

This PDF is a selection from an out-of-print volume from the National Bureau of Economic Research

Volume Title: Ebb and Flow in Trade Unionism

Volume Author/Editor: Leo Wolman

Volume Publisher: UMI

Volume ISBN: 0-87014-029-9

Volume URL: <http://www.nber.org/books/wolm36-1>

Publication Date: 1936

Chapter Title: Affiliated and Independent Unions

Chapter Author: Leo Wolman

Chapter URL: <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c2759>

Chapter pages in book: (p. 135 - 146)

## CHAPTER IX

### Affiliated and Independent Unions

**I**N THE conduct of their internal affairs and in their relations with one another, unions are continually faced with political problems typical of popular democratic movements. Initiating and guiding the public opinion of their members and adjusting inevitable internal conflicts of interest are among the normal activities of all labor organizations. To achieve harmonious relations among the numerous unions that comprise an organized labor movement political policies must be formulated and arrangements made. In the pursuit of such activities frequent and sharp differences of opinion arising from divergent views as to policy, structure and tactics, and from the clash of personalities, are to be expected.

Differences of this kind have, in the history of organized labor in the United States, vitally affected the composition of the labor movement and prevailing relations among its constituent elements. The American Federation of Labor itself originated in a conflict with a rival organization—the Knights of Labor, the dominant factor in the labor movement of this country during the decade 1880–90. And since the establishment of the Federation some ten years before the turn of the century, changing conceptions of the functions of unions and developments in the organization of industry have given rise to successive conflicts which

have resulted in either threatened or actual revisions in the structure of the organized labor movement.

American labor unions consist of two classes of organization—those affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and those independent of it. Of the 141 national unions in existence in the United States in 1934, 109 were affiliated with the Federation. Since 1890, both the number and relationship of these two classes of organization have from time to time radically changed in response to various internal and external factors. The most striking change has been the increase in the membership of affiliated unions. In 1897 the independent unions had nearly 40 per cent of the total membership of the movement. But the Federation has gradually absorbed many of the independent unions and in 1934 the membership of the latter had declined to only 16 per cent of the total. Continual efforts of the Federation to achieve greater unity in the movement have brought many large organizations within the fold. Thus, to mention only several of the more important unions, the Stone Cutters became affiliated in 1907, the Railway Carmen in 1910, the Western Federation of Miners in 1911, the Bricklayers at the end of 1916, the Letter Carriers in 1917, and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers in 1933. The railroad brotherhoods remain the most important group of independent unions. In 1934, when the aggregate membership of all independent unions was 578,600, the smallest since 1911, roughly one-half of the total was that of the railroad unions. The number of members in affiliated and independent unions, 1897–1934, is shown in Table 35 and Chart 5.

Unions independent of the American Federation of Labor are of two types—the traditionally separatist railroad unions which, though independent, are on friendly terms with Federation

unions, and organizations that challenge the jurisdiction of affiliated unions and become therefore involved in conflict with them and with the Federation. These conflicts have in the main arisen out of factionalism within unions. But upon different occasions outside groups, dissatisfied with the management and accomplishments of particular union administrations, have attempted to set up rival independent unions. In troubled times when all unions find it difficult to preserve their power and maintain labor standards in industry, the weakest become vulnerable to attack, and independent unions may be organized either as a result of a split in an established union or by the creation of a new organization. Contrariwise, during periods of union expansion, like the War era or the period of the NRA, the rush to unionize unorganized industries may produce several new unions in the same field which compete for jurisdiction and membership.

Among contemporary independent unions the several unions in the shoe industry were organized in protest against the alleged ineffectiveness of the oldest union of shoe workers, the Boot and Shoe Workers Union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. The combined membership of the independent unions is at present larger than that of the Boot and Shoe Workers. The Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which was started in 1914, was composed of organized clothing workers who for similar reasons seceded from the United Garment Workers, an A. F. of L. affiliate, and formed an independent union. The jurisdictional dispute between this union and its parent organization lasted nearly twenty years and was settled only in 1933 by the adjustment of conflicting jurisdictional claims and the admission of the Amalgamated into the Federation.

