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# THE GROWTH OF AMERICAN TRADE UNIONS, 1880-1923

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study of the changes in the membership of American trade unions in the past 44 years was undertaken as one of a series of inquiries into the social and economic effects of changing conditions of business. As progress was made in the collection of materials, it became clear that the treatment of these materials should not be limited to a discussion of the influence of the business cycle on the movement of trade union membership. In this range of social phenomena factors other than business prosperity or depression sometimes play a controlling rôle. Public policy, developments in foreign countries, great strikes, all exert a powerful influence on the rise and decline in the membership of trade unions. The detailed facts of the changes in the numbers affiliated with labor organizations and their analysis cannot now be found in any single convenient place. For these reasons a more elaborate collection of statistics was made than would have been required for a simple analysis of the relation between the business cycle and changes in union membership.

Prior to this investigation several comprehensive studies of the same question had already been made. Professor George E. Barnett published in 1916 and in 1922 two articles on the growth of labor organization in the United States from 1897 to 1914 and from 1914 to 1920.<sup>1</sup> In 1916, also, the present author published a paper on the extent of labor organization in the United States in 1910, in which the membership of trade unions in that year

<sup>1</sup> "Growth of Labor Organization in the United States, 1897-1914," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. XXX, Aug., 1916; "The Present Position of American Trade Unionism," *American Economic Review*, Supplement, Vol. XII, No. 1, March, 1922.

was compared with the numbers gainfully employed in industry.<sup>1</sup> This study carries the earlier data through the year 1923 and presents an account of the size of the labor movement in the period from 1880 to 1897. The tables from Professor Barnett's two earlier papers are reprinted here. They have, however, been modified in several important respects. Where, in a few instances, trade unions have been able to supply the statistics of membership from their own records, these figures were used in place of the records of the American Federation of Labor. Several unions, whose membership was not available to Professor Barnett, have now submitted their figures and they are included in the revised tables. The new tables indicate also for each union and for each year their state of affiliation with or independence of the American Federation of Labor. In order, furthermore, to indicate the general nature of the growth or decline of the American labor movement before 1897, incomplete series of membership statistics are presented for the period from 1880 to 1897. The analysis, likewise, of the extent of organization among occupied persons was brought up to date by comparing the membership of trade unions in 1920 with the occupation statistics of the decennial census of that year. Here again the necessities of comparability required the reproduction, in revised form, of two tables on the extent of organization in 1910.

In the United States as elsewhere there are a substantial number of organizations, exclusively composed of workmen, which more or less closely resemble the trade union both in structure and function. Decision as to their inclusion in this study must of necessity be in large measure arbitrary. No attempt has been made to draft a refined definition of a bona fide trade union or labor organization. Such associations as company unions and works councils, which are not affiliated with existing labor organizations, are commonly and widely regarded as different from the trade union, for a variety of reasons which need not be the subject of inquiry here. This prevailing view is accepted as the basis of choice and under it all company unions are excluded from the present

<sup>1</sup> "The Extent of Labor Organization in the United States in 1910," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. XXX, May, 1916. See also Leo Wolman, "The Extent of Trade Unionism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* January, 1917.

study. It should be noted, however, that the distinction in any case between trade unions and other workmen's associations is frequently a vague and changing one. What is today a company union may tomorrow have all of the characteristics of a trade union. Thus in their early history several of the railroad brotherhoods were forbidden by their own laws the use of the strike. While company unions and like associations, which have in the last decade experienced a rapid growth in this country, are similarly undergoing radical modification in their habits and conduct, it is clear that their course is on the whole still shaped by forces other than those which affect the strength of trade unions. The membership of company unions, then, is properly the subject for separate and independent inquiry.

