

The Labor movement today and how we got here

Christopher Carter

Georgia Southern University

The American labor movement is one of the most important and influential labor struggles in the world. May 1<sup>st</sup> is known as May Day and is an international day to recognize the struggle of workers. It is one day set aside every year where all over the world people recognize the work and struggle that has been done for worker's rights. May Day was started in order to commemorate the Haymarket Riot which occurred in Chicago as a part of the larger Labor movement in the United States. The purpose was to remember the labor leaders who were put to death by the United States government in order to scare the rest of the labor movement into submission. The Haymarket Riot occurred in Chicago in 1886. There had been protests leading up to this riot all over the United States. This protest movement started with people fighting for an 8-hour work day. Before this people had to work much longer shifts; the boss could make you work pretty much however long they wanted. The fight for an 8-hour work day came about from an idea in workers' rights circles that because there are 24 hours in a day the day should be divided into 8 hours of work, 8 hours of recreation and 8 hours of rest. This protest movement spread all over the United States with most major cities having protests similar to Chicago. Many workers in the United States started a general strike which is where nobody works and pretty much the whole country is shut down because people refuse to work and do business as usual. The workers of Chicago shut down the industrial plants and the police responded and ended up shooting several strikers. A rally was held at Haymarket square with speeches from labor leaders, the police responded in force and fighting broke out. At some point during the fighting a bomb gets thrown and it kills several police officers. To this day no one knows for sure who threw that bomb. After this incident the labor movement was demonized all over America. Major business interests used the Haymarket riot as an excuse to delegitimize the movement for the 8 hour work day and to make the Labor movement out to be terrorists. Many labor activists were put on trial

and 8 were put to death. History has absolved these labor leaders and many now see them as martyrs and that is why the celebration of May Day was started to commemorate their sacrifice and all the other struggle that has been undertaken for workers' rights. To this day the United States still purposefully celebrates Labor Day in September instead to disregard May Day. The international day of workers solidarity or May Day is celebrated on May 1<sup>st</sup>, this year Joe Biden declare May 1<sup>st</sup> to be "Loyalty day" a sort of crypto-fascist holiday were Americans are to once again declare their loyalty to the American flag and republic.

Going back to the earliest history of labor revolt in the United States there were labor disputes among settlers in America before the United States was even a country. In 1619 Jamestown craftsmen went on strike because they were denied the right to vote. Jamestown was the first English settlement in the Americas and was established in 1607. Soon after its establishment craftsmen from Poland and Germany were brought to Jamestown to do necessary work like ship building and making glass. Because they were not English they were not given the right to vote. The craftsmen's work was so necessary that when they went on strike and refused to work the leadership of the Virginia colony reversed this rule and gave the vote to non-English settlers in exchange for the craftsmen teaching their crafts to the other colonists. This is an early example of labor organizing working their labor was so vital that they achieved exactly what they were bargaining for by going on strike. In 1661 indentured servants gathered together to revolt because they were not being fed properly. They gathered, got weapons and planned to revolt and demand they be released from indenture. They were betrayed by one of their co-conspirators and the would be rebellion was put down. After this masters were told to keep a closer watch on their servants and laws were passed to make it illegal for servants to gather in meetings. This is an early example of labor organizing being put down. Bacon's rebellion took

place in 1675 and 1676. It is often thought of as a precursor to the American Revolutionary War where colonists were revolting against the tyranny of the Crown and royal administration in the colonies. However, many historians now emphasize the class dynamics of Bacon's rebellion. The rebels were poor small planters and farmers from the western, frontier part of Virginia who followed Bacon in revolt against the wealthy plantation owners of eastern Virginia who made up the governing body. This militia of working class Virginians surrounded the ruling class and got them to capitulate. There are many other dynamics at play in this historical event, it should be mentioned that what Bacon's Rebellion was fighting for was the right to Genocide local Native Tribes. However, many historians still consider this to be a working class movement.

Wage Labor became common later in the colonial period with artisan craftsmen. These craftsmen would create necessary goods and be paid a fixed wage. In 1768 New York Journeymen Tailors an organization of craftsmen went on strike because their wages were reduced. This is considered the first strike in the colonies by an organized group of workers. The federal society of Journeymen Cordwainers is considered the first real trade union and was formed in Philadelphia in 1794. After the American Revolution working people were further inspired to have more democratic workplaces. The ideas of doing away with aristocracy and having a just, democratic society made workers want to have just and democratic workplaces. These early trade unions worked in major cities to advocate for the interests of workers in specific industries. Going forward into the antebellum period the United States had two separate Northern and Southern economies. The southern economy was based on plantations that grew cash crops and exploited slave labor. The system of slavery that had been established in the Virginia colony and further legitimized after Bacon's rebellion had grown and become wide spread in the south. Enslaved Africans were kept as property by wealthy southern land owners

and by this time new generations had been born into slavery on the American continent. In the North the industrial revolution was dawning and working class people found themselves in mills and factories. During the late Antebellum period immigrants from Ireland and Germany came to Northern cities growing the industrial work force. The Irish in particular added to the working class of the North. Many had to flee Ireland because of oppression from Britain and famine. Therefore they came to United States largely as unskilled laborers as they had largely been farmers back in Ireland but could not easily acquire land once in America. These immigrants created the working class that made American industry what it was during the industrial revolution.