In the mining industry there was no independent unionism after

138 EBB AND FLOW IN TRADE UNIONISM

TABLE 35

UNIONS AFFILIATED WITH THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND INDEPENDENT UNIONS, AVERAGE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP, 1897-1934 <sup>1</sup>

YEAR	AFFILIATED UNIONS		INDEPENDENT UNIONS <sup>2</sup>	
	Membership	Percentage of total	Membership	Percentage of total
1897	272,100	60.9	174,900	39.1
1898	311,500	62.2	189,200	37.8
1899	409,800	67.1	201,200	32.9
1900	625,200	72.0	243,300	28.0
1901	854,300	76.0	270,400	24.0
1902	1,064,800	77.4	311,100	22.6
1903	1,555,800	81.3	358,100	18.7
1904	1,681,800	81.1	390,900	18.9
1905	1,597,900	79.0	424,400	21.0
1906	1,469,100	77.0	438,200	23.0
1907	1,542,300	74.1	538,100	25.9
1908	1,625,300	76.3	505,300	23.7
1909	1,523,900	76.0	481,700	24.0
1910	1,586,600	74.1	553,900	25.9
1911	1,787,200	72.9	556,200	23.7
1912	1,817,600	74.1	634,800	25.9
1913	2,050,900	75.5	665,400	24.5
1914	2,061,100	76.7	626,000	23.3
1915	1,968,300	76.2	614,300	23.8
1916	2,123,700	76.6	649,000	23.4
1917	2,456,900	80.3	604,500	19.7
1918	2,825,200	81.5	642,100	18.5
1919	3,338,900	80.9	786,300	19.1
1920	4,093,000	81.1	954,800	18.9
1921	3,966,600	83.0	814,700	17.0
1922	3,273,400	81.3	754,000	18.7
1923	2,918,900	80.6	703,100	19.4
1924	2,853,000	80.7	683,100	19.3
1925	2,830,800	80.4	688,600	19.6
1926	2,714,800	77.5	787,600	22.5

<sup>1</sup> The membership of affiliated and independent unions by groups is given in the Appendix, Table X.

<sup>2</sup> Does not include the membership of unions affiliated with the Trade Union Unity League.

## AFFILIATED AND INDEPENDENT UNIONS 139

TABLE 35—*Continued*

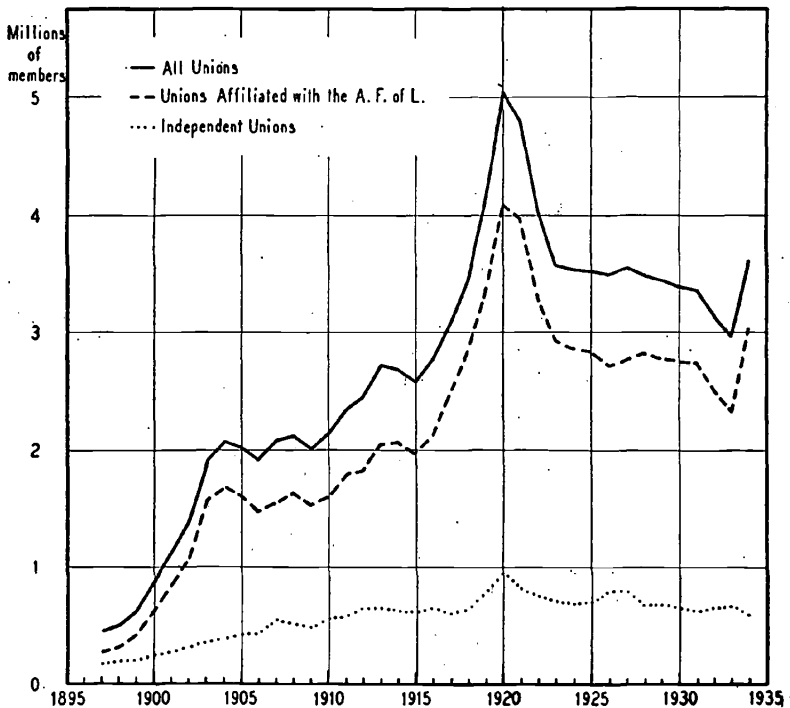
UNIONS AFFILIATED WITH THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR AND  
INDEPENDENT UNIONS, AVERAGE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP, 1897-1934 <sup>1</sup>

