

---

## Chapter 17

# WORK AND WORKERS IN AMERICA

---

### INTRODUCTION

*We may divide the whole struggle of the human race into two chapters: first, the fight to get leisure; and then the second fight of civilization — what shall we do with our leisure when we get it.*

JAMES A. GARFIELD

*The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for — not by the labor agitators but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country, and upon the successful management of which so much depends.*

GEORGE F. BAER

*Oh, they can't scare me, I'm stickin' to the union,  
I'm stickin' to the union,  
I'm stickin' to the union;  
Oh, they can't scare me, I'm stickin' to the union,  
I'm stickin' to the union till the day I die.*

ANONYMOUS

THE TITLE of this chapter might have been "The American Working Class." And if the work as a whole had been *The Annals of Great Britain*, or *The Annals of France*, or *The Annals of Russia*, this chapter would surely have been called "The British (or the French or the Russian) Working Class." But the term "working class," though applicable to some extent in an American context, is not quite an "American" phrase. Certainly the term, both in its substantive usage (with emphasis on the "class") and in its adjectival usage (as in such phrases as

"working-class ideals") does not have the same force here as it does in other countries.

Here almost everyone works, and this has always been so. But it is a fact, one to be stated at the very beginning, and one moreover not to be lost sight of, that a very great number of workers in America, both in the past and in the present, have aspired and still aspire to be more than workers, to be other than *mere* workers. In a country whose leading ideals have been equality, opportunity, and success, the idea of a per-

manent, fixed, working *class* is not only an anomaly but also a fundamental contradiction.

This seems undeniable. Social and economic mobility has been our keynote; we have lived according to the famous dictum of Andrew Carnegie: "From shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations." The son of a wage earner may be a fee earner; his son may be a rich man; and his son may be a wage earner again. It is a history that has been often repeated, and that will be often repeated in the future. Nevertheless, the phrase "American working class" is not totally without meaning. For one thing, even if its membership changes from generation to generation, the working class considered as a group in existence at any one time has had a definite role to play in the nation's life, and one that can be described with a considerable amount of clarity. And for another, the existence of a permanent, fixed working class, the membership of which would not change, has often been predicted by observers of the American scene. Indeed this has been a perennial fear, and one that is far from being quiescent today.

In the following pages we consider first the position of workers in general American society, in the process attempting to throw some light on the apparent contradiction pointed to above. We proceed then to tell the story of the age-old war between capital and labor, as it has manifested itself in our past, after which are treated the development of labor legislation and the history of U.S. labor unions. Finally, we discuss the changing character of work itself. In this last section we can do little more than ask questions about the doubtless very great effect that automation and laborsaving devices in general will have on work in the last third of the present century. Bearing in mind the statement of President James Garfield, delivered during the presidential campaign in 1880 (it is remarkable, perhaps, for being so early), that is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, we must wonder

whether the first fight of civilization — the fight to get leisure — is not on the way to being won, for some if not for all. If so, then what of the second fight — to do well with our leisure once we have it? Has this battle even begun?

### 1. THE POSITION OF THE WORKER IN AMERICA

COLONIAL SUMPTUARY LEGISLATION — laws dealing with prices, wages, charity, relief, and like matters — had two main forces behind it, neither of which implied the conception of a permanent class of workmen or laborers essentially distinct from the rest of the community and basically opposed to it. These two forces were, first, the idea of a corporate commonwealth, or body politic, and, second, the fact of almost unlimited economic opportunity.

According to the idea of a corporate commonwealth, workers were conceived as individual members of a great whole, and not as a separate and opposed class. It is true that slaves and indentured servants were excluded from the corporate commonwealth; but it was of the essence of a contract of indenture that it would end sometime, whereupon the servant could take his place as a full-fledged member of society; and slaves, as members of the "primitive" Negro race, were considered to be in some sense beyond the pale of civilized society.

Regarding the force of economic opportunity, it is important to remember that although there were early colonial laws establishing wages and hours and conditions of work, they usually set upper limits (on wages) rather than lower ones. With an open country before them and almost everything still to be done, the colonists recognized — there was remarkable unanimity, even among laboring men — that the primary need was not to assist and support workers but rather to restrain them. In an era of acute labor shortage, the idea was

that the worker should receive no more than his fair share; there was in most people's minds no question, and in such circumstances little fear, that he would receive less than his share.

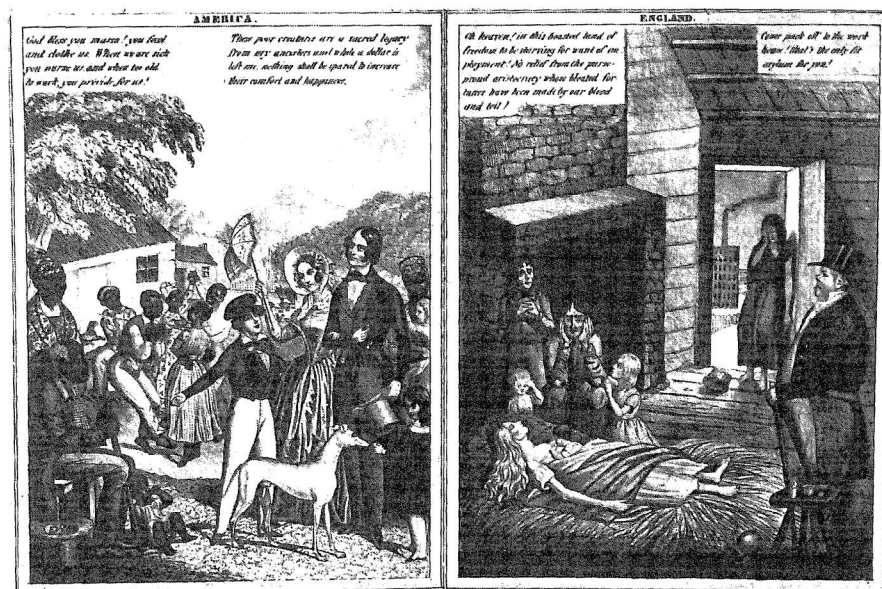
These notions were widely prevalent up to the Civil War. As Norman Ware points out in *The Industrial Worker 1840-1860* (1959), the early labor organizations were in many respects not at all like modern labor unions. Instead, they were social movements populated by skilled craftsmen and master workmen — small entrepreneurs, really, rather than laborers in the modern sense of the term — who were trying to preserve the status of men like themselves against the destructive effect, on the one hand, of a free market, and on the other hand, of the emergence of a working class as such. In the sense in which the Marxists use the term “proletariat” — that is, that class in society that only labors and that owns no part of the means or instruments of production — these early labor organizations were not proletarian. In fact, they were almost as sharply and deeply opposed to labor (in the modern sense) as they were to capital.

A case in point is the set of three resolutions — the first by the journeymen carpenters, the second by the master carpenters, and the third by the “gentlemen engaged in building” — in the Boston carpenters' strike of 1825. In that year some 600 house carpenters in the city of Boston struck for higher wages and for a ten-hour day, declaring that “it is impossible for a journeyman housewright and house carpenter to maintain a family at the present time with the wages which are now usually given to the journeymen house carpenters in this city.”

The master carpenters of course denied the last allegation, and they added furthermore that they could not afford to pay higher wages. But this was not, as it might be today, their principal argument. “We consider such a combination as unworthy of

that useful and industrious class of the community who are engaged in it,” they said of the strike; “that it is fraught with numerous and pernicious evils, not only as respects their employers but the public at large, and especially themselves; for,” the master carpenters went on to say, this being their main point, “*all journeymen of good character and of skill may expect very soon to become masters and, like us, the employers of others*; and by the measure which they are now inclined to adopt they will entail upon themselves the inconvenience to which they seem desirous that we should now be exposed!”