During the 1840s the labor unions who had been bolstered by all the new immigrants entering trade work began organizing to change how things were done in workplaces. Treatment of worker was horrible during the industrial revolution. Mankind had never dealt with industrial work before this was the origin of a whole new era of human existence. With the advent of new machines that could increase productivity to a degree before unimaginable mankind's greed and callousness grew with productivity. The people who ran industry in this time often did not care about the people they employed, people would have to work ridiculously long hours, they would work without breaks, they would employ children, they would make people work and live in inhumane conditions. During this time unions began advocating for a 10 hour work day. The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen were the first to start seriously pushing for the 10 hour work day and in 1835 they orchestrated a general strike in Boston shutting the city down. After this workers in other cities saw what Boston workers had done and the movement spread to other American cities. Woman were major organizers for better working conditions early on. Woman had been a major part of the workforce in factors since the

early 1880s. Many women worked in textile mills. The women who worked in the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts went on strike in 1834 and 1836. These same women were major organizers in the movement for a 10 hour work day. Sarah Bagley started the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association which advocated for better conditions and made petitions and got woman from the mills to sign. In these same New England textile mills there were also child laborers. Child labor became a concern of both working class and middle class people in New England. They were unable to outlaw child labor at the time but in the 1840s laws began being passed in New England to limit the amount of hours children could work in order to allow them to still go to school.

Then the Civil war started. The reason for the American Civil War was a fight over whether slavery would continue to be allowed in the United States. The south wanted to preserve slavery and the north wanted it to stop. The South left the United States and formed its own country dedicated to white supremacy and continuing slavery. The North was what was left of the United States. In the end the North won due in part to all the industry that grew in northern cities and was bolstered by the immigrant workforce. As a result all enslaved people were set free. Even though they were no longer enslaved the people had little options for work, many had to enter the sharecropping system. Sharecropping was a system in which former enslaved people rented a plot of land from former slave owners, they would grow crops on this land and give a portion of the crops they would grow back to the land owner as a form of rent. Right after emancipation some freed African Americans migrated out of the south to Kansas. As reconstruction continued following the war African Americans had to face terrorism at the hands of southern whites. Facing Jim Crow laws, economic disenfranchisement and violence and lynchings many African Americans started moving north. The great migration occurred from

1910-1970 and saw African Americans leaving the south for northern, midwestern and western states in order to escape bad treatment in the South and seek opportunities elsewhere. Though they had escaped the brutality of the south there were still problems. There was tension between African Americans entering the job market and the working class Irish and European immigrants. They had to compete for the same jobs and housing.

The earlier fight for a ten hour work day evolved into the fight for the 8 hour work and 40 hour work week we have today. In 1864 the labor movement in Chicago started advocating for an 8 hour work day. In response the Illinois state legislature passed a law to establish an 8 hour work day but it was ineffective and did not cause any material change. On May 1st 1867 the workers of Chicago went on strike and shutdown the city for a week. The next year the United States congress passed an 8 hour work day for federal employees. All laborers employed by the federal government had gained the eight hour work day but this did nothing for laborers in the private sector. Workers and labor organizers started forming 8 hour leagues. The Federation of Organized Trade and Labor Unions set forth a demand that by May 1st 1886 an 8 hour day would official be a days work and that all unions and governments should conform to this. On that day, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1886, Albert Parsons who was the leader of the Knights of labor led a march of 80,000 people in Chicago. This is considered the first May Day parade. This huge rally inspired workers all over the United States to protest for the 8 hour day. Two days later on May third August Spies the editor of the Workers Newspapaer led another rally. The workers at Spies speech confronted some strike breakers and the rally became violent. The police responded and ended up shooting and killing four protesters. The following day another protest was held at Haymarket square. This is where the bomb went off and a panic swept the country which demonized the labor movement. Labor organizing continued in spite of this. That same year of

1886 the Great Southwest railroad strike happened with 200,000 railroad workers going on strike to try and take power away from the Union Pacific and Missouri Pacific railroads.

