

LABOR IN THE PROGRESSIVE ERA:  
A STRUGGLE FOR DIGNITY

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History 190: Introduction to the Study of History

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The liberal organization of the U.S. economy has historically led to unprecedented wealth on the behalf of the richest figures of American society. Labor movements are often made in response to the fact that this unprecedented wealth is collected off the backs of what can only be called exploited laborers. In the Gilded Age, this was certainly true. While living conditions for all generally got better, the wealth of the upper class grew by many times the amount of the working class. This was a major problem since working conditions for many were dehumanizing at best, and the health and safety of the average industrial worker was not the priority of many of these companies. During the Progressive Era, workers used their solidarity to pressure the government and businesses alike to make livable working conditions and appropriate pay a reality for millions of workers across the country despite a lack of class consciousness and the presence of social factionalism based on race, gender, and more.

In order to truly understand this idea, a knowledge must be established around several subjects: the working conditions of the Gilded Age and how they shaped the metaphorical climate in the beginning of the Progressive Era, the labor struggles of the Progressive Era themselves from the detailed perspectives of different societal groups, how American society, business, and government reacted to said struggle, and, finally, the effects of said labor movement based on its impact on the labor movements of the decades following.

The Gilded Age was a period of unprecedented economic growth that spanned from the end of the Civil War to about 1900. America saw rapid industrialization during this period, and the wealthy of the time reaped incredible profits from it. Rosanne Currarino, in *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age*, describes this period as the switch from “proprietary to corporate capitalism,” meaning a switch from a merchant-run economy to a corporate-run economy; an increased level of interaction between the average

person and a large corporation for necessities was seen at this time.<sup>1</sup> This switch is the center point of what made the Gilded Age what it was, for better or for worse. The 1870s, categorized by this change, coincided with a depression mainly for the working class. Currarino describes both this depression and the potential misnomer that is the Gilded Age by saying that “What that golden age might be was far from clear, but most Americans believed that it could not include desperate families crowding into New York City police stations begging for shelter from winter storms...”<sup>2</sup> As more industrialization occurred and corporations began to wield influence over the markets of commodities and labor, issues of labor were rammed towards the forefront of American society. The new corporate economy made it both a necessity to unionize for many, but also made it more difficult. The size of many of these corporations served to harm attempts to organize labor. As David Gordon says in *U.S. Working Class History and Contemporary Labor Movement Symposium*, “workers took their demands from the workplace into the community and aroused neighborhood backing for strikes and political activity... The employers retaliated... by relocating plants in areas distant from working-class and ethnic neighborhoods.”<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, practices like this made the labor movement weaker and weaker, while arousing more unionist sentiment among the working class.

While average Americans saw the effects of a lack of democracy in the workplace in this corporate economy, marginalized groups took it at full force. Child labor was desperately prevalent. Immigrants, who often include children, women, and other minorities, faced terrible xenophobia despite being essentially tricked into taking grating jobs for low pay under the guise

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<sup>1</sup> Rosanne Currarino, *The Labor Question in America: Economic Democracy in the Gilded Age*, The Working Class in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Currarino, *The Labor Question in America*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Irwin M. Marcus, “U.S. Working Class History and Contemporary Labor Movement Symposium,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 29 (Spring 1986): 98, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27671630>.

of pursuing a better life. Black people saw rampant persecution as the average American had not forgotten the racism that allowed the institution of slavery to exist. This persecution applied to employment as well. Widespread poor conditions like these led to an increased desire for organized labor to have a foot in the door when it came to negotiating, or in many cases, battling with companies for fair working conditions.

At the forefront of this in the Progressive Era was the AFL, or American Federation of Labor. They met their stride as an influential interest group by the 1890s or so. Their main cry was for higher wages and shorter hours across the board. This is a point of contention for many labor historians and left-leaning political scientists, as they believe that this “‘pure and simple’ unionism, with its emphasis on the bread-and-butter issues of wages and hours,” as Currarino describes it, was not enough to establish a sense of class consciousness among the American people that would have led to a more effective and popular labor movement down the line.<sup>4</sup> However, with how ingrained the idea of individualism is into the psyche of the American mind, social initiative beyond guaranteeing a better living for oneself with hard work is not likely to be as popular without an incredible change of faith, especially at this time.