During, roughly, the last half century the membership of the American trade unions has twice reached striking peaks, from which it has later descended. The first peak was achieved in 1887 when membership rose to about 1,000,000 and the second in 1920 when it exceeded 5,000,000. In each case the labor movement failed to hold its maximum numbers. Following 1887 the losses suffered by labor unions were so great that membership in the early nineties was probably little more than a few hundred thousand; and since 1920 the unions have lost more than one and a quarter millions. The two situations are not, however, analogous. The labor movement of the eighties was a labor movement in the process of discovering itself; it was torn by internal conflict; and it was engaged in finding the form and methods of effective organization. The resolution of these forces of internal dissension and the realization of some concensus of opinion regarding a program of development left the movement in the middle nineties small, but started on a new career. Thereafter the rise in members has been almost continuous and has always been large. The first great break came with the industrial depression of 1921 and has lasted for most unions through 1923. In this last year, however, the labor movement has still a membership of close to 4,000,000, roughly 1,000,000 greater than it was in the years before the World War and more than 3,000,000 above the membership in 1897 when the movement may be said to have entered upon its present phase.

In the years before the war, when membership rose from about 450,000 to 2,750,000, the gains from year to year were made by the craft unions in the building trades, steam railroad and printing industries, and by the coming into power of the United Mine Workers. In fact, during almost the whole of this period, nearly half of the total membership was to be found in the transportation and building groups, while the rest were scattered over the entire range of industries and services. Only in a few places like the coal mines and glass and stone industries was there a like concentration of union membership.

This condition was changed quite radically in the years from 1915 to 1920 by the extensive spread of unionism among the semi-skilled and unskilled and into industries, hitherto almost totally unorganized. Unions in the textile industry and in packing and slaughter houses grew by leaps and bounds. The metal unions increased fourfold by accessions in the metal industries proper and in railroad shops. In steam transportation the striking gains were made by unions, only slightly successful before, like the Maintenance of Way Employees and the Railway Clerks; and at the same time water transportation rose to the class of highly organized industries, due in the main to the spectacular growth of the seamen's and longshoremen's unions.

Partly as a result of the temporary effects of industrial depression and partly the effect of the permanent liquidation of war industries, the period from 1920 to 1923 was one of falling membership. In the drop practically all labor organizations shared. Those which had been most heavily represented in the war industries and which had experienced the most substantial gains, were in the period of deflation the heaviest losers. The metal and transportation unions alone contributed about 60 per cent of the total loss in this period. The textile and packing-house unions lost about as much as they had gained. As before, the established organizations of skilled craftsmen, like the railway brotherhoods; the trade unions of skilled workers in the building trades, like the bricklayers' union; and the United Mine Workers retained what they had won. The rest of the unions appear to be in 1923 on a slightly higher level of membership than they were in the pre-war years, but they still remain much below the heights they had

climbed in 1920. In the clothing industry, alone, among the industries which were weak in labor organization before the war, is unionism now on a new and higher level than that of 1914. The chemical, food, iron and steel, metal and textile industries are now, as they have been for many years, in the main poorly organized. Aggregate membership in these industries is substantial, but in proportion to the number employed in them it is slight.

Measured by the number included in its ranks, the position of the American Federation of Labor is relatively stronger at the end than at the beginning of the period, 1897-1923. In 1897, nearly 40 per cent of the total membership of American unions was claimed by labor organizations independent of the American Federation of Labor; by 1923 the membership of independents had dropped to 19 per cent of the total. This trend is attributable to the fact that the group of independent unions, composed largely of the railroad unions, has not grown by the addition of new independent organizations. Of the outstanding independent unions not in the railroad group, the bricklayers and Western Federation of Miners finally became affiliated, but the Amalgamated Clothing Workers has remained independent. New unions are generally sponsored by the Federation and naturally become affiliated with that organization from the very outset. Since it is the new and weak unions which have the greatest capacity for growth, it is not surprising that affiliated membership has grown more rapidly than that of the independent unions.

The number of women in trade unions has in the decade from 1910 to 1920 increased almost fivefold. Compared, however, with the working population of women, the number in unions is still small and in all industries women are much less organized than men. The principal cause of this condition is, of course, the fact that women work largely in occupations such as trade and domestic service, in which men are also poorly organized, and that they do not work in industries like building and mining, in which the extent of trade union organization is very great indeed. In general, it appears to be true that in industries where both men and women work, an onrush of labor organization brings both men and women into the union, but, unless membership is protected by some such

device as the closed shop, the male members become relatively more numerous than the female.

