

The World War II and post-war strike wave



Jeremy Brecher on the huge, often unofficial, strikes which swept the US during and after World War II, despite the existence of union-enforced no strike deals.

The institutional structures developed in the 1930s changed the relationships among workers, unions, employers, and government. Strikes during World War II and its aftermath share some but by no means all of the characteristics of earlier mass strikes.

With the coming of World War II, the divergence between unions and workers' own action deepened. When the United States entered the war, the leaders of both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations pledged that there should be no strikes or walkouts for the duration of the war. Thus, at a time when profits were "high by any standard" and a great demand for labor meant "higher wages could be secured ... and a short stoppage could secure immediate results," the unions renounced the principal method by which workers could have gained from the situation. Instead, they took on the function of administering government decisions affecting the workplace, disciplining the workforce, and keeping up production.¹ "To cease production is to strike at the very heart of the nation,"² proclaimed the AFL. The CIO announced it would "redouble its energies to promote and plan for ever-increasing production." Over the radio, Philip Murray of the CIO urged labor to "Work! Work! Work! Produce! Produce! Produce!"³

Interestingly, the unions with Communist leadership carried this policy furthest. As Business Week noted,

"A more conciliatory attitude toward business is apparent in unions which once pursued intransigent policies. On the whole, the organizations involved are those which have been identified as Communist-dominated.... Since Russia's involvement in the war, the leadership in these unions has moved from the extreme left-wing to the extreme right-wing position in the American labor movement. Today they have perhaps the best no-strike record of any section of organized labor; they are the most vigorous proponents of labor-management

cooperation; they are the only serious labor advocates of incentive wages.... In general, employers with whom they deal now have the most peaceful labor relations in industry. Complaints to the union's national officers usually will bring all the organization's disciplinary apparatus to focus on the heads of the unruly local leaders."[4](#)

As in World War I, the government established a tripartite National War Labor Board, empowered to impose final settlements on all labor disputes. At the request of President Franklin Roosevelt, Congress passed an Economic Stabilization Act, essentially freezing wages at the level of September 15, 1942. The board retained power to make exceptions in cases of maladjustment and substandard wages.

"We're going to have to call on the leaders of labor to put this[5](#) over," the chairman of the War Labor Board declared in an interview. "That is another reason for upholding the hands of leaders of organized labor."[6](#) In exchange for enforcing the no-strike pledge, unions had their hands upheld by being granted rights that greatly aided their growth, while making them less vulnerable to pressure from their own rank and file. The unions' problem, as Joel Seidman put it in *American Labor from Defense to Reconversion*, was this:

"Since the right to strike was suspended, how could they produce the rapid improvements in wages and working conditions and the prompt and satisfactory settlement of grievances that would sell unionism to nonmembers and keep old members paying their dues? How could they cooperate with management to boost production as required by war needs, if their time and energy had to go, month after month, into the routine but exhausting tasks of signing up new members and keeping old ones satisfied, so that union strength would be preserved and the treasury maintained? How could they build the responsible type of unionism demanded by the nation at war without the power afforded by a security clause to discipline those who violated the contract or broke union rules? How could they afford to be discriminating on grievances, refusing to waste valuable time on those of little or no merit, if the workers thus of fended were free to quit the union and persuade their friends to do likewise? If union leaders were to meet their responsibilities under wartime conditions, they argued, they had to be assured that their membership would remain high and their treasuries full."[7](#)

In most cases, the board met this need for "union security" by setting up maintenance-of-membership provisions, under which no union member could quit for the duration of the contract. Thus the union was "safe-guarded against shrinkage of membership and relieved of the necessity of reselling itself to the membership every month."[8](#) Maintenance of membership "protected the union from those new employees who did not wish to join or those old employees who became dissatisfied."[9](#) By making the unions dependent on the government instead of on their members, it kept them "responsible." As the board decision on maintenance-of-membership put it:

By and large, the maintenance of a stable union membership makes for the maintenance of responsible union leadership and responsible union discipline, makes for keeping faithfully the terms of the contract, and provides a stable basis for union-management cooperation for more efficient production. If union leadership is responsible and cooperative, then irresponsible and uncooperative members cannot escape discipline by getting out of the union and thus disrupt relations and hamper production.[10](#)