The master carpenters resolved, finally, “that we will make no alteration in the manner of employing journeymen . . . and that we will employ no man who persists in adhering to the project of which we complain,” and managed thereby to break the strike. Perhaps they could not have done so without the full support of the “gentlemen engaged in building,” but in fact the latter were entirely in concurrence with the master carpenters' principal argument. “We view with regret,” the builders declared, “the late proceedings of a portion of the journeymen carpenters of this city terminating in a combination to curtail the usual number of working hours.” They declared further that “these proceedings are a departure from the salutary and steady usages which have prevailed in this city, and all New England, from time immemorial, by an adherence to which *apprentices and journeymen, accustomed to industrious and temperate habits, have, in their turn, become thriving and respectable masters, and the great body of our mechanics have been enabled to acquire property and respectability, with a just weight and influence in society.*” And they added that giving in to the journeymen's demands would undoubtedly have an injurious effect on workers in other crafts and in other regions and might well reduce all workingmen to the “degraded state” that was customary in other countries. The master carpenters, indeed, had made the same



The Smithsonian Institution

An 1841 lithograph idealizing working conditions of American slaves

point, declaring that they were “compelled to consider it [the journeymen’s action] an evil of foreign growth, and one which, we hope and trust, will not take root in the favored soil of Massachusetts.”

This idea, then — that in the ordinary course of events an apprentice would become a journeyman, a journeyman a master, and the master in his turn would acquire property (*i.e.*, become a capitalist) — was the prevailing one in the years before the Civil War. It should be noted, however, that a proletariat *did* exist in this period. Many of the poor Irish who worked on the canals and later on the railroads were almost wholly without aspiration, and with good reason. The labor organizations were not proletarian, for they consisted for the most part of skilled workmen, and with skill and organization went hope. The Irish workers, and others like them, who belonged to no union and were not organized, were laborers in the lowest sense of the term and had nothing to look forward to.

It was to these people — not necessarily Irish — that Chancellor James Kent was referring in his diatribe against the removal of the property qualifications for the suffrage

in the New York Constitutional Convention of 1821. He pointed to the great increase in the city’s population since 1800 — the population had more than doubled in those twenty years — and declared that New York was “rapidly swelling into the unwieldy population, and with the burdensome pauperism, of a European metropolis. New York is destined to become the future London of America.” The implications, for Kent, were anything but desirable. In less than a century, he predicted, if universal suffrage were adopted, “the rabble” would control the state.

Universal suffrage *was* adopted, and New York *did* become “the London of America” — but the rest of Kent’s prediction did not come true. At the same time, others were making even more dire predictions about the direction in which American society was moving. In a memorable chapter of his *Democracy in America*, the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville described how, in his opinion, the very equality of which Americans boasted, and the plethora of economic opportunity, might have the result of producing a “new aristocracy” that would be more rigid and degrading to those it con-



trolled than the old landed aristocracy of Europe, and at the same time an absolutely fixed and permanent lower class that would be "debased" to a level never before seen in the world.

The argument went like this. It is acknowledged, Tocqueville said, that when a workman is engaged every day upon the same details, the whole commodity is produced "with greater ease, promptitude, and economy." Thus "when a workman is unceasingly and exclusively engaged in the fabrication of one thing, he ultimately does his work with singular dexterity; but, at the same time, he loses the general faculty of the work. He every day becomes more adroit and less industrious; so that it may be said of him that, in proportion as the workman improves, the man is degraded." The effects on the worker would be very great indeed — and on the industrialist, too; for "while the workman concentrates his faculties more and more upon the study of a single detail, the master surveys an extensive whole, and the mind of the latter is enlarged as that of the former is narrowed. In a short time, the one will require nothing but physical strength without intelligence; the other stands in need of science, and almost of genius, to insure success. This man resembles more and more the administrator of a vast empire — that man, a brute.

"The master and the workman have then here no similarity," Tocqueville went on to say, "and their difference increases every day." The reason was that "as the conditions of men constituting the nation become more and more equal, the demand of manufactured commodities becomes more general and extensive; and the cheapness which places these objects within the reach of slender fortunes becomes a great element of success. . . . Thus, in proportion as the mass of the nation turns to democracy, that particular class which is engaged in manufactures becomes more aristocratic."

But, Tocqueville declared, this kind of ar-

istocracy had no resemblance to the aristocracies of the past. For one thing, since these new rich would share no culture, indeed nothing except their interest in business, they would have "no mutual traditions or mutual hopes"; and furthermore there would be "no real bond between them and the poor. . . . The workman is generally dependent on the master, but not on any particular master. These two men meet in the factory but know not each other elsewhere; and, whilst they come into contact on one point, they stand very wide apart on all others."

"The territorial aristocracy of former ages," Tocqueville concluded, "was either bound by law or thought itself bound by usage to come to the relief of its servingmen and to succor their distresses. But the manufacturing aristocracy of our age first impoverishes and debases the men who serve it and then abandons them to be supported by the charity of the public. . . . I am of opinion that the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes is one of the harshest which has ever existed in the world."

Others besides Tocqueville had similar fears, for example William J. Ghent, who predicted in 1902 — roughly two generations after Tocqueville, and without any apparent awareness of the likenesses between their ideas — that an "economic feudalism" was the pattern of the future. It would be a benevolent despotism, Ghent declared, but nevertheless a tyranny as absolute as any that had existed in the past. Such predictions continued to be voiced in the years after World War I, when the notions that the assembly line debased the skill of the worker and turned him into a mere machine for production, and that the very industrial and productive techniques of which America was most proud were having the effect, or would have the effect in the future, of producing a greater social cleavage than the world had ever seen, became familiar ones.

Nor have such fears ceased to be voiced in our own time. Now it tends to be the Negro rather than the poor worker in general about whom apprehensions are expressed. It is said that Negroes are on the way to becoming a permanent lower class; and that the opportunity that is so widely dispersed throughout our society applies less and less to them. This may in fact be true. However, that such ideas are still being discussed may mean not only that what Tocqueville predicted more than a century ago has not come true but also that it will not.

Whether or not there is now developing a working class as such in America, there is no denying that the way of life of workers and of the poor has been very different from that of the rich and the leisured throughout much of our history.

When we speak of American labor we generally think of the free worker in a factory, mine, mill, or manufacturing plant. But other kinds of workers have also played a prominent role in the development of the nation that we know today. Not the least of these were the Negro slaves who, increasing in numbers until they reached almost 4 million by 1860, worked as field hands on Southern cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar plantations, and as house servants. The slave was the property of his owner, whose rights, while not absolute — in every Southern state in the nineteenth century the willful killing of a slave was murder — were almost unlimited. Thus the master could chain or harness his slave at will; he could punish him as he saw fit; and the fruits of the slave's labor belonged wholly to his owner.

Indentured servants were not slaves, but their condition often was not much better. Colonial America suffered from a chronic scarcity of labor, and thousands of impoverished Europeans, Englishmen particularly, were willing to sell their services for a term of years in exchange for passage to the New World. In 1748 Peter Kalm, the Swedish

naturalist, described their lot: some had fled from oppression or religious persecution, "but most of them are poor and have not money enough to pay their passage. . . . Therefore they agree with the captain that they will suffer themselves to be sold for a few years on their arrival." When their term was up, they received a new suit of clothes from their masters, "and some other things." The master was also obliged "to feed and clothe them during the years of their servitude." Such servants, observed Kalm, are "preferable to all others because they are not so [expensive]." Indeed, they received no wages whatever. Perhaps half the white people who emigrated to the colonies before 1750 came as indentured servants.

