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## Seasons Past: Wildcat Strikes and the Smith-Connally Act During World War II

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# **Seasons Past: Wildcat Strikes and the Smith-Connally Act During World War II**

Andrew Robert McCloskey

Thesis submitted to the College of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia University in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

Masters in History

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2020

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## ABSTRACT

### Seasons Past: Wildcat Strikes and the Smith-Connally Act During World War II

Andrew McCloskey

This thesis explores the phenomenon of wildcat strikes during World War II in the United States, the raging public opinion about these wartime strikes, and the passage of the War Labor Disputes Act (popularly known as the Smith-Connally Act) of 1943. Broadly, this thesis examines the wellsprings of working-class anger and frustration which underscored the spontaneous wildcat strikes, the No-Strike Pledge, and the various factions within the public's perception of these strikes. This thesis furthermore analyzes the congressional debate surrounding the Smith-Connally Act and the American public's reaction to the passage of this restrictive legislation. Finally, this thesis posits that the public opinion polls, which spurred the perception of a unified populace against labor unions, were skewed by clear anti-labor biases in the news media and loaded questions in these public opinion polls.

### Acknowledgements

I never thought this day would come when I would finally finish this project. Only two years ago, I left the profession of teaching in the pursuit of higher knowledge and a better understanding of working-class Americans. This project was the culmination of hours of valuable guidance, fruitless searches in the library, and bewilderment of how much work writing a thesis really is. This was not possible without many helping hands.

I first met Dr. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf in January of 2018, when she accepted my request to meet with her and discuss the possibility of attending West Virginia University Graduate School. Throughout my stay, she has been instrumental in guiding me towards this topic and lending some of the resources that I have used in this work. Your patience and many meetings helped me orient myself through the rigors of graduate school. I would also like to thank Dr. Kenneth Fones-Wolf, who also met with me on that bitterly cold day in 2018, for his active role in my education. You provided me with a heightened understanding of working-class history that was transformative as a scholar and a person. This knowledge was put to good use, both in this paper and in running rhetorical circles around my neo-liberal friends on the weekends. My thanks also goes out to Dr. James Siekmeier, who worked closely with me on several chapters of this thesis. This thesis probably would not have been possible without our summer brainstorming meetings, where you helped me talk through several thesis ideas and loaned me a generous number of books off of your very own bookshelf (I promise I will give them back). These three figures have engendered in me a love for inquiry and American history. It was under their tutelage that my intellect struggled, grew, and eventually prospered, and they deserve the lion's share of credit for this work.

I would like to thank my friends from Saint Louise de Marillac and Duquesne University for the boundless mirth that served as a respite from the demands of a Master's degree program. I apologize for my disjointed ramblings about strikes during World War Two and greatly appreciate your reminders that I was becoming *that guy* who would talk about his research to anyone who would listen with half an ear on the weekends. I look forward to your banter, barbaric manners, backhanded support in the future. My family deserves a huge thank you for being the positive, nourishing, and loud support system that is emblematic of many Italian-American families. Mom, thank you for your unconditional love and delicious cooking. Dad, thank you for never ceasing to wander into my room and argue about American politics with me (sorry mom). Justin, thank you for being my best bro and gym buddy. Jonathan, thank you for playing devil's advocate every time I see you. Angela, thank you for lending a commiserating ear on the rigors of graduate school. Sorry that you still have at least three more years of your Ph.D. program.

Finally, I would like to thank my girlfriend and morning star Braley for her everlasting support, sense of humor, and love that she showed me from January, 2019 to present. You provided my graduate school life with many laughs, companionship, and sunlit days doing anything but writing our theses. I have fond memories of our 12:30am study dates and am especially grateful for your lack of judgement towards the embarrassing number of times I shambled to the vending machine while writing this.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter 1:	
Introduction And Historiography .....	1
Chapter 2:	
The Price of Civilization: Equality of Sacrifice, Wildcat Strikes, Hate Strikes .....	9
Chapter 3:	
The Debate: Public Opinion and Wildcat Strikes .....	30
Chapter 4:	
The Answer: The Passage of the Smith-Connally Act and Public Reaction .....	60
Chapter 5: Tides: Conclusions and Interpretations of Wildcat Strikes and Public Opinion During World War II .....	85
Bibliography.....	91

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Historiography

On February 18, 1945 in a private letter, William Fenimore, a West Virginia soldier fighting in the Pacific, railed against the wartime strikes he had read about in newspapers distributed overseas. Strikers, who were “lazy loafers,” who were “too coddled and pampered,” were shirking their jobs, and preventing vital supplies from reaching the fight men.<sup>1</sup> “We may have,” he declared, “the guts to win this war, but guts against cannon aren’t such a big thing.”<sup>2</sup> As Fenimore saw it, too many selfish people believed the war was virtually won and they ought to be given the “cold, bare facts of life over here.”<sup>3</sup> Upon the death of their loved one, instead of simply writing your son has been killed in action, he advised officers to write “your son “had his guts blown out by a hidden Jap .25 caliber machine gun on Leyte”<sup>4</sup> In his letter, he asked “have you ever seen an American trying to hold his guts in his body with one hand and fire his rifle with the other, with blood running all over his hand.”<sup>5</sup> Images like these, he urged, “should not be hidden from the American people.”<sup>6</sup> Fenimore was not alone in condemning wartime strikers. Indeed, as historian William O’Neill observed “no domestic issue aroused more passion than the rights of labor unions,” especially the right to strike.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, asked unions to take a No-Strike Pledge in the name of patriotism and winning the war. This pledge was met with enthusiastic support from labor leaders who volunteered to forsake their most

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Fenimore to Ruth Gibson, c. Feb. 28, 1945, War History Commission Papers, West Virginia Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library, Morgantown, WV.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> William O’Neill, *Democracy At War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 201.



effective tool of bargaining. At the same time unequal burdens of sacrifice roiled the working class and strikes proliferated throughout the country. This contradiction sparked a widespread, spirited, and at times bitterly hostile public debate about labor's broken promise. In 1943, the uproar over labor strikes led to the passage of the Smith-Connolly Act, which was designed to curtail these strikes and to reduce the power of unions. This thesis focuses on the public debate over the working-class militancy during World War II era, particularly wartime strikes, both those sanctioned by union leadership, like the United Mine Workers strikes and unsanctioned wildcat strikes, called by local union leaders and even the rank-and-file.

