

The History of Unions in the US

Class 2:

1900-1945

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Overture

I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2UF8yw89yE>

The IWW – Wobblies

- Founded in Chicago in 1905, out of a group of socialists, anarchists and radical trade union members
- Among its founding members were Bill Haywood and Joe Hill. (more about both later!)



The IWW – Wobblies

Goal was one big union of all workers rather than small unions dedicated to a particular craft



Wobblies

- Membership was open to all – blacks, women, etc.
- Many members were immigrants, particularly Finns (more about the most famous Finn, Joe Hill, later)
- Also had a strong social justice orientation, in addition to labor



Wobblies

- Split in leadership between those who favored political action, working with socialists.
- The other faction, led by Big Bill Haywood, favored direct action, such as strikes.



Wobblies

- The IWW was involved in conflicts with most other labor organizations, to include the AFL, UMW, and many others.
- They opposed US entry into WWI, and were persecuted, along with many other opponents of the war.
- The Palmer Raids, immediately after WWI, attacking radical organizations, further weakened the IWW

Wobblies

- By the 1930's membership, which had once been over 25,000, had decreased significantly
- The IWW still exists today – they took part in the Wisconsin protests, but have little direct influence
- They still serve as an inspiration to union members looking to unite all working people in “One Big Union.”

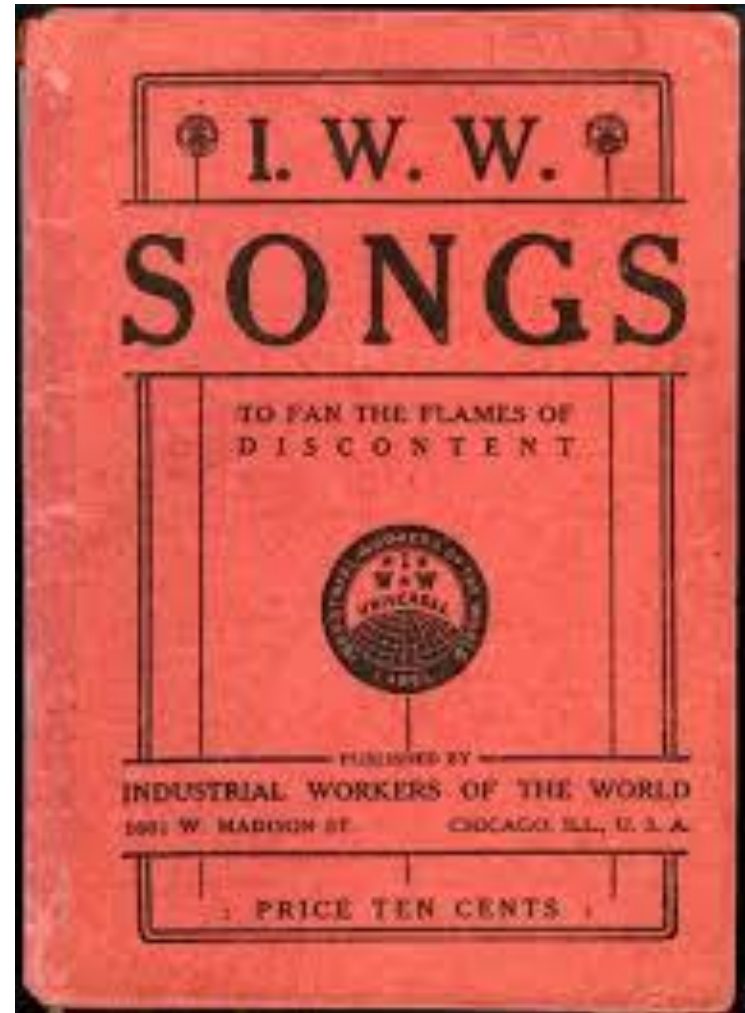
Joe Hill

- After Bill Haywood, the most famous Wobbly was Joe Hill
- Born Joel Haaglund, he was one of the many Finn immigrants in the IWW.
- Besides being a great organizer, he was famous for his music



