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War, Labor, and Dissent: Motivations of American Labor Unions during the First World War

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War, Labor, and Dissent:

Motivations of American Labor Unions during the First World War

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In 1907, members of the Second International met in Stuttgart, Germany to discuss several issues of importance to the working class of the world. Among the issues addressed were the rising concerns of militarism among the nations of the world, particularly in Europe, which saw a Germany that was rapidly developing as an industrial power, and even began challenging Britain for supremacy of the sea. Recognizing the inherently destructive nature in war, and seeing that poor workers in all affected countries would be the primary victims of such a conflict, the Second International resolved that the working class should “do all they can to prevent the breaking out of this war, using for the purpose the means which appear to them most efficacious.”¹ The general idea was that in the case of war, the working classes of each nation would engage in a general strike, paralyzing the industry of each and making it impossible to fight. Seven years later, however, the First World War erupted in Europe and the working classes not only failed to stop the war, but oftentimes actively supported it. Labor unions in the United States also struggled with this idea, splitting them into pro-war and anti-war camps. There are a number of factors that go into determining why American labor failed to solidify in opposition to the war, with some of the most influential being: economic opportunism, government repression, and apathy towards both union and political stances.

Military rivalries and conflicts in Europe had existed for centuries, but gained much urgency following the Industrial Revolution, when mass-production and new weapons of war allowed killing to occur on a previously-unfathomable scale. Additionally, new transportation technologies allowed for rapid long-distance mobilization for the first time. Huge armies, mostly made up of poor, working class soldiers, could now travel almost anywhere to fight in a matter

of days or weeks instead of months. Armies also relied much more heavily on industry as well, requiring a constant supply of weapons and ammunition to maintain the war effort. This development put labor in a position of strength when it came to declaring war, something the Second International recognized with their resolution in Stuttgart. However, this strategy ultimately did not work, and in 1914 much of the world descended into a chaos that would last four long years, with repercussions that would span to the present day.

Labor unions in the United States had had a long history prior to the First World War, and spent decades fighting an uphill battle for rights, workplace protections, and reasonable wages that would stretch well past 1914. This struggle was made all the more difficult by a series of government policies, legislative actions, and federal interventions that were much more favorable toward businesses than their workers. One of the most well-known interventions was the Pullman strike of 1894, in which President Cleveland used the army to break a strike against the Pullman Company that had paralyzed numerous rail lines throughout the country.\(^2\) This violent defeat was just one of many that labor had to endure, with members facing down gun barrels at Homestead, Pennsylvania, Ludlow, Colorado, and many other locations.

Not all obstacles to the labor organization came in the form of bombs and bullets, however. In fact, legal challenges had the potential to be more devastating than any strike-breaking force. Court cases such as *Vegelahn v. Guntner* (1896), *Loewe v. Lawlor* (1908), and *Adair v. United States* (1908), provided a series of setbacks for unions as they lost numerous organizing tactics and protections. *Vegelahn v. Guntner*, for instance, ruled that union picketing interfered with the right of an employer to hire whoever it pleased, as well as the right of workers

to enter into employment.\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Adair v. United States} found that employment contracts banning workers from joining unions were constitutional.\textsuperscript{4} The most threatening decision came from \textit{Loewe v. Lawlor}, however, in which the United States Supreme Court found that the United Hatters of North America had found violated the Sherman Antitrust Act.\textsuperscript{5} To combat this, the AFL pushed heavily for an update to the Sherman Act which would protect unions instead of lumping them into same category as monopolies. In 1914, organized labor was able to break their string of legal losses with the passage of the Clayton Antitrust Act, which stated that “that the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce, and permit[ting] labor organizations to carry out their legitimate objective.”\textsuperscript{6} However, the victorious labor unions would soon have another challenge facing them shortly thereafter in the form of the First World War. The question of whether to support the effort of the Allied Powers, or to follow the directive of the Second International and strike to prevent the war from going any further would soon divide many.