The statistics of union membership, which are the basis of the conclusions just cited, are obtained either directly or indirectly from unions themselves. Although unions are in large part fighting organizations that might be expected on occasion to derive advantage from either concealing their strength or exaggerating it, their reports bear, with few exceptions, every evidence of accuracy and truthfulness. The striking losses in membership following the business recessions of 1914 and 1921 are faithfully reported by all of the unions. Wherever it was possible to check published figures of membership against the financial statements of the union, the essential accuracy of the published data was established. In a few minor instances figures reported by the union appeared to be padded and in those cases the union statistics were replaced by independent estimates. Where, also, the union refused or was unable to give any figures, as was the case with the Industrial Workers of the World and the Amalgamated Textile Workers, no data were put into the tables.

It is unfortunate for the purposes of this investigation that it was found impossible to collect monthly statistics of membership. Since business fluctuations are not synchronous in all industry, the monthly data would probably have brought to light many important correlations which are concealed in the annual statistics. A comparison, similarly, of the relation between paid-up membership and the number of members in arrears would have indicated with greater precision than do the present figures the effect of business conditions on the strength of unions. But, aside from the fact that the rules concerning lapsing of membership vary widely from union to union, such data were in no form available for publication. The figures used, then, represent annual membership. Even the annual statistics are not free of the danger of misinterpretation. Some unions report as their annual membership the average in a calendar year; others the average in a fiscal year; and still others, the membership on a specified day in each year. The resultant data, consequently, constitute a composite in which actual minor and frequent fluctuations do not appear.

Much, likewise, could have been learned from a detailed study

of the geographical distribution of the membership of American labor organizations, and many attempts were made to collect the raw materials for such a study. They did not, however, meet with success. Some unions did not keep their records in such a form as to permit the geographical classification of their membership. Others, which had adequate records, were unable, because of the strategic significance of the figures, to publish them. Trial computations of the membership of local unions, based on their voting strength in the conventions of the national unions, disclosed serious discrepancies and inconsistencies and forced the rejection of such estimates. Even to a greater degree the statistics of membership of state federations of labor and of central labor councils proved fragmentary and unsatisfactory. The concentration of labor organizations in the large cities of the East and Middle West and in the coal mining areas is, of course, generally known. The essential character of the American labor movement cannot, however, be properly appreciated until its sectional distribution is accurately and fully measured.

Except for these gaps, the underlying data are reliable. The statistics of the last ten years, however, are superior in accuracy to those of the preceding period and they are constantly improving. This is due to the fact that the central offices of trade unions in the United States have had their most marked development in recent years. Unions have for many years been adding to the efficiency of their central and local offices and are improving their bookkeeping and accounting systems. The benefit-paying unions have, of course, always kept excellent records; but for the great bulk of labor organizations, the maintenance of adequate records is a practice of comparatively recent origin.

The most convenient single source for the statistics of union membership is the annual convention proceedings of the American Federation of Labor. Since 1897 each annual report of the proceedings contains a table showing the voting strength of each affiliated national or international union and of all directly affiliated local unions. According to the constitution of the Federation<sup>1</sup> each delegate to the annual convention can "cast one vote for every one hundred members or major fraction thereof he represents."

<sup>1</sup> Article IV, sec. 3.



The voting strength of a union is computed from the monthly payment of per capita tax to the American Federation of Labor.<sup>1</sup> The membership of each organization is, therefore, obtained by multiplying its voting strength by one hundred. In the main, figures so derived are reliable and useful. Occasionally, however, a union will pay to the Federation the per capita tax on a fixed membership, either for the purpose of concealing its real strength, to save money, or as a matter of convenience alone.<sup>2</sup> For these reasons the statistics were obtained, wherever possible, from the records of the unions. In the remaining cases the figures used were those published in the proceedings of the Federation.

