

Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (USA)

By [Paul Michel Taillon](#)

Summary

Wartime mobilization in the United States involved supportive federal government policies in labor relations, enabling the labor movement to extend its influence into previously unorganized sectors of the economy. Unprecedented levels of labor conflict characterized the wartime experience as workers pressed employers, union leaders, and government officials for living wages and democracy in industry. Labor's wartime gains proved short-lived, but the experience set in place precedents that would shape American industrial relations for much of the 20th century.

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Introduction

The [United States](#) entry into the war set in motion a series of developments that in the view of American Federation (AFL) of Labor leader [Samuel Gompers \(1850-1924\)](#) catalyzed a revolution in the relations among working people, unions, management, and the state. Although many features of that revolution proved short-lived, the mobilization left a lasting imprint on national industrial relations policies, managerial approaches to employee relations, the labor movement, and rank-and-file union members. Among the issues the war years highlighted, the most important centered on the cost of living, workplace control, collective bargaining, the role of the state in labor relations, and what kind of unions would find their ways into the halls of national power. The last of these issues was no small matter as the pre-war labor movement in the United States included moderate trade unionists, socialists, and syndicalists, all of whom contended uneasily with one another. The single most important feature of the mobilization, the expanded reach of the [state into society](#), favored

the moderate AFL unions at the expense of the revolutionary Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). This expansion of state interest and union growth occurred in the context of a multi-year strike wave lasting from 1915 to 1922 that demonstrated the insurgent quality of the era's labor conflict and workers' sense that the war offered possibilities to improve their lot.¹

Politics and Labor Conflict during the Neutrality Period, 1914-1916

For the first two and a half years of the war, the United States hewed to a policy of [neutrality](#), setting the experience of the American labor movement and the pattern of [labor](#) conflict apart from those of other belligerents. Nevertheless, the war in Europe altered the terrain upon which workers, employers, unions, and the state engaged each other in ways that echoed what was happening in Europe. Two factors assumed particular importance. First, the avalanche of overseas orders for manufactured goods in late 1914 combined with the halt of mass European immigration tightened the American labor market, reversing a decade-long employer offensive against trade unionism. These developments encouraged workers to become more militant and unions more aggressive by early 1915. Second, as American involvement in the war became more likely, national policymakers realized that the extent of mobilization required for a [total war](#) meant they needed workers and their unions on-side.²

These developments took place against the Progressive Era backdrop of increased state involvement in labor relations and organized labor's tightening alliance with the [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) administration and the Democratic Party. In 1912, that alliance delivered to the White House the most labor-sympathetic chief executive in American history to date.³ Although political realities motivated Wilson's accommodation of labor, so too did escalating labor conflict brought on by the [war-infused economy](#), which ended the short but sharp economic contraction of 1913-1915. Tighter labor markets and the escalating cost of living drove workers to change jobs with increasing frequency, and the quest for higher wages and better working conditions encouraged many to join unions. This volatility fed industrial action, with the 3,789 recorded strikes of 1916 more than doubling the figure of 1,593 for 1915, a historic high.⁴

The strike wave of 1915-1916 further drew the federal [government](#) into labor-management relations and established the basic parameters of what would become the Wilson administration's wartime labor policy, beginning with the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations. The Commission took testimony from around the country on the causes of industrial conflict and industrial violence. Its final majority report condemned wealth inequality, unemployment, and poor working conditions and called upon the federal

government to extend “the principles of democracy to industry.” For the Commission’s co-chairman [Frank Walsh \(1864-1939\)](#), workers’ self-organization and collective bargaining offered the best bet for achieving the compelling, but never fully defined, goal of industrial democracy.⁵