American workers and their unions faced the prospect of a second world war with trepidation. From their experience in World War I they knew that mobilization for war brought both opportunities and dangers. During World War I, to help ensure labor peace, the federal government recognized the right of workers to representation in the workplace and millions of workers surged into labor organizations, which won improved working conditions and better wages. Workers spoke of the establishment of a new industrial democracy, but this was a short-lived dream, as unions were crushed by a post-war business offensive to roll back union gains and lost their attraction to some workers in the midst of the economic boom of the 1920s.

In the thirties, however, the Great Depression resulted in an increase in labor activism as workers lost their jobs and security. Worker militancy contributed to the passage of the National Labor Relations Act, which legitimized labor unions. Especially after the temporary economic upturn in 1937, their new rights to organize combined with worker militancy, including new tactics like sit-down strikes, helped enable the newly-formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to make inroads in organizing critical mass production industries, such as auto, steel, rubber and electrical. Still the CIO was relatively weak. Major firms, like Ford

Motor Company and Bethlehem Steel, were still outside union ranks, and powerful business leaders remained dedicated to destroying organized labor, thus setting the stage for a new round of conflict between business and labor during World War II.<sup>8</sup>

In 1939 after war broke out in Europe, the United States, which had a pitifully small military, began slowly to strengthen its defensive capacity. Mobilization, both in terms of increasing the size of the military and increasing armaments, intensified in 1940 and 1941 as Germany and Japan marched across Europe and Asia. Rearming the United States and fulfilling war orders from England and the Soviet Union made possible by the weakening and then ending of the Neutrality Acts meant a vast increase in production which required an increase in manpower. Beginning in 1940, an emboldened CIO sought to complete the organization of the steel and auto industries and to organize rising war industries like ship building and aeronautics. The CIO's competitor, the American Federation of Labor, also sought to enlist the growing workforce into its ranks. Roosevelt sought to stave off conflict resulting from these organizing campaigns by establishing a National Defense Mediation Board to prevent strikes. Still in 1941 as William O'Neill notes there were "4,228 walkouts involving some 2.4 million men and women, making it the biggest strike year since 1919."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most notorious strike, a wildcat strike, occurred in June 1941 at North American Aviation, a major fighter aircraft manufacturer. The government responded by seizing the plant and threatening to end the deferment of any male workers who refused to return to work.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *The CIO – 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1995), 122-123.

<sup>9</sup> William O'Neill, *Democracy At War*, 202.

<sup>10</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People In Depression and War 1925-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 637-639.

It was clear that an agreement needed to be reached if the United States was to function as a total-war economy and from that need, the No Strike Pledge was born. This was a way for both government and labor unions to solve a mutual problem – inflation. During World War One, inflation spiraled out of control and the governments efforts failed. This led to a doubling of living expenses and a 145% increase on the price of food.<sup>11</sup> Strikes raged and workers chafed under their stagnant wages. In 1940, the prospect of a repeating act of inflation and wage-fueled strikes seemed grimly certain. The number of strikes and labor disputes between December and March, 1941 doubled, the overwhelming majority of these were unsanctioned and wildcat.<sup>12</sup> The government needed to freeze wages, which was the easiest way to combat runaway inflation. However, static wages make for angry workers and unions would be impotent to demand higher wages. The No-Strike Pledge was a way out of this gordian knot. If unions would keep their workers from striking, a 1942 maintenance of membership agreement would make all new defense workers automatic union members and thus swelling labor's members to unheard of heights.<sup>13</sup> The year 1942 had 2,968 strikes (despite the fact that workers felt the most patriotic and responsible for winning the war which the Allies were badly losing), followed by 3,752 in 1943.<sup>14</sup> The number of strikes rose sharply in 1944 with 4,956 followed by an astonishing 2,971 work stoppages in the first six months of 1945.<sup>15</sup> The overwhelming majority of these wartime strikes were unsanctioned and spontaneous wildcat outbursts from frustrated workers. It is noteworthy that these wildcats were called *quickies* because the majority of them were over specific grievances and lasted less than a week (60.6% in 1942, 80.0% in 1943, 77.3% in

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Kersten, *Labor's Homefront: The American Federation of Labor during World War II*. (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 93.

<sup>14</sup> "Work Stoppages During the War," *Monthly Labor Review* 60 (May 1946): 723.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

1944).<sup>16</sup> There are a few notable exceptions where large union sanction strikes slowed production, including the 1941 North American Aviation and the 1943 United Mine Workers strikes.

The existing literature on wildcat strikes during World War II is fairly extensive and offers clues to the parameters of this public debate. Some of the historiography is divided along the lines of major labor federations and their affiliates involved. Andrew Kersten's *Labor's Home Front: The American Federation of Labor During World War II*<sup>17</sup>, Robert Zieger's *The CIO: 1935-1955*<sup>18</sup>, and Nelson Lichtenstein's *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II*<sup>19</sup> each analyze wildcat strikes through the AFL (American Federation of Labor) and the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations). These works illuminate the underlying reasons about why unions violated their pledge. Other works look at the strikes from the perspective of different industries such as Martin Glaberman's *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* which focuses on the reception of the pledge by automobile workers.<sup>20</sup> Historians have also chosen to look at strikes through the lens of social history. Both Robert Zieger's *American Workers American Unions*<sup>21</sup> and George Lipsitz's *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940's*<sup>22</sup> concentrate on the racial aspects and organizational struggles that typified these strikes (rank and file union members against union

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<sup>16</sup> Rosa Lee Swafford, "Wartime Record of Strikes and Lockouts, 1940-1945," 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1946 S. Doc. 136, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Kersten, *Labor's Homefront: The American Federation of Labor during World War II* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *The CIO – 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: the CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

leadership and factory workers against factory management). James Atleson's *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* looks at the pledge through the view of the government's and corporations' role and response to the wildcat strikes<sup>23</sup>. It is worth noting that while these strikes provoked an outpouring of public outcry against workers and their unions, virtually all of these historiographic works agree that these strikes had a minimal impact on the production quotas of the American wartime economy.