YEAR	AFFILIATED UNIONS		INDEPENDENT UNIONS <sup>2</sup>	
	Membership	Percentage of total	Membership	Percentage of total
1927	2,759,200	77.8	787,300	22.2
1928	2,808,600	80.7	671,200	19.3
1929	2,769,700	80.5	672,900	19.5
1930	2,745,300	80.9	647,500	19.1
1931	2,743,000	81.7	615,100	18.3
1932	2,497,000	79.4	647,300	20.6
1933	2,317,500	78.0	655,500	22.0
1934	3,030,000	84.0	578,600	16.0

the absorption of the Western Federation of Miners by the American Federation of Labor in 1911 until the post-War decline of the United Mine Workers. The weakness of this union in the soft coal industry after 1927 resulted in extensive organizing activities by a communist union of coal miners and also in the establishment of an independent union—the Progressive Miners of America—in the Illinois coal fields. This union, claiming 35,000 members, still exists. In the anthracite coal industry continued business depression and the shut-down of many mines after 1929 led to the organization of an independent union called the United Anthracite Workers which was dissolved in October 1935. The members of this union were almost exclusively unemployed anthracite miners.

The anticipated spread of unionism in the totally unorganized automobile industry, following the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, gave birth to several new labor organizations in 1933 and 1934. The more important of these were the Mechanics Educational Society, the Associated Automobile Workers, and the Automobile Industrial Workers Association, all

CHART 5  
AFFILIATED AND INDEPENDENT UNIONS,  
MEMBERSHIP, 1897-1934



of which challenged the jurisdiction of the newly organized United Automobile Workers National Union, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Somewhat the same conditions explain the rise of several independent local unions of public utility employees now competing for membership with the Electrical Workers Union and other affiliated organizations. The independent union of shipbuilding workers—the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America—owes its origin to the alleged failure of the national craft unions to organize the employees of this industry. The National Federation of Federal Employees withdrew in 1932 from the American Federation of Labor because

of a dispute over policy. Shortly thereafter a new union, the American Federation of Government Employees, was chartered by the American Federation of Labor and the two organizations now compete for members among government employees.

A novel combination of circumstances accounts for the recent rise in the number of independent railway unions. Organized labor has long been more firmly established on the railroads than in most other American industries. While the train-service employees have been the most thoroughly organized, an effective filip was given to organization among the other classes of employees by the labor policies of the government during the period of war control. The relinquishment of governmental control not only removed valuable support but soon encouraged some railroad companies to replace the standard railroad unions with company unions and various plans of employee-representation. An Act of Congress, amending the Railway Labor Act of May 20, 1926, was approved on June 21, 1934.<sup>1</sup> The provisions of this Act forbidding the railroad companies "to use the funds of the carrier in maintaining or assisting or contributing to any labor organization . . ." (Sec. 2, par. 4) radically transformed the status of company unions and similar associations, and initiated a movement to convert them into independent unions competing for membership with the established railroad labor organizations.