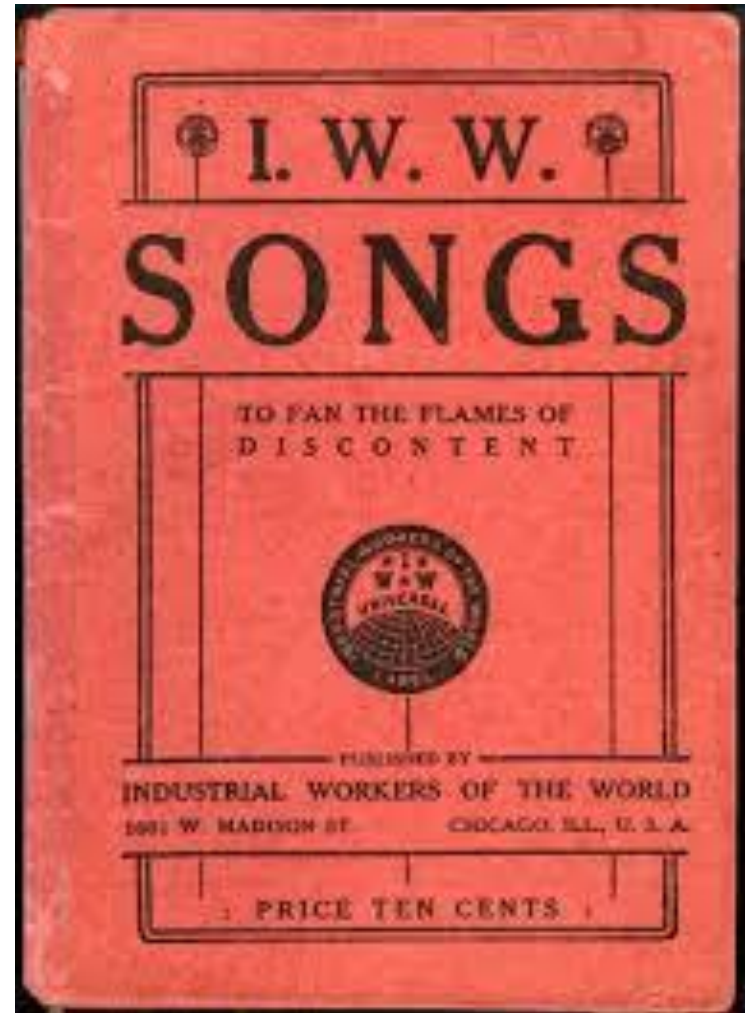
Joe Hill

He was the author of most of the songs in *The Little Red Songbook*.



Joe Hill

- In the song *The Preacher and the Slave*, he coined the phrase “you will have pie in the sky when you die.”
- Many of the songs were parodies – this was of *In the sweet, bye and bye*.



Joe Hill

- In January 1914, a storekeeper and his son were killed.
- That night, Joe Hill was treated for a bullet wound to the left lung
- Hill was arrested on suspicion of murder, and refused to explain the origin of the wound

Joe Hill

- Hill was found guilty of murder and sentenced to execution.
- He consistently refused to explain his actions, and despite nationwide protests, the conviction and sentence stood
- Recent evidence has shown Hill was probably innocent of the murder, and received the gunshot wound from a romantic rival

Joe Hill

- It may also be that Hill saw himself more valuable as a martyr.
- In his last letter to Big Bill Haywood, Hill wrote:

Goodbye Bill. I die like a true blue rebel. Don't waste any time in mourning. Organize... Could you arrange to have my body hauled to the state line to be buried? I don't want to be found dead in Utah.

Joe Hill

- His last words were first turned into a poem by Alfred Hayes in 1930, and then set to music by Earl Robeson in 1936
- *The Ballad of Joe Hill* has been performed by Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez (at Woodstock) and Bruce Springsteen, among others
- Probably fitting that a person who thought that you could reach people through music is now remembered mostly as a song.

Mother Jones

- Born in 1837 in Ireland and moved first to Canada as a teenager and then to the US.
- Had a tragic early life:
 - Her husband and four children died of yellow fever in 1867
 - Her dressmaking shop burned in the Great Fire in Chicago in 1871.