There has, however, been little work on public debate about the strikes. Although all the secondary sources mention public hostility to strikers, it is a significant issue that deserves further analysis. This thesis will explore these events in three chapters. Chapter 2 will survey why these wildcat strikes were occurring. It will analyze the stated causes of the strikers and the different contributors of the conflict. The opportunism of lower-level management at the apparent disappearance of strikes, the profiteering of corporations, and the overburdened government committees that were tasked with addressing workers' grievances to avoid strikes will all be explored in detail. Furthermore, the never implemented "equality of sacrifice" campaign, which was championed by labor to link raising wages with raising inflation, will be interpreted as a prominent engine of worker discontent.<sup>24</sup> This well-spring of frustration stemmed from the popular sentiment that workers were sacrificing more than their wealthy employers, who were called upon to forsake their wartime profits. Finally, the role that racism played in strikes will be considered. Were hate strikes, or racially motivated disruptions in work, a symptom of a seething and harried working class or were they part of a larger pattern of racism and ethnic division in American labor history? This chapter will rely heavily on the secondary

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<sup>23</sup> James B. Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Kerstein, *Labor's Home Front*, 28-29.

sources that were listed above as well as from Congressional investigations in which workers were interviewed.

Chapter 3 will be the central focus of the thesis. After examining the background of the strikes in the previous chapter, the public debate surrounding the wildcat strikes and working-class intransigence will be examined thoroughly. The debate over what to do with strikers had many sides to it – angry citizens and patriots, a befuddled government, workers who felt that they were not being heard, a mass media, that choked with patriotic indignation, soldiers who felt let down, union leaders who felt their influence wane, and the businesses and industries who wanted to claim both patriotic honors and excessive profits. This thesis will also measure how much the demands and complaints of workers factored into the public debate or received equal treatment in the eyes of Americans. Was the invective language used against workers also applied to businesses or the government? How did American attitudes change towards the working class during the five years of war? How did Americans view the individual rights of workers and the ideals of democracy against the realities and demands of the second world war? These are some of the themes that will be examined as byproducts of this lively debate. The sources used will come from hundreds of newspaper articles, editorials, letters to the editor from citizens and soldiers, strikers' pamphlets, and comics gathered to personify the public debate surrounding the wildcat strikes.

Chapter 4 of this thesis will revolve around the passage of the Smith-Connally Act, which placed restrictions on strikes and union activity. The focus will be on how the American public reacted to the effectiveness of the law and their shifting moods towards labor as wildcat strikes continued to rage and workers' demands became more bitter. This chapter will illuminate the public view of the Roosevelt Administration's ability to deal with strikes and the further souring

of opinion of the public on the labor movement. The sources involved in this chapter will be excerpts from the Smith-Connally Act, debates in the Congressional Record, and a number of newspapers chronicling the American attitudes and debate towards the law.

The voices of the media, the general public, workers, the government and soldiers on the issue of wartime strikes can be found in the voluminous newspaper articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from 1941-1945. Contemporary periodicals and digitized newspaper databases provide access to a wide range of opinions that wrestled with this issue as do Congressional hearings. Of the sources that were consulted, automobile industry workers during the war received the most attention due to their militance. As a result of this industry's domination by CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations) labor unions, the CIO garners more attention than their counterparts in the AFL (American Federation of Labor). This also was due to the fact that the CIO official newspaper were prolific publishers during the war while the American Federationist (periodical of the AFL) was only published once a month. Furthermore, workers' voices were pulled from a wide array of places. Capturing working class moods and opinions is difficult due to various contradictory social factors and since quotes from workers are rare.

This thesis has the potential to fill the void of the public debate surrounding the wildcat strikes and ratification of the Smith-Connally Act during the Second World War. This helps add continuity to the historiography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also serves to examine how the popular media's portrayal of labor unions as disloyal and subversive elements drove public opinion towards the consideration of more radical solutions to labor strikes. This galvanized public opinion was also a result of public opinion polls, which are hypothesized to be used to convey a false front of support for anti-strike legislation through biased polling and loaded questions.

## Chapter 2: The Price of Civilization

The year 1941 found the American labor movement in a militant mood. The previous decade unraveled the reverie of a united labor and management through Welfare Capitalism. The Great Depression savaged the working class to the point where over twelve million workers or about one out of four workers were struggling to overcome unemployment.<sup>1</sup> The disillusionment that Americans felt after the post-World War I optimism was aptly characterized by a Communist Party workmen's song. "I fought in the war for my country, I went out to bleed and die. I thought that my country would help me, but this was my country's reply: soup, soup. They gave me a bowl of soup."<sup>2</sup> This caustic portrayal of the bread lines and soup kitchens that were common during this time fed into a resurgence of unionist recruitment and activity. The sit-down strike wave of 1937 and stalwart solidarity shown by the wives of workers forced some of the most powerful corporations in America, most notably General Motors and U.S. Steel, to bow to workers' demands for union recognition.<sup>3</sup> However, a rising strike-wave in 1941, due to the chaos of re-armament and mobilization for war, the Japanese strike on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the American entrance into the war on the next day changed the situation of labor because the stakes were significantly raised. This chapter will examine the No-Strike Pledge, the Equality of Sacrifice campaign, and the causes of the ensuing wildcat strikes carried out by galvanized workers.

Labor's response to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was swift and fervent. Ongoing strikes in military manufacturing plants in places such as Ravenna, Ohio and Morgantown, West

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<sup>1</sup> James Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Sugar, "The Soup Song," recorded in 1931. Found on *The Worker's Songbook*, Workers Music League.

<sup>3</sup> James Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State*, 4.



