

America's Labor Movement: The Lessons of History

Ten Lessons for Today's Unions

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As the inequalities in wealth continue to grow, some have argued that the decline in the labor movement is a strong contributing factor to this tendency. During its period of ascendancy in the 1930s through the 1950s, organized labor scored huge gains for working people and narrowed the income inequalities that hit a zenith in the 1920s. Accordingly, it is instructive to take a retrospective look back at the labor movement in its period of militancy to benefit from lessons learned during this climactic period.

1. The strike is one of the most powerful weapons workers can employ. It brings operations to a halt, profits suddenly drop to zero, and money is actually lost as the inventory sits motionless on loading docks or in warehouses while bills must still be paid. Employers are placed in a situation where they have strong incentives to quickly resolve the conflict, even though concessions are required of them, in order to get operations running again. In 1937 there were 4740 strikes where workers surged ahead in winning union recognition and wage and work-rule gains. In 2010 there were less than ten strikes.

2. Solidarity can play a crucial role in winning strikes. In 1950 Democrat President Truman tried to smash a strike of 100,000 miners by invoking the Taft-Hartley Act (legislation that greatly restricted strikes). In protest, 270,000 additional miners joined the strike. Soon the mine owners backed down, and the miners won a substantial wage increase.

3. Although they bill themselves as “friends of labor” and many in the labor community accept this fraudulent packaging, Democrats are at best entirely unreliable allies of workers and at worst determined opponents. Truman, who claimed he opposed Taft-Hartley and initially vetoed the legislation – only to be overruled by Congress – nevertheless made recourse to it not less than 61 times during his administration. Truman also supported General Motors (GM) in response to the United Auto Workers (UAW) strike in 1945. In 1951 Truman raised taxes on working people by 12 percent, while raising taxes on millionaires by a mere 1 percent. President Roosevelt’s Cabinet was filled with Wall Street representatives. Both he and Truman supported the Smith-Connally Anti-Strike Law. And Roosevelt threatened to use federal troops against striking mineworkers. These are just a few of countless examples of anti-labor Democratic Party policies.

4. During hard times politicians call for “equality of sacrifice.” The more current expression is “shared sacrifice.” Either formulation is a sham. During World War II, strikes were proscribed by law. And supposedly profits were to be restricted as well. But while the no-strike law was harshly enforced, corporate profits received preferential treatment. Accordingly, the profits of some 200 leading corporations during the war were five to ten times greater than during their peacetime years. Today, while working people are losing income, the rich are making enormous gains. Between 2002 and 2008 the income of the top

1 percent grew by 30 percent while the bottom 90 percent of the population suffered a 4 percent drop in income.

5. Although radicals and progressives were critical of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) because of its backwardness in preferring separate and divisive craft unions rather than the unifying, all-inclusive industrial unions, nevertheless they worked within the AFL until their continued work inside the AFL proved impossible. But at that time they could pull out of the AFL as an organized bloc with the maximum number of adherents and constitute the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Their patience was rewarded, and they proceeded to make history.

6. Striking workers must be prepared to ignore injunctions and other legal restrictions if they want to prevail. In 1943, in order to smash the strike of thousands of miners, Roosevelt conducted a government take-over of the mines, and then ordered the miners to return to work. This tactic is simply a legal maneuver, aimed only at the workers, where they are compelled by law to obey the orders of the U.S. government. Profits continue to flow into the hands of the private owners. However, the miners held their ground and simply responded: "You can't dig coal with bayonets." They refused to return to work, and this intransigence led to their eventual victory. In 1937, in the United Auto Workers sit-down strike at GM's Chevrolet plant in Flint Michigan, the police tried to expel the workers from one of the plants, firing tear-gas into the building. The strikers responded with fire hoses and missiles in the form of door hinges, bottles, and stones and succeeded in repelling the attack.

7. When unions fail to fight for their members' interests, membership tends to wane. But when unions stage heroic battles and make substantial gains, the membership can soar. The famous 1936-7 successful United Auto Workers sit-down strike at GM provides an instructive example. During the strike the membership count stood at 88,000. The following month after the strike it rose to 166,000; the next month it climbed to 254,000; and one month later it surged to 400,000. Everyone wanted to join a winning organization and share in the benefits.

8. Workers can prevail despite the greatest adversity by acting independently and relying on themselves and their community allies, not on the politicians or government agencies. During the 1934 Minneapolis Teamsters strike, the Farmer-Labor Party Governor Olsen declared martial law and called in the National Guard. The troops then allowed strikebreaking truckers to operate with protection. But when the striking Teamsters responded by defying an injunction forbidding their mobile pickets, the troops invaded the union's headquarters and arrested 100 union members. The Teamsters then organized a protest rally of 40,000. The protesters' outrage at the arrests was so great that the union members were released in a few days. Throughout their historic strike the Teamsters also relied heavily on an organization of the unemployed and the Women's Auxiliary.

9. When a union tactic is used successfully, it can spread rapidly. During the year prior to the 1936-7 UAW sit-down strike at GM in Flint, there were 48 sit-down strikes. In the year after the strike there were 477.

10. Top labor officials can impede successful union struggles. George Meany, who became the head of the merged AFL-CIO, once boasted: "I never went on strike in my life, never ran a strike in my life, never had anything to do with a picket line." But it was through recourse to the strike throughout the 1930s, the 1940s, and into the 1950s that workers won their

most dramatic gains.

Conclusion:

Today, the incomes of working people are declining, those of the rich are skyrocketing, but federal and state governments are nevertheless aiming their fire at working people, demanding pension cuts, wage cuts, layoffs, and cuts to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, public education, and social services. These cuts will only accelerate the inequalities in wealth. Now more than ever, organized labor needs to step up, reclaim its glories from its past, and mount a major campaign to oppose these attacks and demand that the government institute job-creation programs. In this way the growing inequalities in wealth could be reversed. As a first step, organized labor should organize massive demonstrations in major cities across the country on Labor Day to raise these demands. Working people strongly oppose these cuts and desperately want job-creation programs. They would enthusiastically welcome such a campaign. And with the labor movement in the lead, working people could once again make history.

Sources:

Farrell Dobbs' 4 volumes on the Teamsters' 1934 strike and the aftermath;
Art Preis: Labor's Giant Step;
Sidney Fine: Sit Down, The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937.

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