One trade union was at the center of the rift between those striving for working class solidarity and those supporting US entry into World War I: The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), commonly known as the “Wobblies”. However, the antagonism between pro-war and anti-war unions did not begin with the outbreak of war in 1914. In fact, this rift has its origins in the very beginning of the IWW. The January Conference of 1905 brought together 23 representatives who drafted a new manifesto calling for “one great industrial union embracing all

\textsuperscript{3} Vegelahn v. Guntner, 167 Mass. 92, 44 N.E. 1077 (1896).
\textsuperscript{4} Adair v. United States, 208 U.S. 161 (1908).
industries” to solve the current problems of labor organizing, particularly the belief that individual craft unions were ill-suited toward working for the betterment of the worker. The German economist Werner Sombart wrote in 1905 that “As a result, strong craft antagonisms arise, which lead to an essentially vertical dismemberment of the proletariat, and prevent any joining together into a single solid defensive class.”

For the early founders of the IWW, only one big union could properly advocate for the benefit of all workers. This, of course, meant that workers would need to be recruited from previously-existing unions such as the American Labor Union, the Western Federation of Miners, and above all, the American Federation of Labor. “The general opinion seemed to be that the A.F. of L. had outlived its usefulness, and that its extinction – but not necessarily the extinction of its constituent local unions – was a consummation very much to be desired” argued Paul Brissenden. Naturally, the American Federation of Labor did not take the call to dismantle existing unions and reform them under a new, single union very well. Samuel Gompers, president of the AFL, wrote in March 1905 (only a few months after the IWW released their manifesto) that “the socialists have called another convention to smash the American trade-union movement… So the trade-union smashers and rammers from without and the ‘borers from within’ are again joining hands; a pleasant sight of the ‘pirates’ and the ‘kangaroos’ hugging each other in glee over their prospective prey.”

This was just the beginning of a rivalry that would last for over a decade until the demise of the organization as an influential actor in the 1920s. As conflict broke out in Europe and the

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8 Ibid., 3.
9 Ibid., 8.
10 Ibid.
American war machine began winding up in 1916, the schism between the IWW and the AFL only deepened. The Industrial Workers of the World “stood by organized labor’s traditional beliefs that preparedness for war generated war and that militarism transformed laborers into cannon fodder for the ruling class.”

Samuel Gompers took the opposite stance, viewing Germany as a threat to democracy and pacifism at home as merely aiding their militaristic cause. As president of the American Federation of Labor, Gompers was able to adjust the goals of the organization along these lines, rejecting the staunch class-based pacifism of the more radical unions such as the IWW in favor of military preparedness. Gompers also saw the war in more pragmatic terms, at least when it came to the AFL. The United States had drastically increased production to support the Allies long before they officially entered the war in 1917, which resulted in labor having increased leverage when it came to negotiations with employers. The wartime production boom also led to a rapidly expanding economy as well as a large increase in union membership throughout the period. A strike, while damaging to the war effort, would do nothing to improve the working conditions or pay of the union members, so there was little to gain and much to lose for laborers contemplating a strike.

It was not just increased production that benefitted the workers, however, but also a sharp reduction in available labor. Europe had been a very large source of new immigrant labor, but with the outbreak of war in 1914, the influx of new blood had all but vanished. In the period between 1910 and 1914, 4.5 million immigrants left the Old World for America, but by 1915, immigration virtually ceased. Seeing the laws of supply and demand in action, many workers

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12 Ibid.
and unions saw this as an opportunity to gain vital concessions from employers who could hardly afford the cost of a strike. This did not mean workers gained everything they wanted without incident, however. In fact, there were large numbers of strikes throughout the war years, averaging 3,000 per year between 1914 and 1920. Radical Unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World were involved in a number of these strikes, which, after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, helped stoke wider concerns among the government and employers about the nature of this labor unrest. This led the government trying to conduct friendly relations with mainstream labor organization such as the AFL, while at the same time attempting to suppress radical ones such as the IWW.

These attempt at suppression were not motivated solely by fears of the Bolshevik Revolution, however. In fact, there seemed to be a distinct fear that International Workers of the World were, in fact, agents of the German Empire. For instance, Senator Henry Ashurst of Arizona announced on the floor of the Senate that “I have frequently been asked what ‘IWW’ means… It means simply, solely, and only ‘Imperial Wilhelm’s Warriors.’” Even the president seemed to be paranoid about the motivations of the IWW, and Wilson “found it easy to believe reports which stressed that the IWW had struck the lumber and copper industries not to raise wages or improve working conditions but to obtain German gold and subvert the war effort.” From these fears, President Wilson charged federal judge J. Harry Covington in August of 1917 with investigating the IWW so that they could be prosecuted.

