



CHAPTER 1

DUKIN' IT OUT

Building the Labor Movement

Today's U.S. union movement is the product of relentless struggle between workers and employers. The strategies that the capitalist class has adopted to rid itself of the union movement have changed over time, but never the ultimate goal of leaving the working class unionless and defenseless.

When we think about capitalism, we usually think about competition between businesses, with one corporation trying to take market share and profits from the others. But capitalism also creates another form of competition: competition between workers to win and keep jobs and to secure other resources. Because of the fundamental imbalance in power and wealth within capitalist societies, workers are played against one another by employers, always to the employers' benefit. Labor unions came into existence in response to this problem facing working people. They formed because of the workers' need to develop a common front against employers rather than deal with employers on an individual basis.

The trade union movement appeared on the U.S. scene in the 1820s to 1840s, during the early Industrial Revolution. This period saw the emergence of Jacksonian Democracy, the rise of trade unions, the appearance of the first labor parties, and demands for a shorter work-week. It also saw the rise of the abolitionist movement.¹

We must make a critical distinction here. Though this period witnessed the emergence of trade unions in the United States, it was not the beginning of a *labor movement*. If we understand a labor movement as

an effort by workers to improve their conditions and strengthen their power against the forces of capital by organizing, then the actual labor movement in the United States starts during the colonial period with the introduction of indentured servants—from Europe, Africa, and the First Nations—onto North American soil. Organizations existed among indentured servants and later slaves, and among artisans, sailors, and other workers, and these evolved into what we would consider unions in the nineteenth century.

Capitalism, wherever it is found, promotes competition within the workforce generally and the working class in particular. Yet in the United States, that competition took a particular form: beginning in the 1600s, ruling elites, as a matter of ensuring social control over the workforce, used racist oppression as a means of driving a wedge between workers. By constructing a relative—though critically important—differential between workers who would later be classified as “white” and those who would be characterized as Black and Red (Indians), colonial elites—planters, merchants, and manufacturers—were able to set groups of working people at odds with one another.²

In North America, the competition that capitalism engenders played itself out not just in pitting worker against worker, but increasingly in setting white workers against African, Indian, and later Asian and Latino workers, who were both demonized and subjugated, always defined as an “Other” to be expelled or as an irrelevant population to be used. Regardless of whether actual competition existed between white workers and workers of color, the notion that all “white people” shared certain things in contrast with the Other thus identified the latter as a threat to all those eventually classified as white. The net effect of this structure of social control was to create a white front crossing class lines and thereby blurring class distinctions (and class struggle) between and among those of European American heritage and people of color. It also eliminated the idea that common class interests crossed the legal and social boundaries separating workers of different “races.”

In the developing labor movement, the color line became the main division within the working class, although other divisions—by religion, ethnicity or nationality, and gender—played important roles as well. In that sense, the fight over inclusion versus exclusion, which is a theme of this book, has always had racial implications.³

Indeed, the racial implications of exclusion and inclusion in effect crippled the U.S. labor movement from its birth. One can argue that the United States has never had a true labor movement, only a segmented

struggle of workers. The establishment of essentially a white labor movement in the United States ensured that the character of the movement would depend on who, at any one moment, was determined to be “white” (a determination rooted in the orientation of the Euro-American ruling elites beginning in the 1600s). This situation prevailed until well into the 1930s. For instance, clauses in union constitutions limiting union membership to “white men of high moral standing” obviously excluded people of color and women but also excluded any group deemed to be unacceptable, including immigrants who had not yet “become white.”⁴ The inability of the white labor movement to break from the exclusionary (and largely racial) paradigm made labor vulnerable to constant challenges and caused it to deal with questions of immigration in reactive, if not reactionary, ways. Insofar as the U.S. white-dominated labor movement considered immigrants—first those from eastern and southern Europe and later those from the Global South—to be outsiders or competitors, it was unable to embrace these new sectors.⁵ The history of labor-supported, cross-class efforts to exclude immigrants is legendary. And such efforts flowed directly from the racial construction of the United States.