Virginia were called off in lieu of the changing international situation.<sup>4</sup> Union meetings were called to decide how to best aid the war effort. One meeting of the New Jersey Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) on December 8 voted to make “every needed sacrifice of our labor, our fortunes, and our lives to defeat this new menace.”<sup>5</sup> On December 9, William Green, the President of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), stated to his Executive Council, “Labor knows its duty. It will do its duty, and more. No new laws are necessary to prevent strikes. Labor will see to that.”<sup>6</sup> President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, eager to secure cooperation between the government, labor, and industrial management, scheduled a meeting a few days later. What emerged from this meeting was the No-Strike Pledge, which President Roosevelt summarized as: “1. There shall be no strikes or lockouts. 2. All disputes shall be settled by peaceful means. 3. The President shall set up a proper War Labor Board to handle these disputes.”<sup>7</sup> In order to avoid work stoppages of vital war materials, Roosevelt offered the creation of an impartial mediator between capital and labor to arbitrate disputes peacefully. In true New Deal “alphabet soup” fashion, the forerunner Nation Defense Mediation Board (NDMB) of 1941 and the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) of 1935 were created to address grievances that workers submitted against their employers. Amid this No-Strike Pledge, the question of who benefitted most from it begs to be answered.

The significance of this agreement was profound, as strikes were often the only leverage that workers held against their employers. The conservative founder of the AFL, Samuel Gompers, said in 1899, “unless they [unionists] occasionally strike, or have the power to strike,

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<sup>4</sup>Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980), 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> “President Sets Up An Industrial-Labor Peace Program For War” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 24, 1941, 1.

the [economic] improvements will all go to the employer and all the injuries to the employees.”<sup>8</sup> As vital as strikes were to the power of unions, taking the No-Strike Pledge contained some elements of a quid-pro quo understanding between labor and the government.<sup>9</sup> Labor won a large concession from the National War Labor Board (NWLB) in the form of maintenance-of-membership contracts, which businesses loathed. These contracts determined that when a business had a contract with a union, all newly hired workers were automatically union members unless they expressly waived the right during the first fifteen days on the job.<sup>10</sup> As a result, union membership swelled during the war and offered more representative power in the resurgence of labor. However, without their primary weapon of striking, the benefits of the No-Strike Pledge favored big business to a great degree.

Another reward for not striking was the Equality of Sacrifice program, which assured that labor’s sacrifice of their principle tool of redress would be reflected by industry. This program included “a prohibition of war profits, a \$25,000 ceiling on salaries, control of inflation, rationing of necessities, and so on.”<sup>11</sup> The prohibition of wartime profits and the salary ceiling was designed to hamper industrial management and big business laughed. The mobilization effort and the beginning of the war was a boon for large corporations since their compliance was essential for war production. The auto industry, for example, was needed to re-tool their factories to build military aircraft, tanks, and other heavy-duty war materials. However, they refused to make this conversion until mid-1941 when “thousands of tons of critical materials and countless man hours were wasted in the production of passenger cars. The automakers allowed the concern

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<sup>8</sup> Testimony of Samuel L. Gompers before *Industrial Commission on the Relations and Conditions of Capital*, 56<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, House Document 495, Part 7, 605.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew E. Kersten, *Labor’s Homefront: The American Federation of Labor during World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 93.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 7.

for the preservation of their industry and for profit to obscure their very vision upon which the government was depending for the creation of production ‘materials’”<sup>12</sup> for war. The auto industry also blithely relied on and accepted government subsidies to contribute to the war effort. “General Motors, for example, built nearly \$900,000,000 worth of new plants between 1940 and 1944, almost of which were paid for by the government.”<sup>13</sup> This was occurring before and during the conversation of the suspension of wartime profits as part of the Equality of Sacrifice. Those promises were not feasible due to the President’s conflict of interest with big business. “In virtually all other aspects of wartime mobilization, the Roosevelt administration relied heavily on corporate officials”<sup>14</sup> to carry out the complex centralization across multiple industries.

Both presidents of the AFL and CIO bitterly complained about labors exclusion of important wartime agencies such as the Office of War Mobilization and the War Manpower Commission by big business.<sup>15</sup> Despite President Roosevelt’s pleas for sacrifice during his famous fireside chats, which many Americans took to heart, “corporate profits before taxes had risen 329% over 1939 levels.<sup>16</sup> The sense of exasperation among government officials towards big business’s lukewarm response to the demands of mobilization was palpable. A bitter Henry Stimson, the Secretary of War in 1940, observed in his diary that “if you are going to try to go to war, prepare for war in a capitalist country, you have got to let business make money out of the process, or business won’t work.”<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the earnings of the middle and working classes were being sacrificed due to inflation increasing faster than wages. For example, In

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 88.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Andrew E. Kersten, *Labor’s Homefront*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Clive, *State of War*, 33.

Canton, Ohio, between January, 1941 and April, 1943, the price of a peck of potatoes increased by 256% and the cost of a dozen eggs increased by 56%.”<sup>18</sup>

A mobilization effort for participation in warfare is a disruptive event in the best of situations. The massive reallocation of resources, economic centralization, and conscription of military personnel often bears a reconstitution of the workforce as civilians don uniforms and leave for deployment. America during 1940 and 1941 was not an exception to the disruptive forces of mobilization. Many experienced workers and veteran unionists were drafted or joined various branches of the military. The same loss of personnel to the military applied to factory foremen and lower-level management who were skilled in navigating the shifting tide of demands from their charges. What naturally followed was an influx of new workers due to the demands of the war industry. New “war workers faced enormous problems in housing, child care, transportation, and medical services”.<sup>19</sup> This exponential growth and the problems that it brought with it can be observed in the Detroit area where the work force increased from under 400,000 to 869,000, between 1940-1943.<sup>20</sup> Similar population growth also occurred in the shipbuilding cities of Mobile, Tampa, and Jacksonville and the aircraft manufacturing centers in southern California. The lack of accommodations brought about “housing shortages, rising crime rates, racial tensions, and other evidences of social pathology.”<sup>21</sup>

Among the deluge of humanity that flocked to the defense industrial centers were African Americans and women workers. The percentage of women who worked in the civilian labor force climbed from 25% to 36% between 1940-1945.<sup>22</sup> Women were drawn into the industrial

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Zieger, *The CIO: 1935-1955*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Unions, American Workers*, 77.

sector out of economic necessity. For some, it was a way to compensate for the separation of a loved one, for others, it was a way to support themselves. “The sudden absence of sons and husbands, the fear of the dreaded telegram from the Department of War, and the annoyances and inconveniences of rationing, shortages, and disrupted family lives swept up even the most traditional housewife into the great national crusade.”<sup>23</sup>