Labor Politics and Wartime Mobilization, 1917-1918

The United States’ [entrance into the war](#) on 6 April 1917 brought with it another surge in labor conflict. In the six months between April and October alone, American workers went on strike over 3,000 times. The pattern of these strikes changed, too, with at least sixty-seven of them involving over 10,000 workers each. Metalworkers led in terms of numbers of workers and workdays lost, with shipbuilding, coal and copper mining, textiles, lumber, clothing, and transport following up. Longshoremen, loggers, packinghouse workers, miners, grain harvesters, urban transport workers, and service sector workers joined craftsmen, all contributed to the turmoil. Pre-intervention drivers of labor conflict—inflation and full employment, together with the long-term dilution of crafts (e.g., metalworking) and the consolidation of working-class neighborhoods—intensified under the pressures of mobilization to upset customary standards of earnings, making wage battles chronic and triggering working-class consumer struggles over the high cost of housing and food. And congested working-class neighborhoods, many of them heavily immigrant, fostered the kinds of worker solidarity that drove a series of sympathetic general strikes across 1917-1918 in Springfield, Illinois; Kansas City, Missouri; Waco, Texas; and Billings, Montana.⁶ At the same time, the influx of [women](#) and southern African-American migrants into northern industry created tensions and conflicts within workplaces and working-class communities. The East St. Louis race riot of July 1917, brought on in part by these pressures, stands as one of the worst episode of racial violence in United States history, matched only by the series of [race riots](#) that swept the nation during the “red summer” of 1919.

The labor upheaval drew the federal government even further into labor management relations. Building on prewar precedent, mobilization created a national state apparatus with unprecedented reach into American society. Two broad principles guided policymaking. First, the administration sought the cooperation of existing “responsible” unions. Second, it expected both labor and management to refrain from taking advantage of the war emergency to “change existing standards.” The first of these principles proceeded naturally from the closer relationship between the AFL and the Democratic Party. During the summer of 1916, Wilson had appointed Samuel Gompers to the Advisory Council on Labor of the Council on National Defense. Gompers, for his part, readily pledged no strikes for the war’s duration. Additionally, the AFL supplied union representatives to mobilization agencies and

worked with those agencies to prevent strikes. Moreover, the AFL sponsored the American Alliance for Labor and Democracy to enlist working people on behalf of the war effort.⁷ In sectors critical to war production, the government took a corporatist approach. The Emergency Fleet Corporation, created in April 1917 to coordinate shipbuilding, joined with the AFL's Metal Trades Department to create the Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board to adjust grievances. Similarly, the United States Railroad Administration, which took control of the national rail network in early 1918, created a series of labor boards of adjustment, all staffed with representatives of labor and management.⁸

Despite these kinds of initiatives, labor conflict persisted, in no small part due to the AFL Executive Council's repudiation of Gompers' no-strike pledge and disagreements over the second policy principle: the meaning of "existing standards." For one group of policymakers concentrated in the [War Industries Board](#), that phrase meant just that: no change to prewar lines of power in employment relations. But for many workers and their allies in the Department of Labor, the statement applied only to working conditions, not to the question of unionization.⁹ Moreover, the Wilson administration appeared to tacitly sanction unionization with its rhetoric of industrial democracy, which linked a war for democracy in Europe with the spread of democracy in American workplaces. Thus, as labor conflict surged over the summer of 1917 Gompers called for a special commission to investigate labor disturbances. The president's Mediation Commission investigated clashes in the Southwest's copper and Pacific Northwest timber industries, among telephone operators and [urban](#) street railway workers, and in meatpacking. The Commission adjudicated a number of these disputes but in practice enjoyed little power to enforce its recommendations. Labor conflict continued. Going into 1918, federal labor policy remained fragmented among various commissions, boards, and agencies in war-important sectors.¹⁰