With the formation of unions came a schism within the working class that would define the movement—and that continues to exist today. The central question was how to address the competition within the working class that capitalism engenders and exploits. One orientation was that of exclusion: the desire to increase the relative value of each worker by narrowing the number of workers with the skills needed by a particular employer. The other was that of inclusion: the desire to organize as many workers as possible to narrow the opportunity for employers to play off one worker against another. The resulting clash between exclusion and inclusion strategies took organizational forms both before and after the U.S. Civil War. In the pre-Civil War period, the trade union movement was white and largely male. Reflecting the controversy within the society as a whole, the labor movement was divided over the question of slavery, with some trade unionists supporting slavery (because they feared competition in the labor market from freed Africans), some opposing it (because they recognized that free labor can never compete successfully against slave labor); and some believing that slavery was not a “union issue” and was therefore divisive. The pre-Civil War union movement was never able to resolve these divisions.

In the period following the Civil War, a new union movement began to emerge, starting with William H. Sylvis’s establishment of the

National Labor Union (NLU).⁶ This movement, too, divided along the axis of race, with white workers tending to form unions, such as the NLU, that might fiercely oppose capitalism yet compromise completely on matters of race, often supporting the exclusion of African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and the First Nations.⁷ And at each juncture in its struggle to unite workers and win concessions from employers, the union movement was divided over the question of exclusion. The great strikes of 1877, for instance, broke out in response to wage cuts and paralyzed much of the country's railroads for weeks. This bitter struggle took place at the same time that Reconstruction was being abandoned in the South, yet white labor did not see the course of Reconstruction as central to the future of the working class. The Knights of Labor, a dramatic effort to build a national labor federation during the 1880s, which at one point had seven hundred thousand members, openly welcomed African American and Mexicano/Chicano workers, yet shunned the Chinese!

In the early 1880s, the formation of the organization that eventually became the American Federation of Labor (AFL) marked the development of a relatively stable national labor federation on U.S. soil. Though rhetorically committed to organizing all workers regardless of race, creed, and gender, the AFL advanced craft organization as the key to the future of organized labor.⁸ Ignoring the racial and ethnic cleansing taking place in the skilled trades and on the railroads of the U.S. South, where employers were removing African Americans from positions they had long held and replacing them with whites, the AFL welcomed into its ranks white-supremacist unions that often had clear racial-exclusion clauses in their membership requirements. Though the AFL did include certain industrial unions such as the United Mine Workers of America,⁹ these groups were a minority of the unions in the federation, and the mind-set of the craft unions dominated the AFL. In time, the craft-based narrowness of the AFL expanded and merged into racial and gender narrowness. Workers of color were either excluded outright from the movement or restricted to second-class organizations, either within unions or within the AFL. Women, with the notable exception of the formation of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and later the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union, were for the most part ignored.

Labor leaders staked out various positions along the spectrum from inclusion to exclusion as they sought to carve out a working-class movement in the United States. Eugene Debs and Samuel Gompers, for example, often took contradictory positions. By exploring their views,

we can gain an understanding of the clashing visions that drove the U.S. working-class movement in general and organized labor in particular.

As the twentieth century unfolded, technological advances changed the methods of production. The advent of giant, integrated production centers and assembly-line processes transformed the nature of work and influenced the debate about the structure of the union movement.¹⁰ One of the most articulate advocates for inclusionism within labor was Eugene V. Debs, a leftist president of the American Railway Union, founding delegate of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and four times the Socialist Party's candidate for president. Debs opposed capitalism and argued for applying democratic political traditions to this economic system that subjugated workers in their daily lives. He was a powerful advocate of industrial unionism and criticized the American Federation of Labor's exclusionary craft policies. In 1918, as an expression of his radicalism, he wrote, "The Russian Revolution is the soul of the new-born world,"¹¹ and in June 1918, he delivered a series of speeches criticizing U.S. involvement in World War I. He spoke out against the idea that citizenship requires Americans to wrap themselves in the flag and pledge loyalty to these military adventures and exhorted workers to be free men and women instead of industrial slaves. Debs concluded that socialists have a duty to build the new nation and the free republic, and he called upon people to draw on their "manhood and womanhood to join us and do your part . . . to proclaim the emancipation of the working class and brotherhood of all mankind."¹² Debs was arrested for his speech under the Espionage Act of 1917 and sentenced to ten years in federal prison. In 1920, Debs, though still a federal prisoner, received one million votes in his last run for the presidency. Debs was representative of a political tendency within the labor movement that held industrial unionism—one union for one industry—not only as an essential part of unionism but as something close to a calling. This advocacy of industrial unionism overlapped with that of inclusionism, with proponents generally recognizing that industries could not be organized by labor groups that were divided along racial and ethnic lines.¹³