Eugene V. Debs is perhaps the United States' most well-known socialist politicians. He was also a labor organizer. Debs helped to establish the American Railway Union which led a strike of all American railway workers in 1894. This strike shut down a huge amount of the railroad throughout the United States stopping freight and passenger transportation. Federal troops eventually broke up the strike. Debs would go on to establish the Industrial Workers of the World with Bill Haywood with the idea of bringing all American workers of every industry into one shared union. The Great Anthracite Coal Miner strike occurred in 1902 with 147,000 miners striking to have their Unions recognized and to advocate for better treatment. In 1907 in Monongah, West Virginia an explosion in mining tunnels killed 361 coal miners. This was a horrible disaster that inspired miners to continue to unionize and advocate for themselves. Labor organizers and unions would continue to organize and advocate for labor throughout the early 1900s. However they were unable to effectively unionize workers in industries like steel manufacturing that would become the most important industries going forward in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When the great depression hit labor unions along with the rest of the country were in a tough spot, people were out of work and the economy was tanking. Ironically the depression ended up being the best thing to happen for labor unions. Franklin Roosevelt was elected to deal with the depression and he passed legislation to help unions. The National Labor Relations Act allowed all workers the right to join and start unions and allowed collective bargaining by unions. The National Industrial Recovery Act bolstered America's faltering industry helping work to continue. The National Labor Relations Board was set up to deal with abuses done to workers in industry. The 8 hour work day that Albert Parsons and the protesters at Haymarket Square

were fighting for finally became law under the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. This Act not only established the 40 hour work week and overtime pay for anyone who did more, it established the first minimum wage and finally made child labor illegal. Following this, union membership skyrocketed. After World War 2 unions continued to be powerful and well established through the 40s and 50s.

Workers' rights were somewhat well established in the United States following the New Deal legislations. Everything was going pretty good until neoliberal economic thought came into vogue. Particularly in the era of Ronald Reagan the idea of trickle-down economics really put the emphasis on protecting the owner and not the worker. Right to work laws sprung up around the United States really taking the teeth out of unions making them an afterthought in many states. In these right-to-work states unions have little power in most industries. Labor unions were started to fight for the rights of workers in industrial settings. In the United States less and less people are working in industries. Industrial labor has been outsourced to other countries. The United States has this great labor history where for centuries we have had this hard fought battle to value the worker. American workers became harder to exploit so in turn huge corporations decided they would go to other countries to exploit labor. These corporations set up their factories in the global south where they can get cheap labor by preying on disenfranchised peoples. This is the reason for industry leaving the United States and because of this the labor union has become culturally obsolete. A sort of relic of the old days when we Americans worked in Automobile factories, steel and textile mills, and coal mines. But that does not have to be the case. All labor can be union labor. We think of unions and labor organizing in terms of its historical context where it was only done in manual labor fields. Any kind of labor can be organized, that means office workers, food service workers, IT workers and so on. Steve Earle once said "If you have a

boss you need a union.” Everybody who works should organize with their fellow workers to make sure they are not exploited.

Can we start a new labor movement today? Now is probably the best time in a long time to reignite the labor movement. Ever since the economic recession the American people have been growing more and more distrustful and angry with the wealthy. The economic recession and its causes showed people that banks and corporations do not care about you. The scandal with Enron and Bernie Madoff conning people out of their life savings showed people that the rich do not care about you. This led to memorable slogans like “we are the 99%” referring to the 1% of the most wealthy people being regular people’s enemy. Occupy Wall Street happened in response to Wall Street banks gambling with unstable assets backed up by bad mortgages which is what cause the economic recession of 07’-08’. This year for the first time Amazon package factory workers tried to unionize in Alabama. They took it to a vote and the effort ultimately failed and the Amazon workers did not unionize. But the fact that they made such a strong and public effort to unionize is significant because Amazon has been one of the most anti-union companies in recent years. Amazon has hired private investigators to spy on workers and report on union talk and they have made anti-union propaganda a part of training. Also this year fast food workers went on strike to advocate for a raising of the minimum wage. An effort to raise the minimum wage failed in congress but effort continues to try and raise it. These are some of the most pro-worker times in recent memory.

The key to starting the labor movement of today is to spread information far and wide to raise class consciousness. That is to say put information out to make people realize that you are a worker and the owner of whatever entity you work for is exploiting you. You may not feel like you are being exploited because when you think of exploitation you think of brutal treatment but

you are being exploited. You and your coworkers are the ones who make your workplace run while the owner is the one who profits off of it and then decides how much wage you will be given. That is exploitation. By joining together with your fellow workers you can advocate for yourselves to make it so you are being the least exploited as possible. This information needs to spread to workers in every field no matter what kind of work they do. The organization that spreads this information needs to be one like Industrial Workers of the World in that it seeks to unite all working people and lead them to unionizing. The idea would be to get all workers in all fields to unionize themselves and unite in their given workplaces and also have the shared larger organization that unites all working people. This information would be spread through social media. Tik Tok videos, twitter posts, Youtube videos, podcasts, twitch streams and so on ran by the organization advocating unionization. We would also have to use old school forms of unionizing like handing out fliers, holding rallies, going in to workplaces and working with existing unions. Using both social media and real world methods would make the movements reach very expansive. Most people have to work and many do not realize that they can have more autonomy when operating in the world of wage labor. I think if we can get to them and show them that you can unite and take back the power from the owners of the world they would be more than happy to join.

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