



1981

Workers in Industrial America, Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle

Ralph Barnhart

Follow this and additional works at: <https://lawrepository.ualr.edu/lawreview>



Part of the [Labor and Employment Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ralph Barnhart, *Workers in Industrial America, Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle*, 4 U. ARK. LITTLE ROCK L. REV. 381 (1981).

Available at: <https://lawrepository.ualr.edu/lawreview/vol4/iss2/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Bowen Law Repository: Scholarship & Archives. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Arkansas at Little Rock Law Review by an authorized editor of Bowen Law Repository: Scholarship & Archives. For more information, please contact mmserfass@ualr.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Workers in Industrial America, Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle. David Brody. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. 257 pp. \$14.95.

*Ralph Barnhart**

In his book, *Workers in Industrial America*, David Brody explores the struggle of American workers to escape from the status of "servants" to one in which they would be able to exercise power over their working lives through organization and collective bargaining. Through Brody's essays, the workers' story emerges in a moving, sympathetic, and compelling narrative presented with an historian's insight.

John Pory, writing from Virginia in 1619, stated, "Our principall wealth consisteth in servants."¹ Workers were needed in the new land to grow tobacco, but the native population had stubbornly resisted becoming civilized—that is, they refused to work for the intruders as paid or slave labor. Consequently, servants had to be imported from abroad and as the colonies developed they came in great numbers. Some came as indentured servants or redemptioners who, unable to pay the cost of their passage to the new world, bound themselves to work for a period of years for a colonial master who paid their passage for them. These newcomers have been described as follows:

Many of them were convicts from the jails, transported instead of being hanged; a few were political and military prisoners taken in war or rebellion. There were rogues, vagabonds, whores, cheats, and rabble of all descriptions, raked from the gutter and kicked out of the country. There were unfortunate French, German, and Swiss Protestants fleeing from religious persecution, starving and unhappy Irish, rack-rented Scottish

* Dean Emeritus and Professor Emeritus, University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Law; A.B., Simpson, 1931; LL. B. Cincinnati, 1934; Contributing Author, MCCORMICK'S HANDBOOK OF THE LAW OF EVIDENCE (2d ed. 1972); Member of the National Academy of Arbitrators.

1. A. Smith, *Colonists in Bondage* 13 (1947).

farmers, poverty-stricken German peasants and artisans, brash adventurers of all sorts. People of every age and kind were deceived, deceived, seduced, inveigled, or forcibly kidnapped and carried as servants to the plantations. There were many ordinary individuals of decent substance, and a few even who were entitled by the custom of the time to be called gentlemen.²

It has been estimated that half of all of the persons who came to the colonies south of New England were servants of these sorts.³ They formed the principal labor supply for the Southern colonies until the eighteenth century when they were replaced by Negro slaves. The system of indentured servitude persisted, though in diminishing scale, until well into the nineteenth century.

The demand for "servants" by no means diminished during the period between the Revolution and the Civil War. Brody points out that from the 1840s the country "counted on the brawn of rural immigrants—especially the Irish—to dig the canals, lay the rail tracks, build the cities, and fill the ranks of unskilled factory workers."⁴ Much of the never-ending overseas migration, however, came from the industrial districts of northern Europe. English, Welsh, and German artisans came with skills important for an emergent industrial economy. "They also served as the teachers of American labor. Theirs was a shaping influence on working-class culture and institutions, trade unions included, in the nineteenth century."⁵

During the 1890s, this northern European migration receded and was replaced by an even more abundant flow from southern and eastern Europe, from Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Unlike the earlier immigrants these Italian, Yiddish, and Slavic people were almost wholly lacking in industrial skills. The Jewish immigrants became the sweated labor of the tenement districts of New York and Chicago; the others moved into the bottom ranks of American basic industry. The low-paid heavy work in the factories, says Brody, became their virtual preserve. Industrious and hard-working, they provided a labor supply that constituted a windfall for American industry, a labor supply peculiarly meeting the needs of the new industrial order. By and

2. *Id.* at 3.

3. *Id.*

4. D. Brody, *Workers in Industrial America* 15 (1980).

5. *Id.*

large these immigrants did not expect to support families in America, but rather saved to return to wives and families back home, which they did in large numbers when work was slack. Brody quotes the observation of one scholar that "employers treated their bounty of immigrant workers 'in much the same way that American farmers have used our land supply.'"⁶

When war broke out in Europe in August 1914 immigration was interrupted. After the war, restrictive legislation in this country barred its resumption. Says Brody, "The accustomed labor recruitment from agrarian peoples, however, did not end."⁷ Now the migration was that of the black population to the northern industrial cities where "sharecroppers and farm laborers took the places at the bottom of the ladder vacated by the Slavic and Italian workers."⁸ There was also a parallel flow of southern whites into northern industry bringing into the factories the racial prejudice from which the black workers had fled. But once again the persistent and growing need of American industry for "servants" was met.