It is important to frame this idea relative to the commonly understood story of American labor struggles. Stories are told in high school history classes of company towns, Rockefeller and Standard Oil, industrialization, and more, but they aren’t often resolved. The average American seems to think that things like child labor, monopolization and safety-ignorant working conditions being illegal is a given. The historiography of the American labor movement, or even western labor overall, is basically defined by this. James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni propose a reconsideration of the history of labor in *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of*

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<sup>4</sup> Currarino, *The Labor Question in America*, 86.

*Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925*, saying “There is... a strong presentist bias in the analysis of and discourse about the working class, which militates against a more sophisticated reinterpretation... Even in Britain, when labor history has a lengthy record of achievement, scholarship rarely has reached 1914 and virtually never touches upon later events.”<sup>5</sup> Why this is the case is a point of debate for labor historians. Perhaps the Red Scare and its ripple effect too drastically shaped the average person’s perception on anything to do with Marx or Marxian thought, which describes a lot of the historiography on labor. Perhaps there isn’t much to study; the only major periods of success for American organized labor are mostly pre-WWII. The problem is that the history of labor is so multifaceted that any number of things could cause the issue of a lack of study on the subject.

In the sphere of American historical thinking, the lack of classic Marxian class consciousness in American labor movements is not questioned and is instead seen as a given that serves as a foundation for what little labor-intensive academic study exists in America. This is a notable symptom of a lack of study on anything after the first few decades of the 1900s. In *Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920*, Sean Wilentz questions this notion, saying “The peculiar lack of class consciousness in the United States is taken for granted. The history of American class consciousness is not so much studied and written about as it is written off from the start.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that the questioning of this idea represents contrarianism highlights the degree to which this lack of class consciousness effects the operation of unions and organized labor in general in the United States. Either way, and for better or for worse in the eyes of academics, the aforementioned idea of simple unionism

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<sup>5</sup> James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni, eds, *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv941wrj>.

<sup>6</sup> Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790-1920,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 26 (Fall 1984): 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27671532>.

will prove to be one of the most influential for the American labor movement in the Progressive Era, and even beyond. An understanding of just how pervasive simple unionism is in this small field of study is foundational to understanding the nuance of how the labor movement played out during the Progressive Era.

As America approached the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became clear that the labor movement of the Gilded Age was about to truly meet its stride, signaling the beginning of the Progressive Era. Workers were beginning to understand the effect democracy in the workplace had on their material conditions. With that being said, the year 1900 didn't necessarily magically bring better working conditions for all despite the efforts of workers throughout the Gilded Age. Even though the Progressive Era is defined by relative advancement in terms of American societal standards, challenges certainly did not go away. Marginalized groups understood this best, as their struggle was doubly difficult in many regards compared to that of the average white non-immigrant union worker.

Robert H. Woodrum shares a story of this deep-rooted struggle as it pertained to Black people when he talks about the kidnapping of Black labor leader Ralph Clemmons from Alabama in *Against Labor: How U.S. Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism*. Clemmons was responsible for organizing the International Longshoremen's Association, which unionized many Black dockworkers in the area. In 1918, he was arrested in Mobile on suspicion of smuggling whiskey. As police drove him through the town, they were met with a Ku Klux Klan roadblock. They held the detectives' cars at gunpoint, telling them not to do anything or they'd "blow their heads off" as reported by a local newspaper.<sup>7</sup> They proceeded to kidnap Clemmons and drive off, and no reports were made of him having ever been seen again. The

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Feurer and Chad Pearson, *Against Labor: How U.S. Employers Organized to Defeat Union Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017.), 85.

Klan targeted him due to his prominence as a Black figure in the area first, and as a union leader last.