The infusion of women onto the factory floor forced many to re-evaluate their preconceptions of gender roles. Women, who were supposed to be protected and delicate creatures, were now working in laborious and dirty jobs that were considered to be man’s work. This was bound to cause friction within the work-place because “of the fundamental misconception that women were not permanent members of the labor force.”<sup>24</sup> The novelty of women in a male-dominated workplace gave rise to predictable problems. “Sexual harassment from fellow employees and supervisors often worked to create an intimidating and hostile atmosphere on the shop floor”<sup>25</sup> for women. Substandard pay, the allocation of menial tasks, discriminatory managerial practices that punished women for their out-of-work behavior, and attire were the cold realities that women had to face.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the existence of the double-day presented a uniquely female problem. Typically, workers required an amount of respite at home or at the bar after a long day on the shop floor. Women were denied this luxury by virtue of their caregiving roles. The double-day entailed “waged labor coupled with primary responsibility of household chores and child-raising. Largely because of these demands, which often called them away from the factory for personal and family responsibilities, women workers

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>25</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 53.

<sup>26</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Unions, American Workers*, 76.

found it harder than men to remain at one job.”<sup>27</sup> The mountain of adversity that many female workers faced made their short-term prospects appear sere and barren. However, women did not face this dissension meekly. Social historian George Lipsitz described women responding to male “wolf whistles by whistling back at the men and exchanging wisecracks.”<sup>28</sup>

Women looked to trade unions to help protect them from discriminatory practices, which unions did inconsistently.<sup>29</sup> When unions adopted the same paternalism that industrial management did, women looked to themselves to find avenues of solidarity and mutual support. One example of this creativity was noted at the Dodge plant in Hamtramck, Michigan. Women at the factory would select one of their members to cover for their work for a time. This ‘restroom matron’ “went downtown during working hours with a long shopping list and did the shopping for the whole department”<sup>30</sup> since they all were working 6-7 days a week.

Women were not the only new demographic that altered the workplace. African Americans constituted a significant proportion of new workers that poured into the industrial centers. Michigan, the heart of the automobile industry, saw an 87.4% increase in non-white workers between 1940-1950.<sup>31</sup> As a whole, black participation in manufacturing bloomed. “Black employment in manufacturing, which in 1940 stood at levels considerably below pre-depression figures, grew by 150%. By the end of 1944, some 1,250,000 Negro workers, 300,000 of them female, toiled in manufacturing,”<sup>32</sup> which centered around the steel, meatpacking, and shipbuilding industries.

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<sup>27</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow At Midnight*, 50.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 79.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Henry S. Shryrock, Jr., *Population Mobility Within the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 110.

<sup>32</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 82.

Predictably, the pernicious legacy of racism loomed large over this influx of African American workers. The long tradition of exclusion of black workers from skill-intensive jobs was revived and redoubled. In September, 1941, North American Aviation, a large defense contractor issued a statement that “the Negro will be considered only as janitors and other similar capacities...regardless of their training, we will not employ them.”<sup>33</sup> Other large businesses, such as Ford, were able to use the increase of black workers to manipulate the existing racial tensions between the workers as a way to avoid strikes and work stoppages. In the confused setting of the factories, white and black workers were often intermingled on the assembly line. Occasionally, white women and black men worked in the same space, which added heat to the explosive topic of sexual stereotypes between black men and white women. This closeness of work conditions ignited ugly confrontations between workers. One CIO representative in Memphis, Tennessee, related a typical story of the tensions and violence that accompanied the inter-racial workplace. “Firestone had to shut down three days last week after a guard and a Negro woman became engaged in an altercation. During the exchange of words, the Negro called the guard a SOB [son of a bitch], and the guard slugged her. The white folks walked out in protest over the firing of the guard, and the Negroes followed suit.”<sup>34</sup>

These tensions often boiled out from the shop floor to occur in the new over-crowded community. Southern manufacturing centers in Texas and Alabama were especially prone to violence. Fights broke out on the street cars and city busses between blacks and whites over black efforts to vote in the all-white primary elections and the white fears of a ‘black uprising’ in

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

the South.<sup>35</sup> This was one in an epidemic of violent race riots in the summer of 1943, which affected Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles.

The black worker's response to this turmoil was principled and steadfast. At the outset of the war, in the face of the exclusion by workers and businesses, A. Phillip Randolph, veteran unionist, socialist, and president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters called for a march on Washington D.C. What started as a moderate number of attendees swelled as local rallies and grassroots activists coalesced around the promised March on Washington. Contained in Randolph's manifesto were expressions of stalwart anger and the straightforward demands of change. "We loyal Negro American citizens demand the right to work...we must fight for it and fight for it with gloves off."<sup>36</sup> President Roosevelt, anxious to avoid a public demonstration, which numbered in the hundreds of thousands, buckled to Randolph's demands for change and established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to address grievances of discrimination from black Americans in exchange for cancelling the March on Washington. While the FEPC was commonly criticized by the black community as being toothless and sluggish in its mediation, "neglecting 'legitimate channels' like appeals to representatives or trade unions, black protestors took their grievances directly to the streets in an attempt to force a response."<sup>37</sup>

Emboldened black workers forced some labor organizations to take a stance on the issue of race. The CIO was one of the main organizations to acknowledge the plight of black workers and attempt to address the problems of racism with a fair level of consistency. "Many CIO

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<sup>35</sup> James Burran, "Violence in an 'Arsenal of Democracy': The Beaumont Race Riot of 1943," *East Texas Historical Journal* 14 (Spring, 1976): 39.