Convicts comprise another class of unpaid laborers. As far back as early colonial days, convicts worked, without wages, on public projects, such as roads. They still do. In "To Secure These Rights," a 1947 report prepared by President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, the authors described a common Southern practice. Sheriffs "free prisoners into the custody of local entrepreneurs who pay fines or post bonds. The prisoners then work for their 'benefactors' under threat of returning to jail. Sometimes the original charge against the prisoners is trumped up for the purpose of securing labor by this means. In still other instances, persons have been held in peonage [for many years] by sheer force or by threats of prosecution for debt."

Child labor, a common practice throughout the nineteenth century, presents, if possible, an even bleaker picture. Alexander Hamilton, in his Report on Manufactures (1791), declared approvingly that, "in general, women and children are rendered more useful, and the latter more early useful, by manufacturing establishments, than they would otherwise be. Of the number of persons employed in the cotton manufactories of Great Britain, it is computed that four-sevenths, nearly, are women and chil-

dren; of whom the greatest proportion are children, and many of them of a tender age." Thousands and thousands of American children, many no more than five or six years old, worked long hours in dismal, unsanitary sweatshops, mines, and factories. In 1832, two-fifths of the workers in New England factories were children; forty years later, 750,000 children between ten and fifteen labored throughout the country; this number steadily increased well into the present century.

In 1884 Henry Demarest Lloyd deplored the labor of children in coal mines. "One of the sights which this coal side of our civilization has to show," he wrote, "is the presence of herds of little children of all ages, from six years upward, at work in the coal breakers, toiling in dirt and air thick with carbon dust, from dawn to dark, of every day in the week except Sunday." Twenty years later, Mrs. Florence Kelley, an early leader of the movement to enforce child labor regulations, denounced the hypocrisy of American factory and mine owners who, she declared, claimed in public that there was no child labor in this country. "But they do employ children," Mrs. Kelley charged, "and children are working tonight. I know that children, six, seven, and eight years old, work this week in New York City tenements for reputable manufacturers. I have seen children in a cotton mill in Georgia whose employer told me they were ten years old, who were wretched dwarfs if they were really eight years old." And in 1915 Sarah N. Cleghorn denounced child labor in a famous little lyric:

The golf links lie so near the mill  
That almost every day  
The laboring children can look out  
And see the men at play.

In recent times, child labor has been sharply curtailed by state and federal laws. But it is still true that children work. In the so-called culture of poverty that has been

described by Oscar Lewis in his *La Vida* (1966), Puerto Rican and Negro children from the age of seven or eight are too often thrown on their own devices and forced to fend for themselves in a world that seems to them to have little or no interest in their welfare. Indeed, the contemporary discussion of the culture of poverty, and of the one-third — or one-fourth or one-fifth (the figure varies) — of the nation that is subjected to indignities both in body and soul and that lives almost without hope, is but the latest in a long series of such discourses in our country's history. The poor, said Jesus, would always be with us; and perhaps he was right.

Not only children worked under brutal and unsanitary working conditions. For anyone who works in, or visits, a model modern factory or business enterprise, it may seem hard to realize that only a few decades ago the average American worker labored in grim, inhuman surroundings such as those described by Upton Sinclair in his classic exposé *The Jungle* — a book that, it must be said, helped to change the frightful conditions it described.

"There were men who worked in the cooking rooms," Sinclair wrote in 1906, "in the midst of steam and sickening odors, by artificial light; in these rooms the germs of tuberculosis might live for two years, but the supply was renewed every hour. . . . There were those who worked in chilling rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism; the time limit that a man could work in the chilling rooms was said to be five years. There were the wool pluckers, whose hands went to pieces even sooner than the hands of the pickle men; for the pelts of the sheep had to be painted with acid to loosen the wool, and then the pluckers had to pull out this wool with their bare hands, till the acid had eaten their fingers off. . . . Some worked at the stamping machines, and it was very seldom that one could work long there at the pace that was set and not give out and forget



Courtesy, Vaughn Shoemaker, "Chicago's American"

"How not to stop him!"; 1964 cartoon by Shoemaker

himself and have a part of his hand chopped off. . . . Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer men, and those who served in the cooking rooms. These people could not be shown to the visitor, for the odor of a fertilizer man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards; and as for the other men who worked in tank rooms full of steam, and in some of which there were open vats near the level of the floor, their peculiar trouble was that they fell into the vats; and when they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting — sometimes they would be overlooked for days, till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham's Pure Leaf Lard!"

Living conditions were no better than working conditions for the average worker two generations ago. Overcrowded, filthy tenements in slums that were rife with vice and crime and disease were homes for most workingmen and their families. The laborer's life was described in works such as Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), pictured in books such as Margaret Bourke-

White's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), and deplored in recent studies such as Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), which reminded Americans that even in "the affluent society" there were many who could only dream of affluence and never hope to attain it.

In the twentieth century, however, generally higher wages in at least some industries have gradually helped the American worker to provide his family with commodities once thought to be luxuries but now widely conceded, at least in this country, to be necessities of life. For example, labor leader David McDonald observed in 1953 that "constant economic improvement" had occurred for steelworkers. "In 1936," he declared, "the average wage paid to the steelworkers was 66 cents an hour. Today it is \$2.06 an hour, and we have improved the lot in life of the members of our organization. . . . The cost of living has advanced 94 percent in that period, but the wages of the steelworker have advanced a little over 221 percent in the same period." [For a different treatment of some of the topics discussed in the above, see Chs. 9: EQUALITY and 18: STANDARD OF LIVING.]

## 2. THE WAR BETWEEN CAPITAL AND LABOR

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN an employer and his employees are usually peaceful, otherwise no work could be done and no product could be made. Indeed, labor peace is probably the norm today, although flurries occur from time to time. But it has not always been so; and only an optimist would claim that the age-old conflict between workers and those who hire them is a matter entirely of the past.

We have seen how writers like Tocqueville viewed the opposition between the men who owned the factories, railroads, mines, and mills, and the men who worked for them. The opposition was pointed to by many others as well. "We do not ride upon

the railroad," wrote Thoreau in *Walden* (1854); "it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you." The mythical Chicago bartender Mr. Dooley put it somewhat differently a half century later. "It's too bad th' goolden days has passed," his creator, Finley Peter Dunne, had him say. "Capital still pats labor on th' back, but on'y with an axe. Labor rayfuses to be threatened as a friend. It wants to be threatened as an inimy. It thinks it gets more that way. They ar-re still a happy fam'ly, but it's more like an English fam'ly. They don't speak."

The history of this conflict as it manifested itself around the turn of the century is not something for Americans to be proud of. Strikes had occurred well before the Civil War, and sometimes damage had resulted. In the 1860s and 1870s the Molly Maguires, a secret society composed mainly of Irish miners in the anthracite mines of Pennsylvania, practised terrorist methods: they murdered mine superintendents, wrecked trains, and dynamited borings. But the great battles between capital and labor did not begin until the 1880s and after, with the rise of the national unions. For a generation it seemed that open warfare had been declared.

Employers often maintained armed guards at their mills and factories and encouraged espionage by spies planted in the ranks of the workers. They demanded "yellow dog" contracts, which included a clause that pledged the signer never to join a union. Blacklists of union members were circulated among owners. Hired "goons" beat up labor leaders; other leaders were imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Organizers were attacked by every means, peaceable and legal or not.

In return, the workers struck — great,

bloody strikes following hard on the heels of one another. Between 1865 and 1881, labor staged fewer than 500 strikes in America; between 1881 and 1905 there were some 38,000 strikes, involving 7.5 million workers. The tale of three of the most famous — or infamous — will provide some picture of the violence, destruction, and pathos of these battles between laborers and owners.