Debs and his allies realized that the structure of the U.S. economy was changing and that new forms of organization would be essential if the working class were to develop any power. Though Debs was a socialist, he was not sectarian and was quite prepared to ally himself with non-socialists. Moreover, though Debs and many other industrial unionists

recognized the dire implications of racial exclusion, they did not quite “get” the question of race or understand the special oppression suffered by peoples of color. For example, Debs, while seeking the inclusion of African Americans into the American Railway Union, did not seem to appreciate the need for U.S. organized labor to address first, the counterrevolution against Reconstruction and later, the birth of Jim Crow segregation.

Debs was constantly at odds with traditionalist Samuel Gompers, who was president of the AFL from 1886 to 1924 and who had, originally and ironically, been a socialist. By the early 1900s, all sense of Gompers as a man of the Left had vanished. Speaking at the 1903 AFL convention, for instance, Gompers denounced any belief in class struggle as the basis of working-class trade union organization. Taking a position counter to Debs’s orientation, he told socialist delegates, “Economically, you are unsound; socially you are wrong; industrially, you are an impossibility.”¹⁴

With this attack on the left wing of the trade union movement, Gompers broke with the then-prevalent political position in the United States and Europe: that the working class should have its own political party. He believed that the role of the trade union was to fight in the interests of workers in the workplace. However, the trade union movement should accept the existence of capitalism and take no steps to oppose the system itself, instead working for its fuller development and evolution.¹⁵ In repudiating socialism, Gompers declared that he no longer opposed the capitalist system: as he told a House of Representatives investigating committee, “It is our duty to live out our lives as workers in the society in which we live.”

Gompers’s view, which became known as “bread-and-butter” or “job-conscious” trade unionism, emphasized a formally nonideological approach.¹⁶ In the political realm, this stance meant that organized labor would not, to paraphrase Gompers, have permanent friends or enemies but permanent interests. Though this view might appear to be class conscious, Gompers was not speaking about the entirety of the working class: he was speaking only of its organized sector. When Gompers spoke of political action, he was thinking of lobbying rather than the political mobilization of the working class. Gompers’s view was thus an early version of today’s so-called interest-group politics.

Gompers’s trade unionism grew out of his view of class, the state, and by implication, issues of race, gender, and U.S. foreign policy. His

views evolved (or devolved) from his original adherence to socialism in two important respects. First, his renunciation of socialism and the elimination of a compelling anticapitalist view of the future are critical in understanding Gompers the man as well as what we term the *Gompersian framework*. The role of trade unionism was simply to improve the lives of those who were fortunate enough to be union members. Gompers embraced a form of trickle-down thinking in his belief that the victories of trade unions might at some point improve the lives of unorganized workers. Yet the unorganized sector was not Gompers's concern. In his opinion, if unorganized workers wanted a better life, they should join or form unions.

This belief reflected the exclusionary tendency within the U.S. trade union movement. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the AFL excluded the bulk of unskilled workers, as well as the mass of workers of color and female workers. This pragmatic pursuit of narrowly defined self-interest by most organized labor demonstrated the concept's inherent racism and sexism.¹⁷ The pursuit of "what works" in the immediate term, and in the absence of a larger conceptual framework that questioned the structure of existing social relationships, resulted in capitulation to white supremacy and male supremacy. Regardless of rhetoric such as "an injury to one is an injury to all," the evolution of the Gompers-led AFL reveals a blind spot, even a wall, to issues of race, gender, and ethnicity, which organizers saw as divisive.