<sup>36</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow At Midnight*, 73.



activists, especially those associated with the CPUSA (American Communist Party), identified strongly with the concerns of black Americans...civil rights and industrial unionism quickly developed reciprocal relations, with the presence of the CIO often energizing somnolent civil rights groups and with African Americans educating CIO representatives as to the close relationship between civic and social discrimination and workplace injustice.”<sup>38</sup>

Further alliances between CIO subsidiaries and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) provided even more concrete ties and broke with the history of racial exclusion by unions. While the realities of this alliance between the CIO, Communists, and various civil rights groups was certainly met with opposition from rank and file workers, the CIO leaders actively addressed the concerns of their African American workers. The CIO proclaimed itself as “a people’s movement... It does not ask questions of race or color or creed or origin...The CIO welcomes you.”<sup>39</sup> The AFL, the chief rival labor conglomerate of the CIO, avoided the progressive stance on racism. The AFL had a reputation for the conservatism of its leadership and members. Their lack of protection of African American members was evident in their 1941 national convention. The Executive Board stated, “the AFL did not discriminate, that discrimination as it existed could not be altered as ‘human nature could not be altered,’ and that African Americans ought to be ‘grateful’ for what the Federation had done for them.”<sup>40</sup> As such, African Americans who experienced difficulties from their fellow union members, racist co-workers, and discriminatory managerial policies were on their own. These conflicts took place within the larger context of a wildcat strike wave that rippled through the workforce during the Second World War.

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<sup>38</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *The CIO*, 153.

<sup>39</sup> Philip S. Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker: 1619-1981* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1982), 257.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew E. Kersten, *Labor’s Homefront*, 79.

American public opinion, which will be examined in the next chapter, generally expressed incredulity at why these strikes were occurring. To many relatives of soldiers and armchair patriots, to strike during such a national crisis was selfish at best and treasonous at worst. However, to workers, their reasons were manifold and legitimate. A report presented to the Senate by George Romney of the Automobile Manufacturers Association on 108 case study strikes between December 1944 and February 1945. This analysis concluded that “the presumed causes of these often brief stoppages reveals reactions to various kinds of discipline (40 cases) and protests over working conditions, job assignments and orders, and hours of work (40 cases).”<sup>41</sup> Rosa Lee Swafford’s study for the Automotive Council for War Production arrived at a similar conclusion that “most of the strikes were protests against discipline, protests over certain company policies, or protest against the discharge of one or several employees”<sup>42</sup> There was, however, some discrepancy between different statistical studies that took place during the war. Several studies done by *Monthly Labor Review* during 1943 and 1944 attributed the majority of causes of strikes to wage disputes (43.3-51%) with job security (12.3-16%) playing a minor but not insignificant role.<sup>43</sup> These two studies reported that disputes over shop conditions and policies at only 13.3% in 1943 and 16.1% in 1944 of all strikes that year.<sup>45</sup> This could be due to unique conditions in various industries. The automotive and mining industries, for example, were markedly more militant than other fields. This study will focus on the phenomenon of managerial abuse, working conditions, and racially motivated “hate strikes” which played a significant role in the agitation of already inflamed workers.

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<sup>41</sup> James Atleson. *Labor and the Wartime State*, 138.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “Strikes in 1943” *Labor Monthly Review* 58 (May 1944): 937.

<sup>44</sup> “Strikes and Lockouts in 1944” *Labor Monthly Review* 60 (May 1945): 968.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

## Managerial Mismanagement

It is important to note that many of the irritants that defense industry workers experienced did not happen in a vacuum. Fatigue and long hours wore down workers like a millstone around their necks. Marc Scott Miller conducted a study of wartime Lowell, Massachusetts and found that many workers had two jobs and worked sixty-hour work weeks.<sup>46</sup> Still others spent their off-duty hours on civil defense volunteer forces making sure that the air raid blackouts were enforced.<sup>47</sup> Donald Krinkie, an iron foundry worker who built amphibious assault vehicles for the Oliver Corporation, admitted to working a staggering amount during the heat of the war. “Well, we worked a lot of hours then. I averaged 72 and a half hours a week for 52 weeks one year.”<sup>48</sup> Working approximately 10-12 hours a day in the sweltering foundry doing hard labor was excruciatingly exhausting. When factoring in fatigue and exhaustion, the following managerial policies aggravated to many workers who often turned to striking as a recourse.

With labor’s bargaining chip of the strike officially disappearing with the No Strike Pledge, industrial managers and corporate employers sat up and took notice. It was the perfect opportunity to win back some of the powers that the tidal wave of labor militancy of the 1930’s washed away. The power to fire workers capriciously and without regard to their seniority status at the workplace was especially coveted.<sup>49</sup> Workers chafed under the strict disciplinary measures that were installed to punish even minor infractions of shop floor rules. One unionized worker in the Chevrolet Flint local recalled that his managers meticulously kept tallies of infractions in order to fire troublesome or militant workers. “They thought they were disciplining the workers

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<sup>46</sup> Marc Scott Miller, *Irony of Victory* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 26-28.

<sup>47</sup> James Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State*, 136.

<sup>48</sup> Donald Krinkie, interview by Merle Davis, Oral History Interview, Iowa Labor History Oral Project (OHI-ILHOP), 11.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

at the time and they thought they had a chance to do it on account of the war. We have the umpire system at General Motors and you have to build a record against the man before you can take it to the umpire<sup>50</sup> and actually discharge him. So they tried to build a record against everyone...”<sup>51</sup>

Sometimes, surveillance of employees could take a sinister turn. Worker’s behavior in the factory and towards management had consequences that extended beyond the workplace. The UAW convention in 1943 discussed collusion between business and industrial interests and the draft boards. They charged that “management has used the draft for discriminatory purposes against active union members, has shown favoritism in protecting from the draft, workers less than others being inducted.”<sup>52</sup> Militant workers then could be singled out and drafted into the armed forces and be thrown into the maw of the war. On the other hand, an employer’s favorite worker could receive a deferment from military service which would virtually guarantee an exclusion from the war. Clarence Ramsey, a packinghouse worker for Armour & Co., recalled experiencing this favoritism firsthand. “At that time I was president of the union. And [the plant supervisor] threw these papers to me. He says, ‘Here, Clarence, sign it.’ I said, ‘I don’t sign nothing until I read it, Harry. You know that.’ ‘Well,’ he says, ‘I know that.’ So I read this thing, and it was me asking for a deferment due to my family and the job.”<sup>53</sup>

This control of personal behavior extended to the uneven distribution of privileges within the workplace. The right to smoke in the workplace was revoked in some cases and had to be

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<sup>50</sup> The umpire role is presumably a reference to the WLB’s job as a mediator or referee between labor and industry.