Neither the number nor the strength of these new railroad unions is known since many of them are in process of formation. But certifications of representation (see Ch. VI) issued currently by the National Mediation Board disclose the names of numerous new organizations of railway employees, organized presumably to satisfy the requirements of the law. The most important of these

<sup>1</sup> Public No. 257, 69th Cong., H.R. 9463, and Public No. 442, 73d Cong., H.R. 9861.

new national unions appears to be the Brotherhood of Railroad Shopcrafts of America. But there are other organizations, such as the Pullman Porters and Maids Protective Association, the National Association of Brakeman-Porters, and the Protective Order of Railroad Trainmen, which seem from their designations to be national in character.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a substantial number of local organizations limited to particular railroad systems and localities—such as the Clerical and Station Forces Association of the Chicago Union Station Company,<sup>3</sup> the Maintenance of Way Foremen's Association, Union Pacific System,<sup>4</sup> the Kansas City Terminal Mechanical and Car Department Employees Association,<sup>5</sup> and the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway Clerks Association<sup>6</sup>—are being formed throughout the rail transportation industry.

Types of independent labor organization that differ in essential characteristics from those hitherto described have from time to time appeared in the American labor movement. These organizations have not restricted their efforts to organizing single industries and trades, but have undertaken to establish their jurisdiction over all industry and have challenged the supremacy of all existing unions. In their policy and philosophy they have pursued what are generally regarded as more radical objectives by espousing independent political action in the form of a labor party, by urging greater militancy in the activities of organized labor, by adopting the industrial form of organization and, perhaps most important of all, by advocating drastic change in the economic organization of American society. In the last forty years

<sup>2</sup> National Mediation Board, Cases Nos. R-130, R-129, and R-64.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Case No. R-106.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Cases Nos. R-88, R-89, R-110, R-126, and R-127.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Case No. R-144.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Case No. R-62.

the more important of these independent labor movements have been the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance founded by Daniel DeLeon in 1895, the Industrial Workers of the World organized in 1905 and a second organization by the same name founded in 1911, and, since the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, the successive labor movements sponsored by the American communist party.

All these independent movements have been short lived and small in membership, although their influence has often been considerable. The Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance failed from the outset to make substantial inroads among the trade unions and was little more than the personal organ of its founder. The two organizations of the I.W.W. had at their peak in 1912 a combined membership of hardly 30,000. The communist unions have, likewise, been small and impermanent. The Trade Union Unity League, organized in 1929, was composed of unions outside the American Federation of Labor and mainly under communist leadership; but among their members were working men of all shades of political and economic opinion.

Since 1920 the communist party has attempted either to set up independent unions wherever existing unions were relatively weak and the soil of organization appeared fertile or to work within the Federation unions with a view to shaping their policies and winning their control. On September 1, 1933, according to the data included in Table 36, the unions of the Trade Union Unity League claimed 74,200 members in a variety of industries. The largest and stablest was the Fur Workers Union, a section of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union. In 1934 the party abandoned the policy of organizing independent unions and directed existing unions to dissolve and their members to join the A. F. of L. or other unions which had been growing during the

144      EBB AND FLOW IN TRADE UNIONISM

TABLE 36

UNIONS AFFILIATED WITH THE TRADE UNION UNITY LEAGUE,  
MEMBERSHIP, 1929-1935<sup>1</sup>

	1929	1930	1931	SEPTEMBER 1933 <sup>2</sup>	MARCH 1935 <sup>3</sup>
National Miners Union <sup>4</sup>	7,100	4,000	1,850	5,000	..... <sup>11</sup>
National Textile Workers Union <sup>5</sup>	4,000	1,400	1,850	5,000	..... <sup>11</sup>
Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union <sup>6</sup>	7,000	5,000	7,500	20,000	20,000 <sup>12</sup>
Marine Workers Industrial Union	.....	5,000	..... <sup>10</sup>	2,500	..... <sup>11</sup>
Auto Workers Union	.....	100	175	1,500	..... <sup>11</sup>
Shoe and Leather Workers Industrial Union	.....	2,500	450	7,000	..... <sup>11</sup>
Food Workers Industrial Union	.....	800	1,900	5,000	12,000 <sup>13</sup>
National Building Trades Committee, Building Maintenance Union <sup>7</sup>	.....	1,000	..... <sup>10</sup>	2,500	..... <sup>11</sup>
National Lumber Workers Union	.....	600	..... <sup>10</sup>	500	..... <sup>11</sup>
Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union	.....	.....	800	2,500	3,500
Metal Workers Industrial Union	.....	600	600	8,000	10,000
Railroad Brotherhoods Unity Com- mittee <sup>8</sup>	.....	2,000	300	..... <sup>10</sup>	1,500
Furniture Workers Industrial Union	.....	.....	.....	4,000	5,000
Office Workers Union	.....	.....	.....	1,000	2,500
Packinghouse Workers Industrial Union	.....	.....	.....	2,500	..... <sup>11</sup>
Tobacco Workers Industrial Union (New York)	.....	.....	.....	1,200	1,000
Laundry Workers Industrial Union (New York)	.....	.....	.....	500	..... <sup>11</sup>
Fishermen and Cannery Workers Industrial Union	.....	.....	.....	500	1,000
Miscellaneous <sup>9</sup>	.....	.....	.....	5,000	5,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,100</b>	<b>23,000</b>	<b>15,425</b>	<b>74,200</b>	<b>61,500</b>