In addition, Gompers came to view government as essentially an empty vessel that could be filled by any sort of politics or political or economic influence. Thus, he believed the trade union movement's purpose was to pressure government to act on issues facing organized labor specifically and workers in general. In his view, the working class need not challenge the capitalists for state power. In simplistic terms, the state was open to influence by either organized labor or big business, so organized labor's job was to gain the greater influence. Gompers thus abandoned the notion that the state has a class character.¹⁸ As we will see, assuming that the government is a neutral force in society ignores the reality of the government's bureaucracy and its influence, the pressures that lead to pro-business legislation and the factors that encourage the suppression of independent working-class activity of any sort.

These precepts influenced the political practice of Gompers and the trade union movement he led. In embracing pragmatism, Gompers also slowly but steadily abandoned any of his earlier concerns about matters of race and gender. After the great 1892 general strike in New Orleans,

the question of race lost importance for him. By the early 1900s, Gompers's advocacy of a form of racially inclusive unionism had given way, first, to agnosticism on matters of race and, ultimately, to open promulgation of white supremacy.

One significant aspect of Gompers's views on the state and class was his reading of the relationship of unions to business and matters of foreign policy. Having repudiated the notion of class struggle, Gompers believed that labor and capital have a unity of interest in improving the economic climate that justifies their cooperation. His policy of rewarding friends and punishing enemies, according to a sympathetic biographer, flowed from his need to be accepted by the "leaders" of society, not from the power of the broad masses of working people.¹⁹ In the realm of foreign policy, this view took a particularly rabid form, for Gompers believed that organized labor should support U.S. foreign policy almost unconditionally.²⁰ Perhaps the most dramatic step in this direction was his unqualified support for U.S. entry into World War I and his support of the suppression of opponents of the war. In his view, the interests of organized labor lay with strengthening capitalism and ensuring the success of U.S. foreign policy, regardless of the impact on workers in other countries. The flag of imperialist patriotism was to be the banner of the AFL.

Gompers's political views (which we would call traditionalist) translated into a narrow political direction for organized labor, reflecting positions that would continue to benefit, in the main, the privileged white workers who made up most of the AFL. Gompers supported the government's Asian exclusionary policies and personally denied membership to Japanese workers when they and their Mexican brothers sought affiliation with the AFL. In 1903, after a hard-fought struggle for fair wages, Japanese and Mexican workers created the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA) and, with their seven hundred members, applied for a charter with the AFL. In response, Gompers wrote, "It is . . . understood that in issuing this charter to your union, it will under no circumstance accept membership of any Chinese or Japanese. The laws of our country prohibit Chinese workmen or laborers from entering the United States, and propositions for the extension of the exclusion laws to the Japanese have been made on several occasions [by organized labor]."²¹ The JMLA refused the charter under these racist conditions. The Mexican members of the JMLA leadership,

in rejecting Gompers's proposal, proclaimed their solidarity with their Japanese brothers, explaining that they had stuck together through the harshest of times and would not be divided now: "We would be false to them and to ourselves if we accepted privileges for ourselves which are not accorded to them."²² The terms set by Gompers and the failure of the AFL to accept the Japanese into the federation set the stage for the ultimate demise of the JMLA.

The protection of craft jobs, rather than the idea of organizing workers and developing the AFL as a class movement, was the credo of the AFL. This emphasis placed Gompers at odds with both the masses of workers of color (particularly, but not solely, Black workers who were seeking admission to unions), as well as with the growing demand for industrial unionism.

Gompers presided over the expansion and consolidation of an exclusivist federation, one that was quite comfortable—at least at the leadership level—in suppressing internal and external opposition (the most notable external opposition coming from the Industrial Workers of the World). The AFL was, for Gompers, a partner with U.S. capital and the U.S. state in their program of world expansion. That this partnership with capital put the AFL in direct opposition to the interests of the mass of workers in the United States, as well as to those of workers around the world, did not concern Samuel Gompers.