In 1892, 800 skilled steelworkers in the Carnegie foundry at Homestead, Pennsylvania, were asked to take an 18 to 20 percent cut in pay, the frank intent of which was to break the union. Times were already hard — a depression was developing — and a bitter strike erupted, 3,000 unskilled workers joining their skilled fellow workers. A small army of Pinkerton detectives, equipped with Winchester rifles, was hired by management to smash and destroy the strikers' camp. Manning a homemade brass cannon, the strikers bombarded the 300 Pinkertons, and in the *melée* ten men lost their lives. Although the Pinkertons hoisted the white flag, 8,000 state militiamen, called in by the governor eventually crushed the rebellion — as it was called. After five months of violence, hunger, and death, the strike was over. More than 3,000 workers were fired, and those who remained had to accept the cut in wages.

The Homestead strike was eclipsed not long after by the even more terrible Pullman strike, which occurred in the model workers' town of Pullman, near Chicago, where sleeping cars were manufactured. During the depression of 1893, George M. Pullman, president of the company, laid off 3,000 of his 5,800 employees and cut the wages of the rest by 25 percent. When a committee of workers appealed to Pullman, he fired the leaders, declaring: "There is nothing to arbitrate."

In June 1894 a savage strike broke out. On the one side stood Pullman and the railroads of the country; on the other, the labor leader Eugene V. Debs and his pow-





Library of Congress

"Workingmen — look before you leap"; 1888

erful American Railway Union. When armed strikebreakers — "scabs" — were recruited by the company in Canada, railroad workers all over the country responded by refusing to couple Pullman cars to their trains. Tens of thousands of engineers, firemen, switchmen, and railroad laborers joined the strike. Throughout the Middle West and West, railroads were paralyzed. Gradually the strike spread to the Eastern and Southern states.

Alarmed, the General Managers Association of the railroads hastened to Pullman's support. "We cannot handle Debs," declared the chairman of the General Managers Committee. "We have got to wipe him out." Government aid was enlisted to this end. U.S. Attorney General Richard Olney, a former member of the board of several railroads and still a railway company attorney, charged that the U.S. mails were being stopped by the strike, and he appealed to the courts for injunctions. Federal judges or-

dered the strikers to desist from interfering with the operation of railroads on the grounds that the mails must go through. When the strikers refused to heed the injunctions, 2,000 federal troops were sent to Chicago by President Grover Cleveland to enforce them. More than 2,000 deputies, armed and paid by the railroads, joined the troops. Burning, destruction, and bloodshed ensued; strikers were murdered, some 2,000 railroad cars were wrecked, violence raged. In all, \$50 to \$100 million dollars in property was destroyed.

Debs was indicted and jailed for contempt of court, and the back of the strike was broken. However, a U.S. commission later investigated the Pullman strike and cleared Debs and his union of the charge of having provoked violence; the responsibility for the strike, the commission declared, belonged with the Pullman Company and the General Managers Association of railroads.

The Pullman and Homestead strikes were victories for capital and led to remarks like those of George F. Baer, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad. "The rights and interests of the laboring man will be protected and cared for," he declared in 1902, expressing the paternalism that was the order of the day, "not by the labor agitators but by the Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country, and upon the successful management of which so much depends." But such a claim could be countered by Debs's famous statement of principle, which inspired a generation of workingmen. "While there is a lower class, I am in it," he wrote. "While there is a criminal element, I am of it. While there is a soul in jail, I am not free."

Indeed, labor, though it had lost some battles, was still waging the war, and in 1912 occurred one of its greatest victories — one bought, however, at a high cost. The battlefield was the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts. The eight-week strike

of immigrant weavers was supported by the radical labor organization the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), commonly known as the Wobblies, whose most active organizer was colorful William D. ("Big Bill") Haywood, and whose marching songs were composed by the labor martyr Joe Hill. Hill produced what was perhaps the most famous rallying cry of the American labor movement; its ironic refrain goes like this:

You will eat, bye and bye,  
In that glorious land in the sky.  
Work and pray, live on hay,  
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

Lawrence was the largest textile center in the United States. Its woolen and cotton mills employed over 40,000 people, most of them unskilled workers. Early in January 1912, Polish women weavers in the Everett Cotton Mills discovered an unannounced wage cut in their pay envelopes; they streamed from the mills, shouting "Short pay! Short pay!" When workers in other mills received the same treatment, a general strike erupted. Violence flared; fire hoses and billyclubs were used by factory guards and police to break up picket lines; leaders were jailed.

Early in February, some 120 children of strikers were evacuated from Lawrence and sent to sympathetic labor families in New York City. On February 24 a group of 150 more children was ready to leave for Philadelphia. The Lawrence railroad station was surrounded by fifty policemen and two companies of militia. What happened next was described by a member of the Women's Committee of Philadelphia, testifying under oath before a congressional committee investigating the strike. "When the time approached to depart, the children, arranged in a long line, two by two in orderly procession, with their parents near at hand, were about to make their way to the train when the police . . . closed in on us with

their clubs, beating right and left with no thought of the children who then were in desperate danger of being trampled to death. The mothers and the children were thus hurled in a mass and bodily dragged to a military truck, and even then clubbed, irrespective of the cries of the panic-stricken women and children. We can scarcely find words with which to describe this display of brutality."

This was the turning point of the Lawrence strike. Vigorous protests from all over the country reached Congress, an investigation was ordered, and sympathy generally lay with the strikers. A month later, the American Woolen Company, a consolidation of thirty-four New England mills, acceded to all the strikers' demands. By the end of March the other textile companies had fallen into line and wages were raised instead of lowered for textile workers all over New England.

Labor violence did not end with the Lawrence strike, although bloodshed became less frequent as public opinion grew more and more sympathetic to workers' demands for higher pay and better working conditions. There was continued trouble in textile mills, especially in the South, all through the 1920s and 1930s; one strike, at Marion, North Carolina, formed the background for Erskine Caldwell's famous novel *God's Little Acre*. The steel industry also saw a series of bloody strikes, culminating in the "Memorial Day Massacre" of 1937, when a group of union demonstrators in front of the Republic Steel Company plant in Chicago was fired on by police, with four killed and more than eighty injured.

Less violent but perhaps even more troublesome to the owners were the notorious "sit-down" strikes of the 1930s. On December 31, 1936, a group of a few hundred workers seized the General Motors plants at Flint, Michigan, and "sat down" for forty-four days, resisting all attempts to remove them. Their action involved 40,000 workers directly and over a hundred thousand indi-

rectly, and although sit-down strikes were outlawed by the Supreme Court in 1939, they led to significant labor gains. Labor's position was that a worker had a right to his job and could therefore legally take possession of his tools and of his place of work in certain circumstances. The principle was a novel one that had important repercussions in later years.

Finally, no account of the war between capital and labor would be complete without mention of the bloody and frequent strikes of mine workers in many parts of the country, and of the fifty-year effort of the United Mine Workers (UMW) to organize the coal industry. Among the memorable episodes in this long and bitter chapter of labor history were the anthracite strike of 1902, the fifteen-month strike against the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company in 1913-1914, and the events in "Bloody Harlan" — Harlan County, Kentucky — in the 1930s.

The anthracite strike was a victory for labor, although the workers did not gain all that they hoped for. The strike was called by the UMW on May 12, 1902, and when the owners, led by George F. Baer, refused to deal with the strikers, President Theodore Roosevelt intervened. The strike was called off on October 21, and in the following March a commission appointed by the President awarded the miners a 10 percent wage increase. However, it refused union recognition.