Brody discusses the emergence of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) after World War I as the dominant labor union federation under the able and resourceful leadership of Samuel Gompers. He also examines the obliteration of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), described as an indigenous radical unionism, a labor movement for the "most miserable" of America's workers, as well as the decline of the Socialist party as a significant force in the American labor movement.

In late 1917, when Woodrow Wilson came to the AFL with a plan for industrial peace, labor's strategic place in the war effort was underscored, and Gompers seized the opportunity to align the AFL with the Wilson administration. The short-term gains were considerable. The AFL gained a voice in home-front policy and union men sitting on war agencies were able to defend labor standards against employer pressures. The right of labor to organize and bargain collectively became accepted as a matter of national policy. Union membership increased sharply. The euphoria quickly faded after the war, however, when the Wilson administration reversed its course, the Red-Scare witchhunts took their toll of union labor, and organized opposition from

6. *Id.* at 17.

7. *Id.* at 18.

8. *Id.*

open-shop employers returned, Brody says, "with renewed fury." Union membership dropped. The AFL adopted a conservative pose advancing a new doctrine of labor-management cooperation signalling recognition that labor could progress only with industry's consent.

Brody explores the response of business to this obvious admission of impotence on the part of AFL leadership in his essay on welfare capitalism. Prominent businessmen, perhaps acting in the heady flush of the prosperity of the late 1920s, advanced the notion that it was the obligation of business to take care of the needs of labor—a notion prompted by the "fundamentals of decent and right conduct laid down by Jesus of Nazareth. . . ."⁹ Workers were to be assured of stability of employment and income and, through company welfare plans, the assurance of protection from the vicissitudes of accident, illness, old age, and death. This new philosophy was built upon the premise that labor and management had mutual, rather than antagonistic, interests. Basic was the understanding, however, that the employer would not relinquish control and that labor would not dictate to management. These paternalistic endeavors were widely touted by business leaders, but they were essentially damaging to independent unionism and, however well intended, they perished before the hot searing winds of the great depression. Brody argues that the workers were in fact held captive by the welfare capitalism of the 1920s and had the depression not shattered it as a prevailing concept, the open shop might have remained a permanent feature of American industrialism.

The hardships of the depression and consequent worker unrest brought the need for organization of the unorganized. The rank-and-filers demanded action, and the answer seemed to be industrial unions. The AFL appeared unable to respond because of its own vested interests and its power structure. The AFL's failure to mount a drive to organize the mass-production workers in the steel industry triggered the industrial union movement. Brody pays great tribute to John L. Lewis for Lewis's remarkable role in launching the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). "He provided not only the indispensable funds and the charismatic presence, but, above all, the determination to push forward. At key points throughout 1936 it was his will alone, and the initiatives he took on his own, that carried his reluctant part-

9. *Id.* at 48.

ners along the path that led to the break with the AFL. Without Lewis, it is hard to see how the CIO would have emerged as an independent industrial-union movement."¹⁰ Public intervention during World War II helped to insure the permanence of union gains made during the depression.

Various representational plans under the welfare capitalism of the 1920s, characterized by Brody as company unionism, may have differed in structure and emphasis, but they agreed on one point: they did not diminish the power of the employers. In the early stages of the war, young labor leaders such as the Reuthers and James Cary advanced the notion of labor councils by which management and labor could jointly run war industries. Part of the object was to raise wages without raising prices. Reuther argued that so long as high profits could be made at low levels of production, corporate industry would never generate enough jobs for American workers. Union leaders expressed the idea, perhaps privately rather than publicly, that unions must be given the right to bargain concerning all functions of management. These ideas aroused profound concern in management circles. Brody points out, however, that these management fears have not materialized. Management has, by skillful bargaining, bought off the unions who have been more and more inclined "to take the money and let the prices go."¹¹

Brody's final essay, *The Uses of Power II: Political Action*, truly presaged the debacle of the 1980 national election. The disarray of the Democratic Party was shared with that of organized labor as a political force. The defeat of the Labor Reform Act in the Ninety-fifth Congress was brought about by the united-front opposition of American business and it came almost as a requiem to labor's hopes. Brody quotes from *Business Week* stating that "[a]merican business has by and large never really accepted unionism."¹² "Far from serving as the cutting edge of social change," Brody concludes, "trade unionism appears today to be a largely spent force in the national life."¹³ He adds, however, "[t]he future is never foreclosed."¹⁴

10. *Id.* at 171.

11. *Id.* at 189.

12. *Id.* at 248.

13. *Id.* at 255.

14. *Id.*