<sup>51</sup> F.D. “Jack” Palmer, Oral History Interview, Wayne State University Archives on Labor and Urban Affairs (OHI-WSULA) 22-23.

<sup>52</sup> *Proceedings of the Eighth Convention, 1943, of the UAW*, p. 115.

<sup>53</sup> Clarence Ramsey, interview by Merle Davis, Oral History Interview, OHI-ILHOP, 11-12.

won back through striking. Jack Palmer recalled attempting to negotiate with his managers during the war over this issue. “I said we would go in and bargain on a grievance for a person being sent home for smoking. They sat there and smoked and they would not let us smoke in the same office.”<sup>54</sup> Palmer and workers like him were not the only ones who took note of industrial management’s wartime intransigence. In January of 1943, a War Production Board member reported to Washington that “The evidence which is piling up seems to indicate rather clearly that a well-organized and determined effort is being made on the part of many manufacturers and industrialists to do everything in their power to create instances which will ‘needle’ and provoke labor into unauthorized stoppage of work.”<sup>55</sup> The reasoning for this, as will be examined in the next chapter, was the public relations nightmare that wildcat strikes caused for labor. Especially for the many on the home front who had loved ones in the military, strikes meant a vicious public outrage and an eventual drafting of anti-strike legislation from Congress.

Workers who sought to appeal to the War Labor Board (WLB) for mediation were often frustrated by the over-worked agency and the management who took advantage of the glacial speed of redress. Jess Ferrazza, a local union president during the war, described in an interview management’s preference for mediation. “Management would not settle grievances, they would tell us to take them to the War Labor Board. The result was that grievances took a year or year and a half to process. Many of the workers thought this was the long course around. The result was many unauthorized work-stoppages.”<sup>56</sup> The umpire that the worker at General Motors discussed, presumably the WLB, often did not receive the majority of grievances that workers filed. According to labor historian, Nelson Lichtenstein, “more than one hundred thousand

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<sup>54</sup> F.D. “Jack” Palmer, OHI-WSULA, 34-35.

<sup>55</sup> Alan Clive, *State of War*, 68.

<sup>56</sup> Jess Ferrazza, Oral History Interview, OHI-WSULA, 15-16.

grievances were filed annually at GM (General Motors), and approximately one thousand reached the umpire.”<sup>57</sup>

When the strikes began to spread later in the war as a result of this pent-up anger, labor leaders were also scorned by workers who associated them with big business and the No-Strike Pledge. Past a certain threshold, “The dam broke... strikers simply ignored labor leaders.”<sup>58</sup> Union leaders, caught between the roles of enforcing the No-Strike Pledge for big business and trying to placate the strikes that were caused by the actions of management, found themselves met it increasingly hostility from their charges. Some union representatives were shouted down and cat-called when they addressed crowds of angry workers.<sup>59</sup>

### **Working Conditions**

With fatigue setting in and facing the capricious hostility that was shown by many managers, working conditions were another irritant which contributed to the flair-up of wartime strikes. Working in a factory during the feverish production levels of the war was difficult in the best of times. Workers often dealt with rough working conditions, which made their work much more grueling. Evelyn Gates, a worker at Firestone’s rubber plants, remembered the hazardous conditions due to poor ventilation in her retirement decades later. “It was lots hotter inside the plant than outside, because of all the steam from the pipes. So, if it was ninety degrees outside, it would be maybe ten degrees hotter in the plant, and you’d be wringing wet. There was one fan on the end of the line, and that was it. People would get sick and fall out from the heat.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> James Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State*, 132.

<sup>58</sup> James R. Green, *The World of the Worker: Labor in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 294.

<sup>59</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 101.

Some of these problems may be attributed to the rapid expansion of defense industries that sometimes resembled the frenetic industrialization of the Stalinist Five-Year Plans. Journalist Mary Heaton Vorse, in her study and interviews of industrial workers during 1942, attributed hazardous conditions to much of the labor unrest. “Unnecessary fumes, overheating, poor ventilation are common. From Wisconsin a social worker writes ‘I am rather nonplussed at the rubber factory conditions. The fumes are terrific, and there is a constant turnover because of illness; yet the girls want to work there to provide the raincoats, because the soldiers need them.’”<sup>61</sup> When shop conditions deteriorate and workers are driven ever onward by the lash of production quotas, accidents were bound to happen.

Industrial work was not a safe vocation to pursue. Working quickly around machines that could maim or kill an unobservant or harried employee guaranteed that gruesome accidents were inevitable. The entry of many new and inexperienced workers into the factories added another interlocking danger as amateurism and ignorance could be fatal. During the rush for mobilization in 1940 and the increasing industrial frenzy to support American soldiers, many popular magazines expressed worry on the safety of defense workers. The pro-business outlet *Fortune* commented during July of 1942 that “when Management takes the overzealous view that production must be achieved at all costs – accidents are in the making.”<sup>62</sup> A few months earlier, *Popular Mechanics* magazine warned that workers were “dying by the thousands, being maimed and disabled by more thousands, in a “blitzkrieg” led by General Carelessness.”<sup>63</sup> The figures that *Popular Mechanics* proffered were understatement of the sad truth behind the unsafe working conditions. In 1941, the number of industrial accidents which resulted in injuries

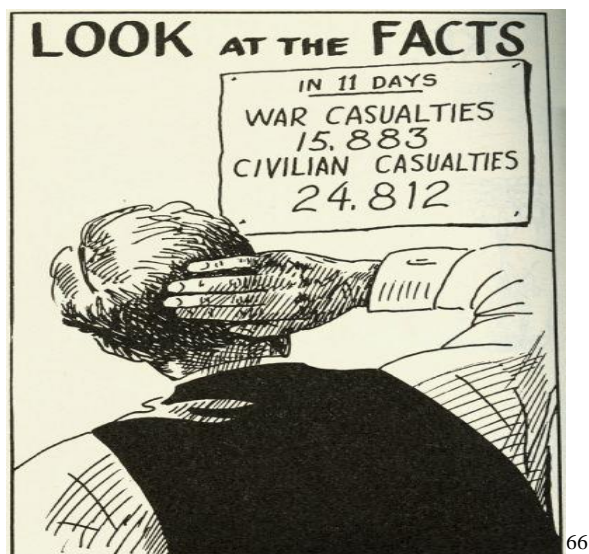
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<sup>61</sup> Mary Heaton Vorse “And The Workers Say...,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1943), 449.