The terrible strike against the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company began on September 23, 1913, when more than 9,000 miners, along with their families, took up their abode in tent colonies established by the UMW near the mine works. The strikers protested the "feudalistic" conditions under which they lived and worked, and demanded union recognition, an eight-hour day (they worked twelve), abolition of the company store system, and the enforcement of the minimum state mining security laws then in existence.



Courtesy, Ross A. Lewis, "The Milwaukee Journal"

"Sure, I'll work for both sides"; Lewis, 1934

The company was owned by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., although there is some doubt whether he actually was aware of the conditions; at any rate, he had not been in Colorado for ten years. The hired managers exerted virtually absolute control, and they were determined to break the strike. They turned the mine fields into an armed camp, and on April 20, 1914, a battle broke out at Ludlow, the largest of the tent colonies. No one is yet sure who fired the first shot, but there is no disputing the fact that the militia that had been called in by the managers made short work of Ludlow, firing on it with machine guns from the surrounding hills. The tents were set afire, and three strikers were captured and subsequently shot. Eleven children and two women who had sought refuge in a pit beneath the tents were found suffocated or burned to death.

The Ludlow Massacre and the consequent civil war — for so it seemed to many people — in Colorado shocked the nation and led to a wave of sympathy for the strikers. Nevertheless, Rockefeller refused to

surrender to the union, establishing instead a company union — that most hated of all devices for controlling labor strife — that continued to direct the fortunes of the Colorado mine workers for a generation.

The story of Harlan is almost untellable, for many of the men who could tell it are dead, and the survivors would probably not be believed. However, the report of a Senate subcommittee headed by Robert M. La Follette, Jr., that was published in December 1937 revealed some of the antilabor techniques used in this and other coal-mining districts in Kentucky, West Virginia, and elsewhere. These included blacklists, espionage, vigilante groups to beat up and sometimes kill labor organizers, organized services for recruiting strikebreakers, private armed forces and — in the case of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company and the Republic Steel Corporation — large private arsenals of weapons. The workers did not come out very well in Harlan, although conditions are better there now than they were in the 1930s, but at least the troubles produced one of the greatest of all the songs on the labor movement.

My daddy was a miner  
And I'm a miner's son,  
And I'll stick with the union  
Till ev'ry battle's won.

Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on?  
Which side are you on, boys?  
Which side are you on?

[For further discussion of some of the matters treated here, see Chs. 6: DOMESTIC TRANQUILLITY and 16: CORPORATION.]

### 3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF LABOR LEGISLATION

SINCE THE 1880s, law has played an increasingly prominent role in the history of

American labor. Legislation, in the form of statutes, administrative orders, and decisions in state and federal courts, is concerned with regulating conditions of labor and relations between employers and employees.

In the United States, labor laws have always been passed as remedies for specific evils perpetrated either by management or unions. Although after enactment almost all important labor legislation has been challenged in the courts, and although many labor laws have for one reason or another been declared unconstitutional — usually as violations of personal liberty or of due process — no leading measure, once enacted and sustained by the courts, has ever been repealed in toto. The result has been a fairly steady advance over the last hundred years or so in the direction of greater safeguards for workingmen.

The first labor legislation in the modern sense of the term involved child labor, but earlier laws had dealt with the worker's right to organize and to strike. In 1835, a New York court, in the case of *People v. Fisher*, declared both the organization of unions and strikes to be criminal conspiracies, "injurious . . . to the people at large." Seven years later, in 1842, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw of the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in *Commonwealth v. Hunt* that trade unions were lawful, and this decision was soon accepted by other state courts. However, his additional ruling that strikes could be legally undertaken, providing workers acted "by fair or honorable and lawful means," was not accepted; and the New York decision and others like it prevailed throughout most of the nineteenth century. Many court decisions and actions were markedly hostile to labor. Long after the Civil War, federal as well as state courts were still holding that it was an actionable civil wrong for labor unions to coerce nonmembers into joining their organizations and to extend union organizing throughout an entire industry.

In the 1880s the courts, maintaining that

union activities threatened harm to the property of employers, began the practice of issuing injunctions forbidding organizational drives. Injunctions became a potent weapon in the hands of the great capitalists. An injunction, a legal order issued by a judge, does not require the verdict of a jury (juries tended to have a majority of workingmen); and if one disobeys an injunction he can be declared in contempt of court, again without being tried or convicted by a jury. Widespread use of injunctions around 1900 seemed on the point of stifling union growth.

However, the celebrated jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., challenged the basis of antilabor injunctions in an opinion that ultimately came to be accepted by most American courts. Union organization, Holmes declared, was not unlawful because no existing legislation made it unlawful. Strikes, picketing, and closed union shops were not opposed to the common law, even if they caused "harm" to employers or other workers. Such union activities, he asserted, were legal if they were directed to the pursuit of self-interest and gain.

A severe blow to unions had been struck in 1908 when the Supreme Court ruled that the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890) — which was aimed primarily at concentrations of business power and which banned all "combinations in restraint of trade or commerce" — applied also to organized labor. However, in 1914, Congress passed the Clayton Antitrust Act, which declared "that the labor of a human being is not a commodity or article of commerce." Nothing in the antitrust laws, the Act went on to say, "shall be construed to forbid the existence and operation of labor . . . organizations, instituted for the purposes of mutual help . . . or to forbid or restrain individual members of such organizations from lawfully carrying out the legitimate objects thereof." This was a great victory for labor, but the most important implication of the law

was vitiated when, in 1921, the Supreme Court ruled that the Clayton Act applied only to disputes between recognized unions and management; it did not apply, said the Court, in the area where the unions needed it most — namely, where unions, by exerting economic pressure, tried to make anti-union employers recognize and deal with them.

This situation was radically altered in 1932 when Congress passed the Norris-LaGuardia Anti-Injunction Act, a milestone in the history of federal labor legislation. The law made it possible for the first time for unions to exert organizational pressures against employers legally; in particular, it allowed unions to try to organize companies that did not recognize any union or that did not employ any union members. Also as a result of this Act, the power of the courts to issue injunctions and to restrain strikes, legal boycotts, and peaceful picketing was restricted; and "yellow dog" contracts were outlawed.

Federal legislation continued to favor labor throughout the 1930s. In 1935 Congress passed the influential National Labor Relations Act, commonly known as the Wagner Act, named for its sponsor, Senator Robert Wagner of New York. This Act was designed to free interstate commerce from the disrupting and often crippling effects of strikes; it attempted to do so by eliminating the prime cause of strikes — namely, the prohibitive practices of employers against employees. The Act declared: "The denial by employers of the right of employees to organize and the refusal by employers to accept the procedure of collective bargaining lead to strikes and other forms of industrial strife or unrest." Consequently, the Act guaranteed employees "the right to self-organization . . . to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection."



Unfair practices on the part of employers that were declared illegal by the Wagner Act included: (1) interference with attempts by employees to form and join unions; (2) domination of or interference with "the formation or administration of any labor organization," or the creation by management of any dependent or "company" union; (3) discrimination against a worker because of union affiliation; (4) refusal to bargain in good faith with the representatives of duly constituted unions; (5) retaliation against workers because they have "filed charges or given testimony under this Act."