The board also declared:

Too often members of unions do not maintain their membership because they resent the discipline of a responsible leadership. A rival but less responsible leadership feels the pull of temptation to obtain and maintain leadership by relaxing discipline, by refusing to cooperate with the company, and sometimes with unfair and demagogic attacks on the company. It is in

the interests of management, these companies have found, to cooperate with the unions for the maintenance of a more stable, responsible leadership.¹¹

Further, the board could hold the threat of refusing maintenance of membership as a club over any unions that did not cooperate. "Even a stoppage of a few hours, when engaged in deliberately by a union, was enough evidence of irresponsibility for the Board to deny it the protection of the membership maintenance clause."¹² For example, on September 19, 1942, the board denied a union security clause for an AFL union at the General Electric Company in Buffalo because it had gone on strike for a few hours in June.

The unions thrived under these conditions. By some measures the greatest growth of union membership in American history came in this period of collaboration with management and government. By 1946, 69 percent of production workers in manufacturing were covered by collective bargaining agreements, including almost all of the largest corporations.¹³

At first, the power of the government and the unions, combined with general support for the war, virtually put an end to strikes. The chairman of the War Labor Board called labor's no-strike policy an "outstanding success."¹⁴ Five months after Pearl Harbor was bombed, he reported that there had not been a single authorized strike and that every time a wildcat walkout had occurred, union officials had done all they could to end it. With the exception of a series of successful strikes by the United Mine Workers in 1943, the unions continued to play this role until the end of the war.

Faced with this united front of government, employers, and their own unions, workers developed the technique of quick, unofficial strikes independent of and even against the union structure on a far larger scale than ever before. The number of such strikes began to rise in the summer of 1942, and by 1944, the last full year of the war; more strikes took place than in any previous year in American history,¹⁵ averaging 5.6 days apiece.¹⁶ Jerome Scott and George Homans, two Harvard sociologists studying wildcats, reported that "the responsible leaders of the unions were as weak as management in dealing with 'quickies,' and the government, for all its new machinery, almost as weak."¹⁷

Scott and Homans described a detailed study of 118 work stop pages in Detroit auto plants in December 1944 and January 1945: "Four strikes ... might be attributed to wages and more specifically attributable to union organization. Most of the strikes were protests against discipline, protests against certain company policies, or protests against the discharge of one or more employees."¹⁸ Many involved all three. For example, one strike record read, "7 employees stopped work in protest of discharge of employee for refusing to perform his operation; 5 of this 7 were discharged when they refused to return to work; 320 employees then stopped work and left plant."¹⁹ "If one added to this, that the international union was unsuccessful, and that the War Labor Board succeeded only after a time, in getting the men to go back to work, one would have the picture of a characteristic quickie," Scott and Homans concluded.²⁰

The sense of solidarity was strong enough so that wildcats often expanded on a large scale. In February 1944, 6,500 Pennsylvania anthracite miners struck to protest the discharge of a fellow worker. Ten thousand workers at the Briggs Manufacturing Company in Detroit struck for one day over a cutback in work schedules. Ten thousand workers at the Timken Roller Bearing Company in Canton, Ohio, struck twice in June 1944 over the general refusal of the employer to settle grievances. In September 1944, 20,000 workers struck for two days at the Ford Willow Run bomber plant against the transfer of workers in violation of seniority rules.²¹

This form of resistance became an industrial tradition, into which new workers were initiated. For instance, one company set a high output standard in an operation in which many young

and inexperienced workers were employed. The newcomers strove to meet the standard until an old-timer came and told them they ought to stick together and turn out a good deal less. The company fired the old-timer and several of the new workers; the other workers in the plant responded with a wildcat.²²

Those who worked together functioned as an informal organization. As Scott and Homans found, "In almost all instances a wildcat strike presupposes communication and a degree of informal group organization. The strike had some kind of leadership, usually from within the group, and the leaders do some kind of planning, if only but a few hours or minutes ahead."²³ Many official labor leaders, in contrast, "were dealing more with War Labor Board decisions and policies relating to the union as a whole than with the feeling of the men in the lines.... Company president could have been more bewildered and irritated than a representative of the central office of the union, called in to stop a wildcat strike."²⁴