Mother Jones

- She then joined the Knights of Labor (remember them?) and soon became associated with the United Mine Workers (UMW) where she organized for the rest of her life
- In particular, she worked with women and children to support union workers, particularly when on strike

Mother Jones

- In 1902, a West Virginia District Attorney at her trial for ignoring an anti strike injunction, bellowed:

There sits the most dangerous woman in America. She comes into a state where peace and prosperity reign ... crooks her finger [and] twenty thousand contented men lay down their tools and walk out.

Mother Jones

- She particularly fought against child labor, specifically in the mines
- Unlike other female radicals, she was not a fighter for the right of women to vote.
- She continued to fight for children and workers until she was well into her 90's

Mother Jones

- A historical marker in Adelphi MD, just inside the Beltway on Powder Mill Road marks the site of Mother Jones' death
- Appropriately, this marker is very near the site of the National Labor College, which was the centerpiece of labor education in the US until it closed in 2014



"Mother" Jones Historical Marker in Adelphi, MD marks the place of her death on Nov. 30, 1930.

Mother Jones

Her rallying cry of

*Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the
living*

is still a slogan of the union movement more than 75 years after her death.

Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- Much like Lowell in the 19th Century, the workers in the garment trade were mostly young women.
- However, they were not from farms, but rather immigrants, and hence doubly marginalized
- 50 percent of the workers were Russian Jews and 35 percent Italian



Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- As a result of appalling conditions – no bathroom breaks, no grievance system, workers packed together, etc. – and the piece work system many of the workers joined the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU)
- The ILGWU led a five week work stoppage against Rosen Brothers, that led to recognition of the union and a 20% raise

Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- The ILGWU had an ally in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) which was a group of middle and upper class reformers
- The WTUL placed female college students and women of means on ILGWU picket lines, which forced management to cut down on violent reprisals.

Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- In November 1910, a meeting was called to determine if there would be a general strike of garment worker
- After droning of speeches, a 25 year old garment worker, Clara Lemlich, took the stage, and called out in Yiddish:

I am a working girl, one of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I have listened to all the speakers, and I have no further patience for talk...I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared – now



Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- With those stirring words, the assembly voted overwhelmingly to strike.
- The general strike hit almost all of the garment companies, who responded with strikebreakers



Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- In light of the violence, the ILGWU received support from the WTUL and suffragettes
- Arbitration proposed a settlement improving working conditions but not recognizing the ILGWU
- The ILGWU rejected the compromise, but by February 1911, most of the workers were back on the job with improved working conditions.

Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- On March 25, 1911, fire broke out on the 8th floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory
- About 700 employees were in the building at that time.



Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- The doors on the workers floors were locked from the outside to prevent the workers from taking unauthorized breaks.
- Employees on the 10th floor, the Executive Floor, were able to escape to the NYU Law School roof.



Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- Given a choice between burning to death or jumping, many workers jumped to their death.
- Almost 150 people were killed