The Act also established an independent committee, originally consisting of three members, called the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB was authorized to investigate union complaints, issue cease and desist orders against unfair practices in labor relations, safeguard the right of labor to bargain collectively, and arbitrate labor troubles. From the beginning, the board had phenomenal success in the peaceful settlement of disputes between labor and management, although it had to endure continuous attacks from businessmen and corporation executives, as well as from the American Federation of Labor, which charged discrimination in favor of its rival, the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

The Wagner Act forbade unfair employer practices; in 1947 came the turn of the unions, whose activities were severely regulated by the Labor Management Relations Act, commonly known as the Taft-Hartley Act, once more for its sponsors Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio and Representative Fred A. Hartley, Jr., of New Jersey. Among the important provisions of this law were that it: (1) permitted employers to sue unions for breaking contracts; (2) prohibited union contributions to political campaigns; (3) prohibited secondary or labor boycotts, in which employees put pressure on their employers not to do business with other, nonunion employers; (4) required



Courtesy, Hugh Hutton, "The Inquirer," Philadelphia, 1936

"No, Franklin, it's not you — it's the lollipop"

that unions give sixty days' notice before inaugurating a strike; and (5) forbade the "closed shop" in certain circumstances. The last provision was particularly onerous to labor leaders. John L. Lewis complained that "every day, I have a matutinal indisposition that emanates from the nauseous effluvia of that oppressive slave statute." Vigorous attempts were made throughout the 1960s to change at least this one provision of the law.

Another law restricting unfair or corrupt union activity was the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act, commonly known as the Landrum-Griffith Act (1959). This Act contained important strictures on the previously unchecked power of union officials over the internal affairs (including the funds) of their unions, as well as their power over the rank and file through the suppression of democratic processes. This law was one result of the extensive investigation of labor leaders Dave Beck and James Hoffa and of their Teamsters' Union.

Legislation regulating child labor devel-



Library of Congress

"The Real Struggle"; Keppler cartoon, "Puck," 1886

oped somewhat earlier. Vigorous campaigns to abolish the widespread employment of children in factories, mines, and other industries gained momentum around the turn of the century. In 1904 the National Child Labor Committee was organized and was chartered by Congress three years later. Committee investigations of the conditions in various industries led to the passage of state and federal laws. Many of these laws were at first ignored by employers; nor were serious attempts made to enforce them. Indeed it was not until 1938, with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act, that child labor even began to diminish in this country. This federal law established a minimum age of fourteen for employment outside of school hours in businesses engaging in interstate commerce; and eighteen for any work judged hazardous by the secretary of labor.

#### 4. LABOR UNIONS: HISTORY AND EMERGING OBJECTIVES

LABOR UNIONS OR GUILDS have existed in America since the early days of the republic. The first unions were local, formed by craftsmen in industries like shoemaking, printing, and weaving. During the 1820s there appeared labor organizations large enough to draw members from an entire city. The objectives of these early craft unions were the right to receive a fair wage and to organize, and to strike and boycott if necessary.

The earliest national trade unions, coming into existence a few years later, were short-lived. The National Trades' Union, formed in 1834 by amalgamating a number of local labor organizations, expired in the depression of 1837; and the National Labor Union, formed some twenty years later, with the objectives of an eight-hour day, producers' cooperatives, and political action in behalf of workingmen, dissolved in 1872. Not until the 1880s did unions emerge as an important force on the national scene.

The first great national union was the Knights of Labor, originally organized in 1869 as a secret society among the garment cutters of Philadelphia. Under the leadership of Terence V. Powderly, the ranks of the Knights swelled to almost 1 million members by 1886. In the preamble to its constitution of 1878, its declared aims were "one big union," which would "bring within the folds of organization every department of productive industry"; "industrial democracy," whereby men and women, white and Negro, skilled and unskilled workers would be welcome to membership; and the substitution of arbitration for strikes, "whenever and wherever employers and employees are willing to meet on equitable grounds."

Although the Knights exerted considerable influence, the union was dealt a death blow by the infamous Haymarket riot. A

crowd of union members had gathered in Chicago's Haymarket Square on May 4, 1886, to protest the firing by police on pickets at the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company the night before. Samuel Fielden, a teamster, declared to the watchful police that "we are peaceable," a statement that would have gone unremembered except that someone threw a bomb. The bomb and the subsequent riot killed seven and wounded seventy policemen, who regrouped and charged the workers, firing as they came. Many workers were killed and wounded. On November 11, 1887, four men were hanged for having thrown the bomb, although no evidence was found that they were guilty. The Knights fell into disrepute and soon expired as an effective labor force.

Hard on the heels of the demise of the Knights of Labor came the American Federation of Labor, organized in 1886 and dedicated to the ideal of organizing workers into craft unions and of fighting for limited but attainable economic goals, as distinguished from the ideal of "one big union" that had been promoted by the Knights. Samuel Gompers became the first president of the AF of L, and by 1900 the union was the spokesman for the labor movement as a whole. Eventually, almost all unions became affiliated with the AF of L — with the notable exception of the brotherhoods of locomotive engineers, firemen, trainmen, and conductors.

The AF of L endured its greatest crisis during the 1930s, when the workers in mass-production industries, such as automobiles and steel, the majority of whom had never belonged to any union, began to form industry-wide labor organizations. The AF of L insisted that these new unions transform themselves into craft unions and join the parent body. But when the AF of L convention in 1935 defeated a resolution to allow workers in mass-production industries to organize on an industrial union basis,

eight major unions left the AF of L and formed the rival Congress of Industrial Organizations. Led by John L. Lewis, the CIO staged militant, often violent, and widely successful drives to organize all of the workers in several great U.S. industries — automobiles, steel, rubber, and electrical products.

The bitter rivalry between the two organizations ended in 1955 when they merged to form the AFL-CIO. Under the leadership of its first president, George Meany, the merged organization stated as a primary goal the "protection" of the whole labor movement "from any and all corrupt influences." Among other actions, six member unions were investigated; in 1956 and 1957, three, including the powerful Teamsters' Union, were expelled.

The Knights of Labor, like the National Labor Union, had favored the establishment of cooperative workshops, in which workers would be paid not only in wages but also by sharing in the profits of the firm or factory. In fact, all of the early American labor organizations refused to accept the existence of a permanent working class; their programs were based on the assumption that no man need be a worker all his life, and that ways could, and should, be found by which workers could escape the status of employees and become at least incipient capitalists. The first American labor organization to recognize the possibility of a permanent or semipermanent working class was the AF of L, which was never interested in cooperative workshops. Instead, it put all of its emphasis on improving the conditions of the worker as such — on higher wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions — and relied on collective bargaining and on the strike as the means to achieve its goal. The same may be said of the CIO in its early years; and it is probably equally true of the combined AFL-CIO.

The point is an important one. It ex-



Library of Congress

"Labor Day amenities"; Elderman, 1936

plains, for example, why the Knights of Labor, at least in theory, did not believe in strikes; it did not so much see itself in opposition to the capitalist as in league with him in a cooperative effort to improve conditions among all Americans, not just workers. The change also reflected the influence, which became powerful after 1900, of radicals — socialists, Communists, and to some extent, anarchists — who had often been trained in Europe or had at least adopted European styles of thinking about labor problems and ideals.

According to orthodox Marxist doctrine, the very existence of a working class is an inevitable result of the rise of capitalism; and the conflict between the two great classes — the industrial proletariat, on the one hand, and capitalists, on the other hand — is also economically determined. It is easy to see how the acceptance of such ideas could have produced a radical alteration in the orientation of the American labor movement. It is of course not being

suggested that the AF of L is or ever was controlled by Communists — the union has consistently been one of the more conservative in the country — but it is nevertheless true that Marxist habits of thought influenced a great number of labor leaders as well as historians and sociologists in the years before World War I.

This influence was most evident, perhaps, in the organization known as the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW was established in 1905 as a protest against the craft union policy of the AF of L, and in general against its nonrevolutionary program. "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common," declared the preamble to the constitution of the IWW adopted at Chicago in June 1905. "Between the two a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system." Led by "Big Bill" Haywood, the IWW undertook extensive organizing drives among unskilled and migratory workers in the Midwest and West, and for a time wielded considerable power in the labor movement. However, as a result of vigilante action and federal prosecutions, mainly in the state of Washington in 1918-1920, the influence of the Wobblies waned, and the organization disbanded in 1925.