In many cases, the strikes were directed against decisions of the War Labor Board. For example, in October 1943, the union representing workers at the National Malleable and Steel Castings Company in Cleveland requested a wage increase from the board. After nine months, the board granted an increase of only two and one-half cents an hour; in late July, 1,100 workers struck against the decision. Similarly, maintenance workers in twenty Detroit-area auto plants struck in October 1944, idling 50,000, when their request for an eleven-cent increase in hourly wages sat before the board for nine months without action.²⁵

The unions and the employers worked hand-in-hand to suppress the wildcats. For example, at the Bell Aircraft Corporation plant in Marietta, Georgia, employees in the electrical department, most of them women, left their jobs after the transfer of a supervisor. Union officials ordered them back to work, but the workers held out for six hours. Next they were called to a meeting in the plant labor relations office. Union officials told them they had forfeited union protection when they broke the no-strike pledge, then company officials handed out discharge slips to the seventy workers.²⁶ In the Akron rubber industry, "some plants had work stoppages almost daily over minor grievances, dissatisfaction with wage rates." In a typical response, United Rubber Workers president Sherman H. Dahymple one week expelled seventy-two combat-tire-band builders who participated in a wildcat at General Tire and Rubber, and two mill-room workers blamed for leading a strike at Goodyear. This amounted to firing, Business Week reported: "was obliged to conform to the maintenance of membership clause in the rubber contracts and dismiss the expelled workers because they are no longer union members in good standing.... General and Goodyear are expected to notify the appropriate local draft boards of the dismissals, and the change in occupational status of the strikers may subject them to re classification."²⁷ When Dalrymple's home local, Goodrich Local 5, retaliated by voting to expel him for violating the union constitution, the union's executive board backed down and reinstated all but seven of the wildcatters.

Detroit, the center of U.S. defense production, was likewise the center of the strike movement. Detroit papers had carried reports on a dozen strikes a week on the average for the first three months of 1944. At Ford, two or three a week was common. Occasionally they became violent. For example, a crowd of workers overpowered a plant protection man and demolished the office and records of a labor relations officer for whom they were searching. The president of the Ford local promised to take "whatever measures are necessary to wipe out rowdiness in Local 600." Twenty-six "ringleaders" were fired and ninety-five more were disciplined with the tacit approval of the UAW officials. "Implementation of this policy in the Ford case was hailed by management people, who feel that only a few examples of this kind are necessary to bring labor relations back to a level keel," Business Week reported.²⁸ When

members of Local 600 moved for a strike vote against the penalties, the officers quickly adjourned the meeting.

During the forty-four months from Pearl Harbor to V-J Day, there were 14,471 strikes involving 6,774,000 strikers: more than during any period of comparable length in United States history.²⁹ In 1944 alone, 369,000 steel and iron workers, 389,000 auto workers, 363,000 other transportation equipment workers, and 278,000 miners were involved in strikes.³⁰ In many cases, the "quickie" tactics were extremely effective in improving working conditions and easing the burden of company discipline. Workers virtually made extra holidays for themselves around Christmas and New Year's, holding illicit plant parties and cutting production to a trickle. Workers often created free time for themselves on the job by other means. On one occasion, workers in an aircraft plant staged a necktie-cutting party in the middle of working hours, roaming through the plant snipping off ties of fellow workers, supervisors, and managers. The wildcat tradition and organization gave workers a direct counter-power over such management decisions as the speed of work, number of workers per task, assignment of foremen, and organization of work. While the effects are impossible to measure, industry representatives claimed a decrease of "labor efficiency" of 20 to 50 percent during the war period."³¹