This is a textbook example of how external social issues gave marginalized people a supremely difficult time in trying to establish any kind of labor group or union. It is incredibly difficult to argue that a white labor leader would have undergone this kind of persecution. Let it be fully understood that not too long before the Progressive Era or the Gilded Age, slavery made it so that enslaved Black people and their plight didn't even fit into a typical Marxian analysis of labor struggle. James Green in *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* describes this concept: "Although this slavery was not capitalist in the form of production itself, that it was not based on the purchase of alienated wage labor, the plantation system of the New World composed an integral part of the international market relations of the growing capitalist system."<sup>8</sup> Slaves were seen as a product, and racist white people could not break that ideal enough to see them work for a wage, let alone participate in a unionist labor struggle.

With that being said, examples like the one of Ralph Clemmons still serve to assist one's understanding of unionists' persecution overall as a group. The Klan certainly was motivated by Clemmons' race first and foremost. But it is somewhat safe to speculate that they wouldn't have kidnapped him as dramatically if he was just a well-known ordinary Black man in the town. The fact that he was inciting change and bettering the lives of Black people through unionism was their issue. This notion, that the lesser are meant to work at their own expense as some predisposed quality of their existence, guides much of the racism, xenophobia, sexism, and overall discrimination that unionists received from both their peers and employers.

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<sup>8</sup> James Green, ed, *Workers' Struggles, Past and Present: A "Radical America" Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6mtdnm>.

In *Women's Labor History, 1790-1945*, by Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield, there are numerous insightful ideas that support this concept of a marginalized laborer's plight during the Progressive Era being profoundly prominent. In this circumstance, women were the marginalized group in question. At this time, the role of a woman was seen to be that of a housewife and child caretaker. This influences much of the struggle for women when it came to union activism. Factionalism came to be among unionists, and much of the feminist labor struggle was "countering the sexist assumption that women are impossible to organize because paid work is simply a brief interlude in a life devoted to marriage and mothering" as Helmbold and Schofield put it.<sup>9</sup> This ideological struggle challenged the real effect that women had on the labor movement for generations, let alone the Progressive Era, leading to only 15 percent of women workers being union members at any point in time during the entirety of both the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>10</sup> It is untold what effect women would have had on the labor movement if the feminist idea of a working woman was more prominent at the time.

This absence of women in a contemporary American labor movement relates to the idea of simple unionism having its negatives. A union movement that was not simply hyper-focused on labor conditions and pay and was instead focused just as much on social change would have produced a higher rate of marginalized unionists to help the effort, surely. Abroad, labor movements were class-based, meaning that the lower class of laborers took the hand of whoever aligned with their plights. American labor movements were still centered around the free-market principles that define American economics and believed that the establishment of unions was a method of negotiation in an open market of labor, and that achieving class consciousness was not

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<sup>9</sup> Lois Rita Helmbold and Ann Schofield, "Women's Labor History, 1790-1945," *Reviews in American History* 17, no. 4 (1989): 506, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2703424>.

<sup>10</sup> Helmbold and Schofield, *Women's Labor History*, 506.



the goal. As William Forbath puts it in *The Shaping of the American Labor Movement*, “Social mobility, ethnic and racial divisions among workers, and a pervasive individualism undermined the cohesion and class-based politics that apparently characterized Europe’s working classes.”<sup>11</sup> This idea of factionalism based on different social metrics also drove much of the xenophobia present in the labor movement.

When it comes to the issue of immigrants and people of color, a major distinction between the American labor movement and the labor movement of other countries can be seen. This lies, once more, in the idea that American labor struggled without a collective class consciousness. Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger speak to this idea in *Against Labor* when they discuss the American deviation from more contemporary Marxist analysis of racism in a class conflict. They say, “Marx generated sharp insights into the role of racial slavery in stultifying class consciousness within the White U.S. working class... the emphasis is on the role of race in undermining political unity and trade union solidarity, especially during strikes.”<sup>12</sup> This idea speaks for itself when considering issues of race and ethnic identity as they arise in the labor movement at this time.