It is probably fair to say that its days were numbered in any event. From time to time, and especially in the period before World War I and during the Great Depression of the 1930s, political radicals have attained important posts in American unions, and have to some extent brought about shifts in their policies toward the political left. But for the most part the American labor movement has not been leftist in orientation — to the dismay of European Communists, who have often been disturbed by the fact that American workingmen on the whole have been unsusceptible to socialist and Communist doctrines.



The relations between labor and management have altered profoundly since the early nineteenth century, when a man such as Theophilus Fisk could describe the bitter antagonism between workers and the “apostles of Mammon” in terms of “a continual warfare of *honesty* against *fraud*, *weakness* against *power*, *justice* against *oppression*,” and since the era of the great and bloody strikes. It is true that as late as 1932 the AF of L could declare that “a struggle is going on in all the nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed, a struggle between the capitalist and labor, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit.” But attitudes have changed much in recent years.

Owing partly to the federal legislation that we have described — the Wagner and Taft-Hartley acts, for example — and partly to increasing affluence, the struggle between labor and capital has become less and less a matter of the strike and the picket line and increasingly a matter of collective bargaining and arbitration, where representatives from labor and management meet around a conference table and iron out their differences. “Thirty years ago,” a union official remarked in 1958 (according to Leon Litwack), “the important thing was for a union leader to know how to organize economic strength. Organize. Strike. Settle. That was labor-management relations. But today, with laws and labor boards, almost all of our problems are settled at the conference table through negotiations. This requires new skills, a different kind of intelligence. Now, it is diplomacy instead of the big stick.”

Indeed, it has been seen for some time that labor and management have much in common. Half a century ago, the possibility of a *détente* was feared rather than welcomed; as Kin Hubbard had his character



Courtesy, Edward Kuekes, Cleveland "Plain Dealer"

"The mating season"; Kuekes cartoon, 1965

Abe Martin say, "If capital an' labor ever do git t'gether it's good night fer th' rest of us." Recently, however, feeling has gone all the other way. In 1952 labor leader Philip Murray asserted that unions and owners must learn how to attain "the mutually desirable objective of guaranteed annual wages without strife, dispute, and strike" by getting together "for joint discussion, joint planning, and joint adoption of a system of guaranteed annual wages through the collective bargaining system." And in 1951 Daniel Bell described the common objectives of labor and management and the *modus vivendi* the two seem to have reached in our time. Many unions, he wrote, "have become industry-minded, and even corporate-minded, and have begun to think in terms not only of the welfare of the workers but of the industry as a whole."

Does this mean that the antagonism, the "essential opposition," between labor and capital has come to an end? Or, at the very least, that we can look forward to a cessa-



tion of hostilities within this century? Probably not. In the first place, events occur from time to time that remind us that the old conflict is still a vital one. A case in point is the transit workers strike that erupted in New York City on January 1, 1966, paralyzing the city and causing economic distress to workers and employers alike. The strike was marked by rhetoric, from both sides, of the classic type; charges flew back and forth, union leaders were thrown in jail, and the city was accused of "union-busting."

In the second place — and more important — a true and lasting peace between labor and capital, between workingmen and their employers, might only be bought at the cost of a rigidly stratified social system. *If* a group of Americans would finally concede that they constituted a permanent working class, and *if* they would also concede that another group constituted a permanent employing class, then, with the legislatures, the courts, and public opinion supporting the agreement, they might arrive at compromises beneficial to both — a guaranteed annual wage, a guaranteed job (in the face of automation), a six-hour day and a four-day week, even more generous "fringe benefits" than are now enjoyed, and so forth and so on. (Such measures would be beneficial to the employers because they would guarantee, in return for the other guarantees, a continuing and loyal labor force.)

However, unless the American character changes very much and very quickly in the next few years, it seems unlikely that any such concessions will be made, at least in the near future. American workers, at mid-twentieth century, like their forebears of a century before, did not think of themselves as workers; at any rate, they dreamed of becoming something else. They desired, as they had desired in the past, to become entrepreneurs, to go into business for themselves, to be independent and free. Thus it continues to be true that many Americans

do not want to join a union — any union — because, in their view, to do so would have the effect of fixing them in the status of worker and limiting their dreams of future achievement. Indeed, this was one of the most important obstacles to the organization of the so-called white-collar workers in the 1960s. Many secretaries, salesclerks, and the like refused to join a union even when they were shown that their wages would go up and their working conditions would improve. In their judgment it was better to draw low wages than to look forward to being a permanent underling — they aspired to a condition in which low wages for secretaries would be irrelevant to them because they would no longer be secretaries.

However, it is also true that the organization of hitherto nonunion groups, such as public school teachers, was a significant development in this period. If teachers could be organized, then perhaps anyone could.

## 5. WORK IN AMERICA

ATTITUDES TOWARD the worker and work itself have varied greatly in our tradition. On the one hand, the laborer has been lauded as the embodiment of fundamental American virtues. Representative John Cramer, for example, speaking in opposition to Chancellor Kent at the 1821 New York Constitutional Convention, praised the worker because "more integrity and more patriotism are generally found in the laboring class of the community than in the higher orders. These are the men who add to the substantial wealth of the nation in peace. These are the men who constitute your defense in war." Eugene V. Debs's commendation was even more enthusiastic. "The workers are the saviors of society," he asserted in 1905, "the redeemers of the race." Theodore H. White, in *Fire in the Ashes* (1953), a report on the revival of Europe after World War II, pointed out that in a certain sense Ger-



Courtesy, Bruce Shanks, "The Buffalo Evening News"

"The Thinker"; Pulitzer prize cartoon, 1957

many was indestructible. "The wreckage of Germany . . . was the wreckage of buildings and stone," he said. "But it was impossible to destroy the skills in the fingers of German workmen." In like manner, he declared, "if all American industry were leveled to the ground, America would still be the greatest industrial nation on earth because of her social capital."

Others too, have lauded work and the American worker. "The sum of wisdom is, that the time is never lost that is devoted to work," Emerson wrote in "Success," one of his last essays. "I don't pity any man who does hard work worth doing," declared Theodore Roosevelt in 1902 — he was a hard worker himself. "I admire him. I pity the creature who doesn't work, at whichever end of the social scale he may regard himself as being."

In an editorial in the *New York Times*, June 14, 1940, R. L. Duffus wrote that America is "men at work. It is the storm-tossed fishermen coming into Gloucester and Providence and Astoria. It is the farmer riding his great machine in the dust of harvest, the dairyman going to the barn before

sunrise, the lineman mending the broken wire, the miner drilling for the blast. It is the servants of fire in the murky splendor of Pittsburgh . . . the trucks rumbling through the night . . . the pilot in the clouds, the riveter running along the beam a hundred feet in air. It is the clerk in the office, the housewife doing the dishes and sending the children off to school. It is the teacher, doctor, and parson tending and helping, body and soul, for small reward. . . . It is a great number of people on pilgrimage, common and ordinary people, charged with the usual human failings, yet filled with such a hope as never caught the imaginations and the hearts of any nation on earth before."

Perhaps Walt Whitman was making the same point in short poems such as his famous epigraph for *Leaves of Grass*, "I Hear America Singing."

I hear America singing, the varied  
carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing  
his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures  
his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready  
for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to  
him in his boat, the deck-hand sing-  
ing on the steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on  
his bench, the hatter singing as  
he stands,  
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's  
on his way in the morning, or at  
noon intermission or at sundown,  
The delicious singing of the mother,  
or of the young wife at work, or of  
the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or  
her and to none else,  
The day what belongs to the day —  
at night the party of young fellows,  
robust, friendly,  
Singing with open mouths their strong  
melodious songs.