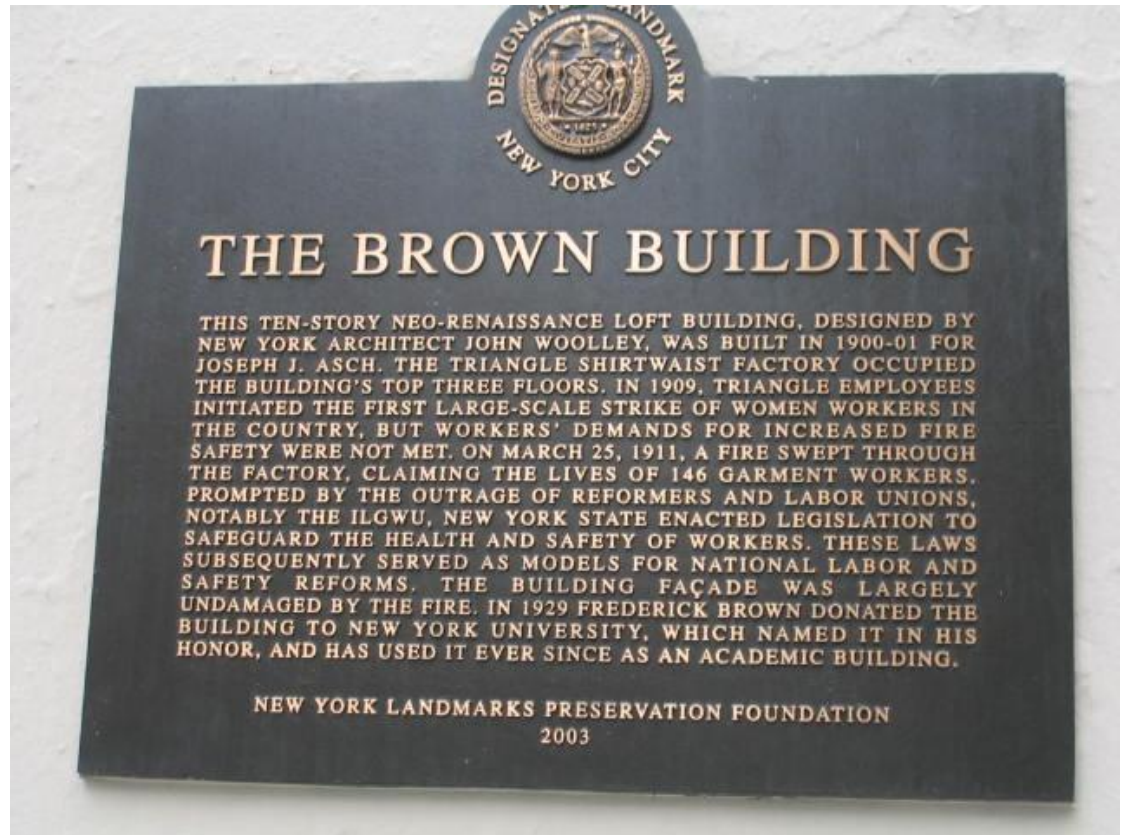
Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- The owners of the factory were acquitted of all charges – a juror called it “an Act of God.”
- Because of both the deaths and the acquittals, the ILGWU became a power to curb industrial negligence



Triangle Shirt Factory Fire

- The site of the fire is now a building in the NYU campus.
- On the side of the building is a plaque noting the history.
- When I went on a campus visit with my son, the guide pointed out the plaque – and unfortunately, I was the only person who understood the significance.



Ludlow Massacre

- Coal mines remained dangerous into the 20th century
- One of the largest mines was in Colorado, owned by the Rockefeller family.
- Without any outlet for their grievances, the miners turned to the UMWA.



Ludlow Massacre

- Without any agreement from management, the workers went on strike in September 1913
- The workers strategically placed tents near the entrances to the mines to block strikebreakers, effectively shutting down the mines
- The companies employed private detectives to break the strike, and when that failed, the Governor called out the National Guard

Ludlow Massacre



- On April 20, 1914, Guardsmen entered the miners camp looking for a person supposedly being held against his will.
- The leader of the miners met with them, but, seeing machine gun being emplaced, returned to the camp.
- In addition to men being killed by the Guardsmen, 2 women and 11 children died when a tent above the pit they were hiding in was set on fire

Ludlow Massacre

- The deaths, particularly of the children, became a rallying cry for miners.
- The UMWA, short of funds, had to call off the strike in December 1914
- The Rockefellers, particularly John Jr., spooked by the bad press, agreed to most of the demands (except for union recognition) of the strikers.
- At the Federal level, a Commission on Industrial Relations was created, to provide support for reforms.

Post WWI Red Scare



- During World War I, there was a distinct crackdown on all forms of dissent.
- In particular, the Wilson administration sought legal action against war protestors, conscientious objectors, and union leaders, especially in war time industries
- This led to the founding of the Civil Liberties Bureau, the forerunner of the ACLU

Post WWI Red Scare



- After the war, action was directed towards Communism in light of the Russian Revolution
- Post war labor activity, such as a general strike in Seattle, was seen as directed by Communists
- There were also a number of anarchist bombings, include one directed at Attorney General A Mitchell Palmer

