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CHAPTER II

Union Growth Before the World War

THE modern period of American trade unionism, beginning in 1897¹ and dominated by the methods and policies of the American Federation of Labor and the independent railroad unions, resolves itself into several well-defined phases. The first phase of growth and consolidation lasted eighteen years, 1897-1914. The second phase of accelerated increase in membership, arising from the business and political conditions associated with the World War, was terminated in the last months of 1920 with the onset of the first severe post-War depression. The degree and nature of the losses suffered by organized labor during this relatively brief depression returned the movement to nearly its pre-War status. The vicissitudes of organized labor during the prosperity of the 1920's constitute the data of the next phase. This was followed by more than three years, starting in 1930 and ending about the middle of 1933, of severe losses in membership under the influence of the forces of the world depression. The present and latest phase, marked by a swift and large increase in membership as a result of economic recovery and the social policies of the government, is so far as we know not yet at its close. Over this span of thirty-eight years the unions comprising the

¹ For a discussion of the choice of 1897 as a starting point, see Leo Wolman, *The Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880-1923* (National Bureau of Economic Research, 1924), pp. 29-32.

organized labor movement of the United States have alternately gained and lost millions of members. The characteristics of these phases and the magnitude of these changes, the general course of which appears in Table 5, are the subject of this monograph.

During the first period, the eighteen years from 1897 to 1914, the number of trade unionists in this country increased two and one quarter million, or at the rate of 125,000 a year. Starting with a small but widely distributed membership, which was greatest in the construction and railroad industries but was not very powerful even there, the organized labor movement had by

TABLE 5
AMERICAN TRADE UNIONS, TOTAL MEMBERSHIP, 1897-1934 ¹

YEAR	AVERAGE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP	YEAR	AVERAGE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP	YEAR	AVERAGE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP
1897	447,000	1910	2,140,500	1923	3,622,000
1898	500,700	1911	2,343,400	1924	3,536,100
1899	611,000	1912	2,452,400	1925	3,519,400
1900	868,500	1913	2,716,300	1926	3,502,400
1901	1,124,700	1914	2,687,100	1927	3,546,500
1902	1,375,900	1915	2,582,600	1928	3,479,800
1903	1,913,900	1916	2,772,700	1929	3,442,600
1904	2,072,700	1917	3,061,400	1930	3,392,800
1905	2,022,300	1918	3,467,300	1931	3,358,100
1906	1,907,300	1919	4,125,200	1932	3,144,300
1907	2,080,400	1920	5,047,800	1933	2,973,000
1908	2,130,600	1921	4,781,300	1934	3,608,600
1909	2,005,600	1922	4,027,400		

¹ For the source of the figures in this table, see Appendix, Table I. The slight differences between the figures in this table for the years 1897-1923 and similar ones in *The Growth of American Trade Unions, 1880-1923*, p. 33, are due to revisions of the earlier data.

1914 established strong unions in parts of the coal mining industry, and among building and railroad labor, and had made some progress with the expansion of organization in manufac-

turing industries by the development of craft unions, particularly among skilled craftsmen in the metal trades. While growth was uneven and there were losses due to bad business and its concomitant spells of unemployment, the reverses suffered as a result of the business recessions of the period were not great and acted to retard the rate of growth of unions rather than to inflict severe losses upon them. Thus in only four of the eighteen years did aggregate membership decline, and for no year was the drop as great as 10 per cent.

This early period, furthermore, bore the earmarks of solid and permanent development. In contrast with the policy of its predecessor, the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor assisted in organizing local craft unions in the hope that they would spread through the industries of the country and become the nuclei of autonomous national craft unions each based on a natural community of interest among its members. Largely in consequence of this policy, the number of national and international unions, preponderantly craft in structure, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor had increased from 58 in 1897 to 120 in 1904. There was, to be sure, a large turnover and a high mortality rate among these newly organized national unions,² but many of the unions important at present originated in this manner. Later, after the zest for further expansion had perhaps spent itself and the existing unions had staked their jurisdictional claims over the principal organizable areas of industry, the number of affiliated national unions declined, mainly as a result of amalgamations, and remains now about 110. The

² The total number of national and international unions, affiliated and independent, of which we have a record between 1897 and 1923 is 220; between 1923 and 1934, the corresponding number is 159.

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number of affiliated national and international unions, 1897-1935, is shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6
NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL UNIONS AFFILIATED WITH
THE A. F. OF L., NUMBER, 1897-1935 ¹

FISCAL PERIOD ENDING		NUMBER OF AFFILIATED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL UNIONS AT END OF FISCAL PERIOD
October	31, 1897	58
"	" 1898	67
"	" 1899	73
"	" 1900	82
"	" 1901	87
September	30, 1902	97
"	" 1903	113
"	" 1904	120
"	" 1905	118
"	" 1906	119
"	" 1907	117
"	" 1908	116
"	" 1909	119
"	" 1910	120
"	" 1911	115
"	" 1912	112
"	" 1913	111
"	" 1914	110
"	" 1915	110
"	" 1916	111
"	" 1917	111
April	30, 1918	111
"	" 1919	111
"	" 1920	110
"	" 1921	110
"	" 1922	112

¹ Data for 1897, 1898, 1933, 1934 and 1935 were compiled from the *Proceedings of the Annual Conventions of the A. F. of L. for those years*; data for other years are from Lewis L. Lorwin, *The American Federation of Labor* (Brookings Institution, 1935), p. 488.

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TABLE 6—*Continued*

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL UNIONS AFFILIATED WITH THE A. F. OF L., NUMBER, 1897-1935¹

FISCAL PERIOD ENDING	NUMBER OF AFFILIATED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL UNIONS AT END OF FISCAL PERIOD
August 31, 1923	108
“ “ 1924	107
“ “ 1925	107
“ “ 1926	107
“ “ 1927	106
“ “ 1928	107
“ “ 1929	105
“ “ 1930	104
“ “ 1931	105
“ “ 1932	106
“ “ 1933	108
“ “ 1934	109
“ “ 1935	109

But for the exceptional period of the War, and perhaps also during the present phase of which the outcome is still obscure, expansion in the total membership of American unions has been dominated by advances in the membership of the coal mining, railroad and building trades unions. From 1902 to 1903, when the movement recorded a net increase of 538,000 members, an annual gain not equalled until the first post-War boom, half of the increase is attributable to the gains of the United Mine Workers, growing out of the settlement of the famous anthracite coal strike in 1902, and to advances in the membership of the building and railroad unions. Likewise, over the period 1897-1914 considerably more than half of the entire advance in membership is accounted for by increases in these three groups of unions. While the total membership of all unions increased

2,240,100, the number in these groups, as is shown in Table 7, rose 1,279,300. The fortunes of these groups—mining dominated by the United Mine Workers, an industrial union, and the other two composed almost wholly of strictly craft organizations—have from time to time vitally affected the course of the whole American labor movement.

TABLE 7
MINING, BUILDING AND TRANSPORTATION UNIONS,
INCREASE IN MEMBERSHIP, 1897-1914

GROUP OF UNIONS	AVERAGE ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP ¹		INCREASE OVER PERIOD
	1897	1914	
Mining, quarrying and oil	20,900	380,200	359,300
Building construction	67,300	542,000	474,700
Transportation and communication	116,400	561,700	445,300
Total, above groups	204,600	1,483,900	1,279,300
Total, all unions	447,000	2,687,100	2,240,100

¹ See Appendix, Table I.

Except during the brief period of the World War, when the metal and clothing unions rose to power, the building, railroad and coal miners unions have dominated the organized labor movement of this country.