No doubt most union leaders would have liked a continuation of wartime conditions protection by government and cooperation with management into the post-war period. Presidents Murray and Green of the CIO and AFL signed a "Charter of Industrial Peace" with Eric Johnston, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in March 1945. "It's Industrial Peace for the Post-War Period!" read the front-page headline of C.I.O. News.³² But this was mostly wishful thinking. As early as July 1944, The New York Times acknowledged "labor-management antagonisms which forecast a post-war period of great turmoil in labor relations."³³ The real question was not whether there would be strikes, but whether they would be union-controlled or wildcats. Business Week found many who expected "large numbers of quickie strikes.... Analysts admit that the end results of such stoppages may prove as substantial as those of the premeditated, big-league strikes."³⁴

Business was resolved to "restore efficiency" and raise productivity in many cases below pre-war standards by breaking the de facto control of production won by workers during the war. To this end, employers demanded from the unions "company security" against wildcats and recognition of management's "right to manage." The unions' program after the war was, as industrial relations specialist Clark Kerr put it, "a continuation substantially of the status quo."³⁵ Union officials set as their main bargaining objective the maintenance of wartime incomes. Through loss of overtime and down grading of workers, the weekly wages of non-war workers decreased 10 percent between spring 1945 and winter 1946; war workers lost 31 percent³⁶ and were making 11 percent less-spendable income than they were in 1941³⁷. A government study released in May 1946 found that "in most cases, wages during the first phase of reconversion were inadequate for the maintenance of living standards permitted by earnings in the year preceding the Pearl Harbor attack."³⁸ To compensate for these losses and to re-establish rank-and-file support, the unions bargained for substantial increases in hourly wages.

With the end of the war, the expected strike wave began. In September 1945, the first full month after the Japanese surrender, the number of work days lost to strikes doubled. It doubled again in October.³⁹ Forty-three thousand oil workers struck in twenty states on September 16.⁴⁰ Two hundred thousand coal miners struck on September 21 to support the supervisory employees' demand for collective bargaining. Forty-four thousand Northwest lumber workers, seventy thousand Midwest truck drivers, and forty thousand machinists in San Francisco and Oakland all struck. East Coast longshoremen struck for nineteen days, flat

glass workers for 102 days, and New England textile workers for 133 days.⁴¹ These were but a prelude to the great strikes of 1945 and 1946.

Three days after Japan surrendered, the United Auto Workers requested from General Motors a 30 percent increase in wage rates without a price increase to maintain incomes. The company offered a 10 percent cost-of-living increase and told the union its prices were none of the union's business. United Auto Workers president R.J. Thomas stated he hoped that a settlement could be reached "without a work stoppage," but by early September some ninety auto and auto parts plants around Detroit were already on strike, and the union decided to order a strike vote.⁴² When GM failed to respond to a union offer to have all issues settled by arbitration if the company would open its books for public examination, 225,000 workers walked out November 21.

The auto strikers were soon joined by workers throughout industry. On January 15, 1946, 174,000 electrical workers struck. The next day, 93,000 meatpackers walked out. On January 21, 750,000 steel workers struck, the largest strike in United States history. At the height of these and 250 lesser disputes, 1.6 million workers were on strike.⁴³ On April 1, 340,000 soft-coal miners struck, causing a nation wide brown-out. A nationwide railroad strike by engineers and train men over work-rule changes on May 23 brought "an almost complete shutdown of the nation's commerce."⁴⁴

The first six months of 1946 marked what the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics called "the most concentrated period of labor-management strife in the country's history," with 2,970,000 workers involved in strikes starting in this period.⁴⁵ The strike wave was not limited to industrial workers. Strikes were unusually widespread among teachers, municipal workers, and utility workers, and there were more strikes in transportation, communication, and public utilities than in any previous year.⁴⁶ By the end of 1946, 4.6 million workers had been involved in strikes; their average length was four times that of the war period.⁴⁷

The government moved in quickly to contain the strike movement. As President Harry Truman wrote, "it was clear to me that the time had come for action on the part of the government."⁴⁸ In the auto dispute, he appointed a "fact-finding board" and appealed to the strikers to return to work pending its decision; similar boards followed for numerous other industries. The findings of the General Motors strike board, generally followed by the other boards as well, recommended a 19.5 percent wage increase, six cents above the corporation's last offer and a little more than half of what the union demanded as necessary to retain wartime incomes. General Motors refused to accept the recommendation.