Red Scare

- Palmer used this as an excuse to go after labor leaders and radicals.
- He instituted the Bureau of Investigation, under J. Edgar Hoover, the forerunner of the FBI.
- He oversaw the deportation of many immigrants, to include Emma Goldman
- During this time, all Socialist members of the NY assembly were expelled from the legislature

Red Scare

- Palmer was less successful going after labor leaders, in that he was opposed by Lewis Post, the Secretary of Labor
- With Wilson ill, Palmer thought his red scare would be the road to the Presidency in 1920

Red Scare

- He warned of riots, assassinations, bombings and general strikes on May Day (May 1) 1920
- When the day passed without incident, Palmer lost all credibility, and not only his Presidential aspirations but the Red Scare was over.

CIO



- The American Federation of Labor (AFL), founded by Samuel Gompers, was divided into craft unions, working together, but not “a big union”
- After the collapse of the Wobblies, there was no organization uniting unskilled workers in a united union

CIO



- Proponents of industrial unions wanted organization by sector as compared to craft.
- The AFL continued to support craft unions
- At the 1935 AFL Convention, John Lewis, head of the UMW, got into a fist fight with the President of the Carpenters Union

CIO

- Lewis felt the AFL did not support his workers interest
- Shortly after the 1935 convention, he called together leaders of a number of national unions and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations in November 1936
- One of its earliest victories was with the UAW (more about that later)

CIO

- The conflict between the AFL and the CIO was as much personality driven as issue driven
- Internal rivalries within the CIO also hurt its progress
- More about these two organizations after WWII and their merger in Class 4

UAW and Auto Workers



- The United Auto Workers was founded in 1935, under the auspices of the AFL
- Shortly thereafter, at the 1936 convention, the UAW bolted from the AFL to become one of the founding members of the CIO
- The UAW attracted many young activists, along with Socialists and Communists.

UAW and Auto Workers



- The UAW's first success was the Flint sit down strike against GM beginning in December 1936
- After mediation by the Michigan Governor, the strike was settled in February 1937 with recognition of the UAW
- Recognition was won at Chrysler in March 1937 after a similar strike

UAW and Auto Workers



- Ford did not agree as quickly as GM or Chrysler.
- On May 26, 1937, UAW activists passed out union literature on a pedestrian overpass near a gate at the Ford River Rouge Plant
- A photographer from the Detroit News asked UAW leaders to pose for photos

UAW and Auto Workers

- Ford security personnel decided this was the right time to start beating the activists, and the newsmen got photos
- The photos were snuck out and published
- This incident became known as “The Battle of the Overpass.”

UAW and Auto Workers

Union activists being roughed up



The aftermath



UAW and Auto Workers

- While Ford tried to argue that the union activists provoked the incident, the photos led to a upsurge in support for the UAW.
- The National Labor Relations Board chastised Ford, but it still took three years for UAW recognition.
- With Ford's agreement, the Big Three automakers were all under a union contract.

FDR and the New Deal



- In October 1929, the stock market crashed, throwing the US into the Great Depression
- The Herbert Hoover administration tried traditional methods of private charity and government economy, without success.
- In 1932, NY Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt was overwhelming elected President, bringing in huge Democratic majorities in Congress

FDR and the New Deal

- In accepting the Democratic nomination in 1932, FDR said

I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people.

- This New Deal would be an unprecedented increase in federal programs, to include direct employment programs such as the CCC, WPA, and others
- It also included unprecedented support for unions
 - Frances Perkins
 - Wagner Act

Frances Perkins



- She was educated at Mount Holyoke and the Wharton School
- She personally witnessed the Triangle Shirt Factory Fire, inspiring her to work for safer working conditions.
- In 1929, then Governor FDR appointed her the first Commissioner of the NY Department of Labor
- While there, she championed such causes as the minimum wage, and end to child labor, and worker safety.

