrance. The President demanded the strikers return to work under the terms of the settlement. Following WBW's suggestion, Wilson threatened to bar the strikers from work in the war industries of Bridgeport for one year. He added that draft boards would be instructed to deny striker's claims of exception for war work during the period the workers were barred.⁷⁰ Though the final resolution required additional pressure be placed on the shipyard owners to readmit the strikers, the President's letter ended the Bridgeport strike.⁷¹

The WLA and the NWLB showed both positive and negative aspects of wartime intervention by the federal government in industrial relations. These agencies affected

⁶⁸ WBW to Woodrow Wilson, 11 Sep 18, Case File 43141, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁶⁹ Valerie J. Conner, The National War Labor Board: Stability, Social Justice, and the Voluntary State in World War I (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 133.

⁷⁰ Woodrow Wilson to District Lodge 55, International Association of Machinists, Bridgeport, Connecticut, 13 Sep 18, Case File 43141, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁷¹ Samuel Lavit to Woodrow Wilson, 17 Sep 18, Case File 43141, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

a program of federal labor policies that raised the prospects of a more democratic workplace. Though the NWLB only acted on half the cases it received before the Armistice and settled even fewer,⁷² it still provided workers with the hope of having their complaints heard by an impartial government body empowered specifically to bring justice to labor relations. The principles of the WLA and NWLB established a national measure for employment standards that contributed directly to the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. These agencies also bore bitter fruit for organized labor. Again, only “legitimate” unions, willing to submit to the power of state could enjoy the benefits of federal mediation. No one spoke for the IWW and other radical labor groups in the councils that dispensed industrial justice and controlled the means used to enforce cooperation.

THE TRUCE COLLAPSES

Just as the government seemed to be getting an effective grip on its labor policies, storm clouds appeared on the horizon of American organized labor. The election of 1918 ominously foreshadowed a postwar change in the relations between government and labor. Republicans won a large majority in the House and a two seat majority in the Senate and were reunited as a party for first time since split of 1912.⁷³ This triumph came on a platform of reducing the cost of living and limiting government regulation.⁷⁴ Despite their pro-labor policies and the open support of the AFL, the Democrats were still unable to break the Republican’s grip on the urban, industrialized Northeast. The ability of the Democrats to extend wartime reforms in industrial relations would at best be limited. Paranoia about the specter of a Communist revolution like that underway in Russia gripped the country. The Red Scare brought business and government interests into closer harmony and tainted unionism in the

⁷² Lombardi, 250-252.

⁷³ Kennedy, 232-233.

⁷⁴ Montgomery 393

eyes of many.

The Armistice brought a crashing end to the conditions that had fostered cooperation between labor government and business. The government immediately canceled all war contracts. Business demanded government controls on inflation and wage growth and the President responded. The disparity between the rise in the cost of living and the rate of wage increases continued. The end of government cost plus contracts and of the threat of federalization dramatically reduced the leverage of the administration over business. When business attempted to roll back wartime concessions, organized labor responded with a massive wave of strikes. By 1919, one in five workers would go out on strike, more than ever before in US history.⁷⁵

After the Armistice, the War Labor Administration and federal mediation agencies rapidly withered away. Most of the components of the WLA lapsed when their appropriations ended on 30 June 1918, the end of fiscal year. The NWLB slid into decline. Frank Walsh resigned, to be replaced by Basil Manly on 27 November 1918.⁷⁶ Manly was blunt his assessment the state of the NWLB.

The National War Labor Board, as now constituted, with its present personnel and rules of procedure, is not an effective instrument for the stabilization of conditions and the prevention of industrial dislocation and warfare. It cannot be made effective for these purposes without fundamental changes which require the action either of the President of the United States or of Congress.... With the signing of the armistice the entire situation was changed. The compulsion of patriotic necessity has been removed and the power of the Board to secure enforcement of its awards ... has been greatly reduced....⁷⁷

Manly described the Board's business representatives as openly critical of the Board, even devising fellow businessmen to ignore its actions. He noted that the lack of enforcement powers had seriously undermined the support of organized labor for the

⁷⁵ Kennedy, 272.

⁷⁶ WBW to Woodrow Wilson, 27 Nov 18, Case File 43141, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁷⁷ Basil Manly, Memorandum "The Present Status of the National War Labor Board" to WBW, 25 Feb 18, RG174, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

Board. "It is quite certain, indeed," Manly asserted, "that the Board will ever again be as successful in inducing employees to remain at work pending its decisions as it has been in the past." Manly called on WBW to allow the entire board to resign pending the establishment of clear federal labor policy and a business-labor agreement to submit to it.⁷⁸ Despite Manly's proposal, the impotent NWLB lingered on until 11 August 1919, when WBW dissolved the Board upon the joint recommendation of Taft and Manly.⁷⁹

With the demise of the NWLB, any hope of resuming cooperation in the immediate future ended. The coalition between business, labor and government that had brought so much progress during the war lay in ruin. The end of war production reduced the incentives for governmental intervention in industrial disputes. This intervention had largely underwritten labor's progress in improving conditions, standards and wages during the war. Without the help of the government and in the environment of the Red Scare, labor's struggle against resurgent capital was doomed to fail. In David Brody's words, "depending on their own economic strength, American workers could not defeat the massed power of open-shop industry."⁸⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The wartime cooperation of organized labor with business and government left a mixed legacy. In the short run, organized labor's cooperation secured government intervention that produced gains in wages, hours and conditions that would have been difficult if not impossible to secure otherwise. For the future, organized labor's cooperation encouraged the government to establish precedents that paved the way

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Woodrow Wilson to William Taft, 11 Aug 19, Case File 43141, Reel 366, Wilson Papers.

⁸⁰ Brody, 45.

for the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. From both perspectives, American workers paid a high price for these gains. The knowledge of what was lost made the setbacks for organized labor in the postwar period all the more bitter. It is in the long term that American unionism has paid the highest price. Cooperation with the government constrained organized labor's ability to fundamentally alter the terms of American democracy. Cooperation in wartime dispelled the notions of a generation of workers that "legitimate" trade unions could deliver anything more than bread and butter. It recognized the supremacy of national interests over class interests. Perhaps, this compromise explains why a viable labor party never developed in America.

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