Currarino covers the relevant effects of xenophobia in *The Labor Question* as they pertain to Chinese immigrants. A quote from a German migrant “labor agitator” as Currarino describes him by the name of Isaac Cohen made before a New York investigative committee certainly aligns with the common ideology of the white laborer of the time; “The Chinese... are a barbarous, debased, demoralized people. If they come here, and are detrimental to the interests of

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<sup>11</sup> William E. Forbath, “The Shaping of the American Labor Movement,” *Harvard Law Review* 102, no. 6 (April 1989): 1112, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341293>.

<sup>12</sup> Feurer and Pearson, *Against Labor*, 29.

the workingmen, then I say... 'They ought to go.'"<sup>13</sup> Currarino even describes him as “hardly alone in making this seemingly unlikely connection.”

While it is often understood that social institutions of prejudice influenced the labor movement in America, that effect isn't usually seen as helpful to said movement. That is to say that this particular example of xenophobia was helpful when it came to inciting sinophobic white laborers to organize considering the classic idea that Chinese immigrants were stealing their jobs. It is imperative to note that this is not ideal, and that a perfect labor movement would not need racism or xenophobia as one of its driving motivations. That aside, the Chinese generally weren't stealing jobs as one was led to believe, either; Currarino says, “Few Chinese immigrants lived east of the Rocky Mountains, and they offered almost no competition for jobs in the industrial Northeast and Midwest” while confirming that this “hatred of the Chinese served as the catalyst for the formation of a white working-class culture and for working-class political action.”<sup>14</sup> So to speak, a win is a win, one can suppose, for the American labor movement of this time, even if it was achieved with xenophobia.

The narrative of the American labor movement in the Progressive Era thus far has been one of many faults and idiosyncrasies as foundational societal issues of racism, xenophobia, and misogyny existed in contrast to the supposed goals of the labor movement at large. The successes those laborers achieved, however, were revolutionary in one of the world's textbook examples of a laissez-faire economy. It is important to point out some baseline issues that were solved that the common public takes for granted as obvious malice which needed no struggle to remove. The abolition of exploitative child labor is one of these, which was first brought to light before the government in the middle of the Progressive Era in 1906, when federal legislation was proposed

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<sup>13</sup> Currarino, *The Labor Question*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Currarino, *The Labor Question*, 36-37.

to regulate what work children could and could not do. While it was not immediately adopted, it opened a Pandora's Box of review over the issue of child labor and eventually led to the passing of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which is still the law of the land today.<sup>15</sup> Women saw their own genre of labor legislation come to relevancy, ushering in an era of equitable consideration of circumstances unique to one gender over another.<sup>16</sup> Simple unionism, with its flaws, saw significant popularity that is worth commending. Clerical workers had a "union fever," as Green describes it in *Workers' Struggles*, which saw clerical workers organize en masse and exercise economic democracy.<sup>17</sup> In later years, the conditions of the Great Depression and the tension from the conflict between employer and employee would yield the presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his New Deal, which is widely known as some of the most progressive social-welfare-and-labor-intensive legislation to ever be passed in the United States despite it being highly contested and sparking large constitutional debates in American political discourse.<sup>18</sup>

In either regard, it is only right to say that the cries of workers were heard, even if those cries did not break the barrier of simple unionism to the disdain of many scholarly analysts. The labor movement of the Progressive Era worked, in one way or another. A lack of class consciousness certainly left its mark; its absence is still felt today. Considering the circumstances, though, this truly unorthodox labor movement and its relative success is a historical conundrum to be simply gawked at by both academics and, with a heightened understanding, the general public alike.

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<sup>15</sup> Ian C. Rivera and Natasha M Howard, *Child Labor in America*, Children's Issues, Laws and Programs Series (New York: Nova Science, 2010), 37-38.

<sup>16</sup> Julie Novkov, *Constituting Workers, Protecting Women: Gender, Law and Labor in the Progressive Era and New Deal Years* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 77.

<sup>17</sup> Green, *Workers' Struggles*, 151-167.

<sup>18</sup> Novkov, *Constituting Workers*, 2.

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