Frances Perkins

- In 1933, President FDR appointed her US Secretary of Labor, the first woman Cabinet member.
- She remained in that position until June 1945, serving longer than any other Secretary of Labor

Frances Perkins

- With FDR's support, she championed as she did in NY worker safety, shorter hours, and an end to child labor
- She also had supervisory authority over government employment programs such as the CCC
- Additionally, she drafted the Social Security Act

Wagner Act



- The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, commonly called the Wagner Act, was the fundamental law regulating labor relations in the private sector
- In the act, for the first time collective bargaining between independent trade unions, on behalf of the workforce, and the employer was encouraged
- The act also created a National Labor Relations Board to enforce its provisions

Wagner Act – Collective Bargaining

- There could only be one exclusive bargaining agent for employees
- Management could not refuse to bargain with that agent
- Bargaining could include wages and “conditions of employment.”

Wagner Act – Unfair Labor Practices

- Listed a specific number of unfair labor practices by management, including
 - Refusal to bargain
 - Interfering with union elections or business
 - Creation of a “company union”
- The Taft Hartley Act (more about that in two weeks) included a list of union unfair labor practices

Wagner Act – Exclusions

- Wagner Act did not include
 - Railway workers (covered under the Railway Labor Act)
 - Public Sector workers (more about them next week)
 - Agricultural workers (more about them and Cesar Chavez in two weeks)

A Phillip Randolph



- In addition to discrimination in the workplace, blacks also suffered from discrimination in the union movement
- A large number of blacks were employed as railroad porters on Pullman (remember him?) cars
- The pay and working conditions for these men was abominable

A Philip Randolph and The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

- Randolph was born in Florida in 1889, where his family instilled in him value of self support
- He moved to NY city in 1911, where he edited a socialist newspaper
- He first became involved with the union movement during WWI, when he organized unions of black workers excluded from traditional labor organizations

A Philip Randolph and The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

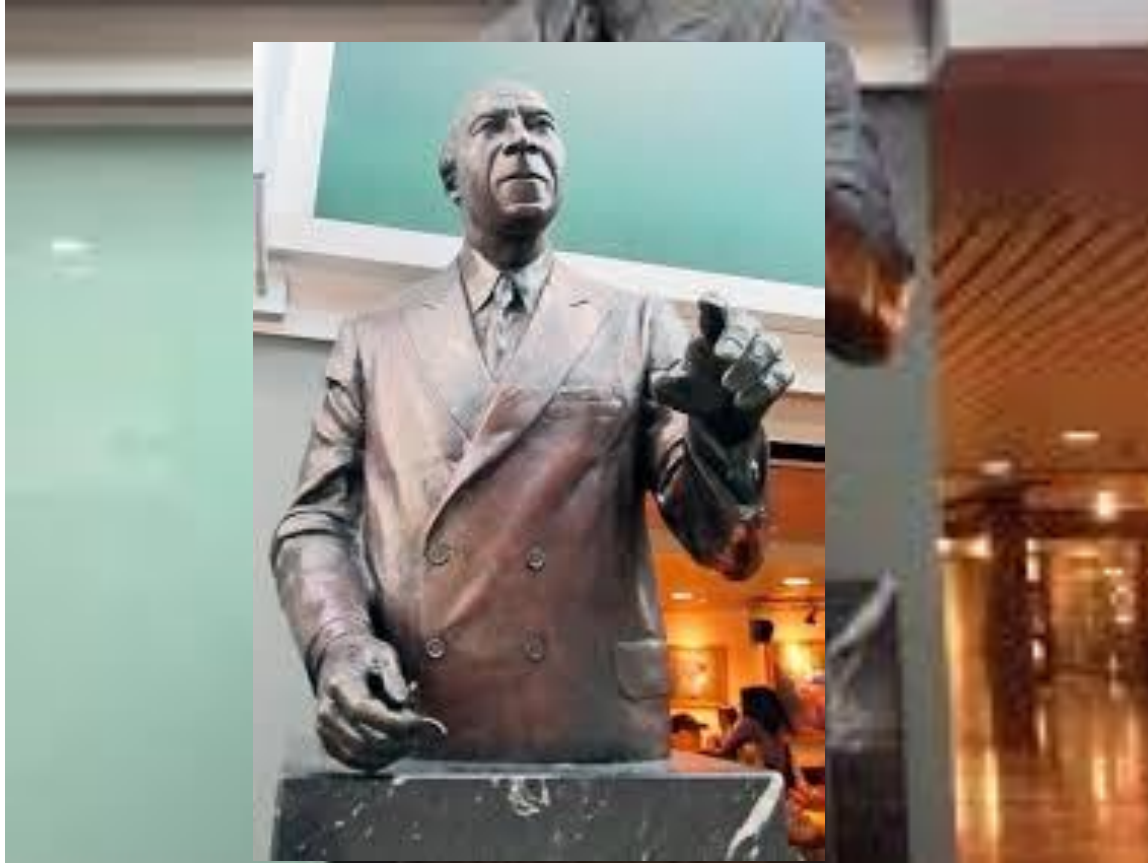
- In 1925, he was elected President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters
- He had little success until the election of FDR in 1933, and the passage of the Railway Labor Act
- In 1937, he won the first contract with the Pullman company, covering such issues as overtime, hours of work, and pay
- The Brotherhood was by far the largest black labor organization, providing a base for Randolph in the larger black community