Fluctuations in the membership of the American Federation of Labor do not, however, satisfactorily reflect changes in the membership of the total labor movement. As at present constituted and almost throughout its whole history, the American labor movement has been composed of many diverse elements. There were for example in 1923, 108 national and international unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Not all of these organizations have been continuously affiliated with the Federation. The bricklayers' union became affiliated only a few years ago; the Western Federation of Miners remained independent for a long period and finally for a few years became an affiliated organization. As existing unions are added or dropped from the roster of the Federation, the membership of that organization would show changes not representative of the variations in the total membership of trade unions. In addition to such unions as these, which have had a changing relationship with the American Federation of Labor, there are a group of large national unions, like the railroad brotherhoods and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, which have always been independent of the Federation. The membership of such unions does not, of course, appear in the Federation proceedings but it is included in the tables of this study. Scattered over the

<sup>1</sup> Article IV, sec. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Hugh Frayne points out that in periods of depression and widespread unemployment many unions will pay per capita taxes to the American Federation of Labor only on their dues-paying membership, while they retain on their books a substantial number of bona fide members who have, because of unemployment, fallen in arrears. Where this is the case, the membership statistics of the American Federation of Labor underestimate the effective membership of its affiliated organizations. This condition no doubt accounts for a portion of the drop in membership since 1920.

country are a substantial number of independent local unions affiliated neither with the American Federation of Labor nor with the independent national organizations. Important unions of this type, like the Tapestry Carpet Workers, the Mechanical Workers' Union of Amsterdam, N. Y., and others, play a considerable part in the labor movement in the textile industry. To collect the statistics of membership of these organizations, even for a single year, would involve the taking of a census at a considerable expense, not justified by the results. They are, consequently, here omitted.<sup>1</sup>

The omission of independent local unions and of a few national unions, which refuse to publish their membership, leads to a slight underestimate in total membership. This is partly compensated for by an overestimate in the membership of local unions directly affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Directly affiliated local unions are organized by the Federation in industries and localities where there is no existing national union or where the national union is weak. As they grow in number and extent they are frequently formed into national organizations. In 1923 there were 523 of such local unions in the Federation. Since many of them, which have an average annual membership of less than fifty, are allowed at least one delegate to the convention, membership computed from their voting strength is too large. With every possible allowance for this exaggeration, it is estimated that the present total membership of American trade unions is probably from 100,000 to 200,000 greater than the totals shown in the following tables.

Most American trade unions admit to membership Canadians working in the industries over which they claim jurisdiction. Since 1911 the Canadian membership of American unions is available in the annual reports of the Canadian Department of Labor. Because this Canadian membership adds directly to the financial resources and total strength of American parent organizations, it is not de-

<sup>1</sup> Unions independent of the American Federation of Labor are of two types. The first type consists of unions, like the railroad brotherhoods, whose jurisdictional claims do not overlap those of organizations affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Unions of the second type, on the other hand, challenge the jurisdiction of affiliated organizations and are, therefore, regarded by the Federation as "dual" unions. Jurisdiction over men's clothing workers is, for example, claimed by the United Garment Workers and over all textile workers by the United Textile Workers. Accordingly, independent unions like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and many small unions of textile workers are frequently described as "dual" unions.

ducted from the total membership of the American unions. But when comparison is made between the number of organized workers and the number gainfully employed in the United States, proper deduction is in each case made of the Canadian membership.

Only in a few cases do the unions keep adequate records of female membership. It was frequently necessary, therefore, to rely for the statistics of women members on the estimates of trade union officials and to limit the study of these figures to the years 1910 and 1920. The final statistics appear to be reasonably accurate; if anything they underestimate slightly, perhaps from 25,000 to 50,000, the total female membership of American labor organizations.

Much would be gained both in accuracy and in usefulness if some agency such as the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics undertook the publication of an annual or biennial report on the statistics of union membership. The unwillingness of many labor organizations to file their statistics with public bureaus, which prevailed until recently, is now a thing of the past. The requirements of frequent reporting would inevitably lead to a closer scrutiny of the materials and hence to more reliable statistical data. This is particularly true with regard to the statistics of women membership, where the periodic issue of government reports would unquestionably bring the unions to the establishment of a permanent system of bookkeeping in which male and female membership was distinguished and separately kept.