To formulate and implement labor policies in war-related industries, President Wilson created the National War Labor board (NWLB) by executive order in April 1918. Composed of an equal number of representatives of business and labor, and co-chairs representing the public, the NWLB docketed and investigated cases in a wide range of firms. Warming to his vision of industrial democracy, co-chair Frank Walsh fought for the principle of living wages, the eight-hour day, and workers' right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers. With the surprising support of his presumptively pro-employer co-chair [William H. Taft \(1857-1930\)](#), Walsh succeeded in winning shorter hours, higher wages, equal pay for women doing equal work and, broadly, the principle of collective bargaining, in many industries. As a compromise between unions' demands for government protection of workers' right to organize and employers' insistence on open shops, the NWLB devised the shop committee,

which gave employees voice but stopped short of union representation.¹¹

Even though the NWLB handled labor disputes in companies with government contracts, the Wilson administration's approach to labor policy fostered union growth broadly. Union membership grew by over 2 million between 1917 and 1920, a total gain of almost 70 percent.¹² Indirect government control of coal mining facilitated the growth of the United Mine Workers to over 500,000 members, making it the largest union in the United States. On the railroads, the United States Railroad Administration afforded unions a privileged position. Especially for workers in the offices, shops, and maintenance-of-way, whose unions had always been weaker than the operating crafts, government control enabled the growth of union membership. What was true on the railroads also held in industries with antiunion histories like steel, which had stood as an open-shop bastion since the 1892 Homestead Strike.¹³ However, although unions, like those in steel, surged due to the enrollment of immigrant workers, this growth did not translate into more racially inclusive forms of organization. In fact, where black workers had gained footholds, white workers mobilized to push them out, as in the notorious Memphis railroad switchmen's "race strike" of 1919.

Wartime federal labor policy stopped well short of encouraging all forms of unionism and, in fact, worked to contain or eliminate the radical (and more gender and racially inclusive) alternative embodied in the Industrial Workers of the World. Whereas the AFL and its constituent unions broadly (although not always consistently) supported national war aims, the IWW repudiated the war and Wilson's policy. The same war economy favoring moderate unions also benefited the IWW, which enrolled increasing numbers of migratory farm workers, copper miners, and loggers. These in turn engaged more frequently in job actions and, by the summer of 1917, conducted major strikes in the southwest and northwest. These industrial actions, which threatened war-vital mining, timber, and food production, drew the venom of employers and state officials, who branded "Wobblies" as disloyal or as German [spies](#) and saboteurs and demanded federal action against them. In this context, an IWW-led copper miners' strike in Arizona met with owners' violent resistance. Drawing the support of local sheriffs and vigilantes, these men orchestrated the rounding up of 1,200 strikers at bayonet-point and shipped them by railcar into the New Mexico desert—the infamous Bisbee Deportation. Similar incidents followed that fall, as did the lynch-mob murder of IWW organizer [Frank Little \(1879-1917\)](#) in the mining-town of Butte, Montana. State-orchestrated repression followed these extra-legal incidents, culminating in a federal government campaign against the IWW, which involved Justice Department raids on IWW headquarters around the country and a federal grand jury indictment of 166 officials under the Espionage Act in September 1917, killing the organization as a viable union.¹⁴

Postwar Strike Wave and Reaction, 1919

Despite the government's selective encouragement of unionism, state intervention—especially in its emphasis on the idea of the shop committee and its promotion of industrial democracy—nevertheless stimulated the spread of workers' movements challenging rigid craft organization.¹⁵ However, following the November 1918 armistice these new directions and aspirations for meaningful [postwar social reconstruction](#) ran into reversed government policy and popular reaction against union gains. As the NWLB wound up its business and government controls came off the economy, employers determined to restore the open shop blocked the labor movement's march toward the extension of industrial democracy and the triumph of trade unionism.¹⁶ The resulting clash produced one of the greatest strike years in American history.

The strike surge of 1919 featured unprecedented levels of industrial conflict. Acting as the capstone to the long strike wave of 1915-1922, it involved nearly one out of every four workers—over 4,160,000 in total, 20 percent of the labor force—walking out in more than 3,630 work stoppages, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁷ As with wartime strikes, demands for living wages drove the majority of these industrial actions, but worker demands for expanded union democracy also animated the upsurge. [Postwar labor conflict](#) took on an insurgent quality as workers challenged managerial authority *and* union leadership and conventional trade union practice. The February Seattle General Strike embodied these qualities as locals of the Seattle Central Labor Council endorsed the walkout of shipyard workers in defiance of the AFL hierarchy, leading to a citywide shutdown. The actions of clothing workers, textile workers, telephone operators, and wildcat walkouts by railroad shop workers across spring and summer demonstrated comparable militancy. New groups of workers also struck for the first time, adding to the crisis atmosphere: actors in the New York and Chicago theater districts in August and the Boston police in September. The Great Steel Strike, when it unfolded in late September, capped the year's labor upheaval as 350,000 workers—mostly immigrant and unskilled—launched the biggest strike in United States history to date. So large was the steelworkers' action that when the United Mine Workers struck in early November it seemed like a denouement.¹⁸