A Philip Randolph and The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

- In 1941, he proposed a March on Washington,
- FDR, wanting to protect his southern flank in the run up to WWII, convinced him to postpone it in exchange for a Fair Employment Commission
- During the 1950's his support was crucial to a rising leader named Martin Luther King

A Philip Randolph and The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

- In 1963, he saw his dream of a March on Washington come to fruition
- He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by LBJ, and lived until 1979, at age 90



A statute of Randolph graces the main train concourse at Union Station.

Political Parties

- As noted last week, there is no Labor Party as in England
- While labor generally aligns itself with the Democratic party, there have been two parties, in particular, which were labor based:
 - Socialist party
 - American Labor Party

Socialist Party

- Party was founded in 1901 from the merger of a number of other smaller parties
- In addition to support from trade unionists, received support from farmers and immigrants, many of the latter who came from countries with strong socialist parties



Socialist Party

- There was some early successes, as the party elected two Congressmen, one from NY and one from WI
- Each year, it ran Eugene Debs for President, with him reaching a high of 6% of the vote in 1912



Socialist Party

- Traditional labor organizations, such as the AFL under Samuel Gompers, wanted nothing to do with the Socialist Party
- More radical organizations, such as the IWW, enthusiastically supported the Party
- The Socialist Party's opposition to US entry in WWI cost it popular support.

Socialist Party

- While they gained some clout supporting Bob LaFollette's presidential bid in 1924, by the 1930's the Socialist Party was in tatters.
- Many of its programs and plans were coopted by FDR in the New Deal, and the Party was rent by “Left” and “Right” factions

Socialist Party

- They continued to run Presidential candidates – Norman Thomas ran 6 times
- Except in the Depression year of 1932, when they received 2.2%, never received more than 0.5% of the vote



Socialist Party

Despite having famous members such as A. Philip Randolph, Bernard Rustin, Helen Keller and Upton Sinclair, among others, the Socialist Party never gained traction either as a National or Labor Party

Socialist Party

Among the reasons

- Two party system makes it difficult for a third party to break in
- Many of its issues were coopted by the Democratic Party
- Associated in public's mind with the Communist Party, and subject to police action for that reason.

American Labor Party

- A split in the Socialist Party in 1934 led to the creation, with AFL and CIO backing, of the Labor Non Partisan League, similar to a current day PAC
- In 1936, it became the American Labor Party, to give FDR another line on the ballot
- Generally, the ALP did not run their own candidates, but endorsed candidates such as FDR and Fiorello LaGuardia



American Labor Party

- An exception was the election of Congressman Vito Marcantonio in East Harlem district in New York.
- Marcantonio was first elected in 1934 as a Republican and was defeated for reelection.
- In 1940, he was elected on the ALP line, and served until 1952
- In that redbaiting period, the fact that he voted against going to war in Korea was a key issue



American Labor Party

- Most of the ALP strength was in NY, and it was siphoned off by the creation of the Liberal Party in 1944
- In 1954, the party got less than 50,000 votes statewide in NY and lost its place on the ballot
- The ALP disbanded in 1956
- A series of state ALP, created after 2010, merged in 2017 to create a national ALP



Next week

**Public sector labor
relations throughout US
history**