Where fact-finding boards were not sufficient to set limits to the strike wave, the government turned to direct seizures, still authorized under wartime powers. On October 4, 1945, President Truman directed the Navy to seize half the refining capacity of the United States, thus breaking the oil workers' strike.⁴⁹ On January 24, 1946, the packinghouses were seized on the grounds that the strike was impeding the war effort months after the war's end and the strike was thus broken. The nation's railroads were seized May 17 to head off a nationwide strike. Workers struck anyway on May 23, and only the president's threat to draft the strikers and call up the Army to run the railroads forced them back to work. On May 21, the government seized the bituminous coal mines; the miners continued to strike, however, forcing the government to grant demands unacceptable to the operators and continue its control of the mines for many months. On November 20, the miners struck again, this time directly against the government. The government secured an injunction against the United Mine Workers, and when the miners struck anyway the union was fined \$3.5 million for contempt. As President Truman wrote, "We used the weapons that we had at hand in order to fight a rebel lion against the government."⁵⁰

The unions made little effort to combat the government's attack, despite their demonstrated power to stop virtually the entire economy. Except for the miners, workers returned to their jobs when the government seized their industries, and in most cases they accepted the recommendations of the fact-finding boards, even though these admittedly meant a decline in workers' incomes below wartime levels. Indeed, by May 1947 a year after the big strikes the average worker had less purchasing power than in January 1941.⁵¹ In March 1947, auto and basic steel workers were making almost 25 percent less than they were two years before.⁵²

Nor did the unions generally attempt to combine their strength, even within the AFL or CIO. Each union made settlements without consideration of others still on strike. Thus the division of the working class that had been the source of so much criticism of craft unionism was reproduced on a larger scale by the new forms of industrial unionism. This contrasts with the high level of rank-and-file solidarity, indicated not only by the nationwide strikes of 1946 but also by general strikes in Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Stamford, Connecticut; Rochester, New York; and Oakland, California.

Indeed, most union leaders would have preferred to avoid the strikes of 1946 altogether. They led them only because the rank and file were determined to strike anyway, and only by leading the strikes could the unions retain control of them. In a widely cited Collier's article, business analyst Peter F. Drucker pointed out that in the major strikes of 1945 and 1946, "it was on the whole not the leadership which forced the workers into a strike but worker pressure that forced a strike upon the reluctant leadership; most of the leaders knew very well that they could have gained as much by negotiations as they finally gained by striking. And again and again the rank and file of the union membership refused to go back to work."⁵³

The attitude of top union officials was embodied in the preamble to the 1947 U.S. Steel contract, in which company officials pronounced that they were not anti-union, and union officials stated they were not anti-company but were "sincerely concerned with the best interests and well-being of the business."⁵⁴

Far from trying to break the unions, management in the large corporations had learned how to use them to control the workers. General Motors' foremost demand in 1946 auto negotiations was "union responsibility for uninterrupted production."⁵⁵ The unions were willing to continue their role in disciplining the labor force. Ninety-two percent of contracts in 1945 provided automatic arbitration of grievances,⁵⁶ and 90 percent of contracts pledged no strikes during the course of the agreement by 1947.⁵⁷ Wildcat action on the part of workers was the predictable result of this union-management cooperation. In U.S. Steel alone, there were sixty-three unauthorized strikes in 1946.⁵⁸

The war integrated the American economy more than ever before. The conditions affecting workers in 1946 cut across industry lines, leading to the closest thing to a national general strike of industry in the twentieth century. The potential capacity of the workers to paralyze not just one company or industry but the entire country was demonstrated. At the same time, even simple wage settlements affected the entire economy. Therefore the government took over the function of regulating wages for the whole of industry. In this situation, the trade unions played an essential role in forestalling what might otherwise have been a general confrontation between the workers of a great many industries and the government, supporting the employers. The unions were unable to prevent the post-war strike wave, but by leading it they managed to keep it under control. Nonetheless, they were unable to prevent wildcat strikes and other direct challenges by workers to management control.

Text originally from Brecher's excellent book, Strike!, lightly edited for accuracy from www.prole.info

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