The political context in which American workers undertook strike action differed markedly from that of the war years. Halting attempts to plan for peacetime reconversion and reconstruction foundered on employer-union disagreement. The Republicans' sweeping of Congress in the 1918 midterm elections and President Wilson's focus on the [peace negotiations in Paris](#) over the first half of 1919 made the circumstances more difficult. Public discontent with inflation moved the president to distance himself from the AFL and caution

against significant wage rises. He also denounced strikes, especially by public servants like the police. Compounding matters, widespread fears about Bolshevik influences in the strike wave, made believable by a series of anarchist bombings in June, drove a virulent postwar [red scare](#). Government and popular antiradicalism targeted mainly immigrant anarchists and leftists but many Americans could only comprehend the Seattle General Strike or the Great Steel Strike as Bolshevik-driven. Given the mood, the efforts of progressive-minded unions, like those on the railroads and in the mines, which advocated for the permanent national control of their industries, stood little chance of success. The National Industrial Conference Wilson convened in October 1919 to resolve the labor upheaval deadlocked. On one side were AFL unionists seeking to rescue the failing steel strike and, more expansively, gain an equal voice with management in the governance of industry. On the other side were employers resolved to remove unions from their workplaces. The conference illustrated the gulf between labor and capital and the distance traveled since the summer of 1916.¹⁹

Conclusion

On the face of it, organized labor's political fortunes stood entirely reversed in the war's immediate aftermath. Union membership dropped some 1.5 million members and although the well-established unions more or less maintained their positions, any gains made among the unorganized, particularly in the mass-production industries, vanished. The postwar strike wave illustrated the limits of the "new unionism" evident during the war years with its emphasis on broader scope and extent of union action, inter-union organizing campaigns, and efforts to extend unionism's influence to previously excluded groups, all animated by ideals of industrial democracy. More dramatic yet was a bill introduced into the Senate in early 1920 outlawing railroad strikes and criminalizing any interference with interstate trade. The bitter truth, observes historian David Brody, was that American workers could not hope to win union recognition, let alone more democratic workplaces, without state intervention.²⁰

Still, even if the open shop ruled in the 1920s, wartime mobilization established precedents that would shape industrial relations for much of the 20th century. Historians like Joseph McCartin see industrial democracy as providing Americans with a new vocabulary to debate labor-capital relations that, together with new patterns of labor management, planted seeds that would germinate into industrial unionism a decade later. The AFL and trade unionists generally emerged from the war more strongly oriented toward Washington, D.C. The Labor-Democratic alliance cooled during the 1920s only to be more firmly cemented by [Franklin D. Roosevelt \(1882-1945\)](#) during the New Deal. Lastly, David Brody draws a direct connection between an often-overlooked feature of the 1919 Industrial Conference: a compromise agreement that employees must be allowed to collectively bargain through representatives

of their own choosing. In the short run, the clause “representatives of their own choosing” opened the door to company unionism in the 1920s. In the longer run, Supreme Court decisions opened a constitutional pathway for the 1935 Wagner Act’s protections of workers’ rights to union membership, union recognition, and collective bargaining.²¹

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Notes

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External Links

- [1919 Seattle General Strike \(Pacific Northwest Labor and Civil Rights Projects\) \(Online Exhibition\)](#)
- [Beneš, Jakub: Workers and Workers Movements during the First World War, Archival Research Guide \(CENDARI Collaborative European Digital Archive Infrastructure\) \(Article\)](#)
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