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14 Ibid., 37.
16 Ibid., 227.
The authority to prosecute the IWW originated from the Espionage Act, one of the most evident attempts at suppression during this period. This act gave the Justice Department the right to “punish by a fine of not more than $10,000 or imprisonment for not more than twenty years, or both” those individuals who “shall willfully cause or attempt to cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, or refusal of duty, in the military or naval forces of the United States…”\(^{17}\)

The wide authority granted by the Espionage Act led to the United States government leading a coordinated crackdown on the offices of the Industrial Workers of the World on September 5, 1917. All of the records of the IWW were seized, and despite an optimism by the IWW leadership that the agents would find nothing incriminating, the guilt of the organization had essentially been already decided. A letter to the Attorney General written shortly after the raid showed that the writer, the United States attorney for Philadelphia believed that “Our purpose… as I understand it, [is] very largely to put the I.W.W. out of business.”\(^ {18}\)

The brutal crackdown on the activities of the Industrial Workers of the World, as well as the imprisonment of many of their leaders was designed to send a clear message to would-be agitators. The United States was not only pro-war, but actively dedicated to wiping out anti-war activity as well. This became even more evident with the passage of the Sedition Act in 1918 that acted as an update to the Espionage Act and “punished the use of any ‘disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language’ that might encourage feelings of ‘contempt, scorn, contumely or disrepute’ towards the nation’s constitution, political system, flag, or military uniform.”\(^ {19}\) For those that decided to continue their opposition to the war, the consequences could be severe.

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\(^{18}\) Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, 233.

\(^{19}\) Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 70.
Perhaps the most famous case is that of Eugene Debs, the socialist leader and one of the founders of the IWW, whose 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio led to him being charged with violating the Sedition Act and sentenced with three concurrent 10-year prison terms.\textsuperscript{20} Although the Industrial Workers of the World survived the crackdown, it would not be long before their influence faded, and other, less radical organizations took their place.

Another possible reason for the lack of working-class solidarity in the United States was apathy and complacency. Unions were organized along democratic lines, with major decisions (such as whether or not to strike) being put up to vote among the general membership. Perceptions of labor union activities in popular consciousness tend to assume that they are organizations in which every member is completely committed and active. As with any democratic organization, however, there tends to be a not-insignificant portion of the population that refrains from active participation, for any number of reasons. These members prefer instead to leave the decisions up to the leadership or the other members.

In an examination of the September 1917 strike by the Union of Boilermakers, Iron Shipbuilders and Helpers, Walter Woehlke found a decidedly apathetic union. He described the situation as one in which “The sober, efficient mechanic with a steady job and a family to look after has no particular interest in union affairs. He rarely goes to meetings…Thousands of union meetings are held in the United States every week, but in few of them more than a quarter of the membership takes part, no matter how important the issue up for decision may be.”\textsuperscript{21} This paints a picture of a union that hardly seems concerned with the development of their own workplace, let alone the development of the war effort thousands of miles away.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 107.
A study of union government and structure in the mid-twentieth century found that “The routine meetings are attended by a very small proportion of the membership, rarely beyond 5 percent…All attempts to exhort and induce attendance and to attract members to meetings tend to fail.”22 This is supported by another examination stating that “The vast majority of union members – in industrial unions up to 95 percent – have only intermittent interest in, or connection with, the union… the chances are that not very many of this 95 percent feel either hostility or enthusiasm for the union. To all of these members, the union is merely one of the facts of life.”23 The likely result of this apathy is a union membership that is unwilling to cause trouble by pestering for reform, giving union leadership no particular reason to call for a strike.

There is no one answer to why American labor unions did not or could not choose to come together in an anti-war solidarity movement. Labor unions are, after all, made up of individual people, whose motivations are far too numerous and varied to definitively categorize. It is possible, however, to discern some of the most compelling motivations that drove the highest number of individuals and unions to either embrace the war effort, or at least silence their opposition. Of the many motivators, the three that stand out as being among the largest are: increasing economic opportunity for workers that participated in the war economy; a government crackdown on dissenting voices and organizations; and a general sense of apathy among workers who simply didn’t care enough about solidarity against the war effort to bother with striking.

Bibliography