Others, of course, have viewed both work and workers in a less rosy light. Not only are workers prey to "tyranny, socialism, and violent anarchism, with their glittering utopias," educator Thomas Davidson charged in 1898, but the "political boss, with his lying promises and filthy bribes, finds many of them an easy prey." Clarence Darrow, who was, as he himself declared, "a friend of the workingman," added with typical bitterness that he "would rather be his friend than be one." There is also a note of admittedly rather affectionate raillery that accompanies many American discussions of work. "Only horses work," according to an American proverb reported by H. L. Mencken — "and they turn their backs on it." And the rollicking verses of "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" celebrate even the release from work produced by necessity.

Oh, why don't you work  
Like other men do?  
How the hell can I work  
When there's no work to do?

Hallelujah, I'm a bum.  
Hallelujah, bum again.  
Hallelujah, give us a handout  
To revive us again.

Emerson, writing in 1849, gave voice to a common American attitude. "When I go into my garden with a spade and dig a bed," he said, "I feel such an exhilaration and health that I discover I have been defrauding myself all this time in letting others do for me what I should have done with my own hands." Henry Ford expressed similar views more than half a century later. "Thinking men know," he declared, "that work is the salvation of the race, morally, physically, socially. Work does more than get us our living; it gets us our life." And the recent success of "do-it-yourself" books — actually they are not a

phenomenon confined to our own time — results not only from economic considerations. It is true enough that labor is expensive, and that the householder can often effect a repair more cheaply, if not quite so well, as the professional. But it is also true that most Americans enjoy doing things with their hands — perhaps it is a result of our frontier heritage — and they point to their creations with pride all out of keeping with the excellence inherent in them.

These encomiums, however, have reference to productive work, needed work, work the fruit of which is manifestly of some use and the cause of pride. There is another kind of work, and Americans have been saying for over a century that it is degrading and not the sort of thing that a man should do. It was this kind of work that Hawthorne had in mind when he declared in 1841 that "labor is the curse of the world, and nobody can meddle with it without becoming proportionately brutified." Thoreau spoke out with equal force twenty years later against this kind of work. "Most men would feel insulted," he wrote, "if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall; and then throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages. But many are no more worthily employed now."

In other words, work that is effort expended for an immediate and personal goal is ennobling. In his poem "Mowing," Robert Frost put it beautifully. "The fact," he wrote, "is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Labor done for oneself, for one's own gain and benefit, is indeed sweet, as most men and women will agree. But labor done *merely* for others, *merely* for wages, is not sweet. The long, hard labor of the miner, of the farmer, of the industrial worker, with no end in view other than the enrichment of the owner or the mortgage holder, is far from "sweet." It is that kind of work that, in Hawthorne's view, is "brutifying."

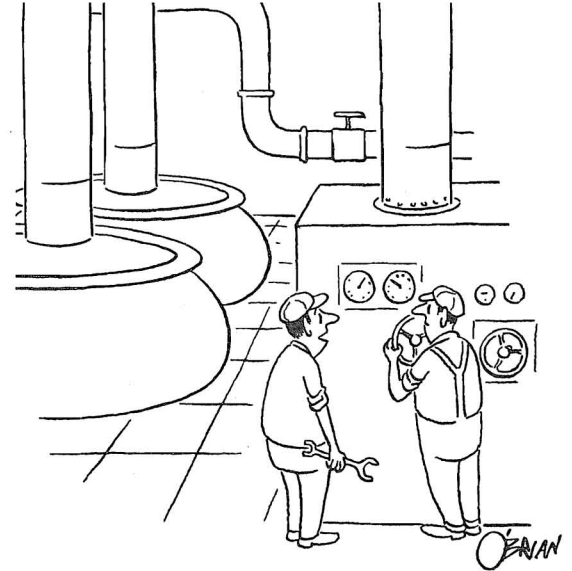
It is that kind of work to which Merle Travis referred in his hit song, "Sixteen Tons" (1947).

Now some people say a man's made out  
of mud,  
But a poor man's made out of muscle  
and blood,  
Muscle and blood, skin and bone,  
A mind that's weak and a back that's  
strong.  
You load Sixteen tons, and what do  
you get?  
You get another day older and deeper  
in debt,  
Saint Peter, don't you call me 'cause I  
can't go,  
I owe my soul to the company store.

A hundred years ago the average American worker worked six days a week and twelve hours a day — and many were no more worthily employed than Thoreau's man who threw stones over a wall only to throw them back again. It is one measure of the great success of the labor movement in the United States that the average worker of today works forty hours less a week, and that the two-day weekend is not only universally accepted but is also on the way to turning into three. What seemed to be an all but utopian dream of the National Labor Union in 1866 —

Eight hours for work,  
Eight hours for sleep,  
Eight hours for what you will —

has become a reality for most people and indeed is now the base from which labor unions are beginning to negotiate for even more limitations on the hours of labor. By the end of the present century the average American worker will have cause to complain if he is forced to labor for more than three or three and a half days a week, and



"Sorry — No Budget"; Courtesy, "The Wall Street Journal"  
"I'm new here. What are we making?"

for more than five or six hours a day. And he will demand, and probably receive, even more pay than he now receives for a forty-hour workweek.

However, it is in the phrase "eight hours for what you will" that the rub lies. There are 168 hours in every week, and if one works only 30 and sleeps 56, that leaves 82 hours in which to do what one wills. The question is, what will one do with these hours, gained in the blood and sweat and toil of workers and of union organizers and of theoreticians of politics and economics and of the technologists who really should not come last in the list because they make it all possible? What of that last fight of civilization, as President Garfield called it in 1880 — the good use, and not the misuse, of the free time that is the most precious fruit of our vaunted technological and industrial ingenuity? Are there any signs that free time is better used now than most men work but 40 hours a week rather than the 72 that used to be the norm?

There are some signs, of course. The father who comes home long before dark, his day's work done, can go with his son to the

Little League field or play catch in the backyard, which is more and more commonly a feature even of the houses of members of "the working class." The laborer can play golf on Saturday instead of working in the mine or the mill, and he can pile the whole family in the automobile and set off to see the country during his annual two-week or maybe even three-week vacation. There is plenty of money around nowadays — for the fortunate three-quarters or two-thirds, at least — and there is plenty of time. But most men cannot make a life out of playing golf. Such activities are basically recreational — that is, they help the worker to *re-create* himself, to restore himself after labor. As the time spent in labor decreases, the need for re-creation also decreases — and a new kind of fatigue sets in, the fatigue of boredom, of frustration, of the more or less unconscious recognition of a life being wasted and of days, weeks, and years being lost.

It is hard to say what is, or what should be, the answer to the problem of leisure — for it seems to grow more and more just that, a problem. It is easy enough to urge wider participation in adult education, the

spending of more money for educational television, and the adoption of all kinds of "cultural" programs by the state and federal governments for the benefit of citizens. It is also too easy, perhaps, to laud the recent very great increase in the sale of books and of "classical" phonograph records, the swelling audiences at "art theaters" and symphonic halls, and the increased attendance at the country's leading museums. The population as a whole is growing, too, and vast numbers of Americans have not yet learned to go to an art exhibit on a Saturday rather than play golf.

In fact, the problem of leisure has not yet been solved, and there is really no solution in sight. Perhaps the problem is only soluble by workers themselves — which in the end includes all of us, here in this America where everyone works. We may hope, however, that it is solved sometime; for the exhaustion that accompanies and follows boredom is even more destructive than the exhaustion that accompanies and follows too long, and too hard, work. [For a different treatment of some of the topics discussed here, see Ch. 1: NATIONAL CHARACTER.]