<sup>1</sup> The data in this table were compiled by Robert W. Dunn of the Labor Research Association under date of March 28, 1935; they are, according to Mr. Dunn, incomplete because estimates of membership were for some years not available.

<sup>2</sup> As of September 1, 1933. The League estimates that its membership grew to 94,000 as a result of the strikes conducted during September 1933.

<sup>3</sup> The Trade Union Unity League went out of existence in March 1935. The March 1935 column therefore covers not Trade Union Unity League unions but independent unions that had been previously affiliated with the League.

<sup>4</sup> The National Miners Union was formed in September 1928 as a result of the secession movement from the United Mine Workers of America following the strike of 1927-28.

period of the NRA. For this reason the membership of unions affiliated with the Trade Union Unity League declined in 1935. Thus communist activity in trade unions has for the present at any rate changed its form.

In the last few years the American labor movement and particularly the American Federation of Labor appeared to be achieving greater unity in their internal affairs. The membership of independent unions was reduced more than 100,000 in 1933 and a long and bitter dispute was settled by the affiliation of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers with the A. F. of L. The change in communist policy further reduced the number of independent organizations and contributed to internal harmony. The largest block of unaffiliated unions, composed of the railroad brotherhoods, continued its cordial relations with the many Federation unions in the railroad industry. The struggle between two groups of building employees unions for control of the Building Trades

*Footnotes to Table 36 continued:*

<sup>5</sup> The National Textile Workers Union was formed in 1928.

<sup>6</sup> The Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union was formed in January 1929. The Fur Workers Union was a section of the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union.

<sup>7</sup> Does not include opposition groups within the A. F. of L.

<sup>8</sup> Formerly Railroad Workers Industrial League. The present group is not working for a separate union, but for unity of existing railroad unions and for rank and file control.

<sup>9</sup> Includes Jewelry Workers, Rubber Workers, Barbers, Paper Box Makers, and other small industrial unions and leagues.

<sup>10</sup> Membership data not available.

<sup>11</sup> In conformity with the new policy, the members of these unions have joined existing A. F. of L. or unaffiliated unions in their fields.

<sup>12</sup> This number was considerably reduced later in 1935 when the fur workers merged with the International Fur Workers, the A. F. of L. union. At its peak, this group had 35,000 members. The number was reduced to 20,000 when 15,000 joined the International Ladies Garment Workers and other Federation unions. With the absorption of the fur workers into the Federation union, the membership of this group of needle trades unions has declined to probably less than 10,000.

<sup>13</sup> The Hotel and Restaurant Section of the Amalgamated Food Workers, an unaffiliated union founded in 1921, merged with the Food Workers Industrial Union in February 1935.

Department of the American Federation of Labor was brought to a peaceful settlement. But at the convention of the Federation in October 1935, the conflict over union structure broke out anew and quickly engendered such bitterness among both the advocates of industrial and craft unionism as to create the most serious threat of disruption that the American labor movement has faced since 1885.