<sup>62</sup> “Death on the Working Front,” *Fortune* 26 (July 1942): 2.

<sup>63</sup> “The Battle for Safety,” *Popular Mechanics* 77 (March 1942): 67.

reported were 2,180,200 with 19,200 workers dead.<sup>64</sup> With the war going poorly for the allies in 1942 with Nazi Germany and Japan dominating large swaths of the globe, the accident rate rose to a staggering with 2,267,700 disabling injuries and 19,900 deaths.<sup>65</sup> The result of the common experience of witnessing horrific injuries and deaths was the disaffection and lowered morale of industrial workers in the war. These staggering casualty figures undoubtedly would have made a mockery of the idea of the Equality of Sacrifice. Even in the later stages of the war with American soldiers dying on the shores of Europe and the Pacific Islands, civilian casualties were still comparable. A pamphlet that was displayed in the International Harvester Corporation's Tractor Works poignantly illustrated this point below. It was small wonder that resentment over employer intransigence coupled with appalling casualties would generate unrest and labor stoppages. One more factor added a dynamic volatility to the boiling cauldron of discontent: race.



<sup>64</sup> "Estimated Number of Disabling Industrial Industries, 1941-1943" in *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1944-1945* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1945), 217.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Safety: 51 Safety Messages* (Chicago: International Harvester Corporation, 1945), p. 44, International Harvester Collection, courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society, image ID 34379.



## Hate Strikes

George Galloway, an African American railroad worker and member of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), recalled an incident on his way home from work that typified racial relations in America for him. While working on a Pullman train transporting German prisoners of war, he saw something that he remembered for decades afterwards. “We stopped in Little Rock, Arkansas, that morning, and they fed the German prisoners in that beautiful crystal dining room. They put the six Pullman porters in the kitchen. I was one of them. It came out in the newspapers all over, about the prisoners being served in the crystal dining room, and the black porters being served in the kitchen...’The Germans are white, aren’t they?’”<sup>67</sup> The demands of the defense industry were colorblind but those who worked inside the factory walls were not. The demands of total war placed southern rural whites and northern urban blacks, black men and white women in the same room and sometimes even side-by-side on the line. Old racial prejudices that were previously nursed at a distance now surfaced in the very close proximity of one’s co-workers, at times resulting in clashes between over-worked and agitated workers.

Hate strikes were called by white workers and often provoked counter-strikes by their black co-workers. Black workers early in the war often staged wild cat strikes to protest the under-utilization of their skills. White workers jealously guarded high-paid skill-intensive jobs in industry. After black workers agitated for the right to enter the skill intensive job pool in 1941, “Packard officials reluctantly agreed to upgrade their black employees. But personnel officers warned blacks that bloodshed might ensue if they accepted transfers to higher-paying defense jobs.”<sup>68</sup> Later, in 1943, after 4 black women were upgraded to skilled work “immediately 2,300

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 126.

<sup>68</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow At Midnight*, 74.

workers walked off the job, and another 700 joined them in a few days to protest the transfers”<sup>69</sup> Packard supervisors who had a strong interest in exploiting the fissures within the shop floor deftly exploited this rift. Company managers sought to associate the racialized and heated workplace with unions. Packard employers told “white workers that they could, and should, defy their union and refuse to work with blacks.”<sup>70</sup> Hate strikes over the promotions of black workers was a reoccurring theme across multiple industries. Large strikes in 1943 spread across the nation like a bloodstain as Mobile’s dry docks and shipbuilding installations, Sparrow’s Point shipyards in Baltimore, Bethlehem Steel mills, Aliquippa, Point Breeze Western Electrical plants stopped work due to protests over the promotion of black workers or demands for segregated facilities.<sup>71</sup>

Some of these racialized work stoppages had a violent and brutal dimension. One infamous example was recounted by Irene Bench, a Firestone worker: “I remember a black woman was beat up right at the bus stop outside of the plant, around 1944. A supervisor hit her, and the blacks walked out of the plant. Blacks had a hard time, they’d beat you up anytime. A white supervisor would hit a black. I didn’t get hit, but several other blacks did, mens and womens.”<sup>72</sup> Indignities such as this one are in a long and sordid line of violent episodes that were perpetrated against blacks. The shipyards in Beaumont, Texas during the strike wave of spring 1943 were especially pernicious scenes of racialized malevolence. After black workers won the right to work in high-paying and skilled jobs, they were greeted by white co-workers by getting molten rivets *mysteriously* dropped on them.<sup>73</sup> This took place during a general increase in racial

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Robert Zieger, *The CIO*, 155.

<sup>72</sup> Michael Keith Honey, *Black Workers Remember*, 87.

<sup>73</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 81.

tensions in the benighted city due to the desegregated work place and the changing social relations in the country brought by wartime migrations of working class Americans. One muggy evening on June 15, 1943, over two thousand workers staged a wildcat strike so they could lynch a black man who was accused of raping a white woman.<sup>74</sup> Fabricated accusations of interracial sex and the rape of white women invariably worked as lightning rods for racial tensions to erupt into violence. That summer night in Beaumont was no different, as a mob shouted “Let’s go to n\*\*\*\*r town!” which kicked off a night of vandalization and terrorizing of various black neighborhoods.<sup>75</sup> This riot occurred days after the famous Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles and shortly before the race riots of Detroit and New York City which were only quelled by federal soldiers. When viewed against the backdrop of proliferating acts of violence, the wildcat strikes caused by racism had political significance. While propaganda of a strong and united home front was undermined by such events, it gave black Americans a chance to project their dissent. “They understood that a power structure that obscured real conflicts through false claims of consensus made itself vulnerable to even a small group of demonstrators because their actions shatter the illusion of unanimity.”<sup>76</sup> These wildcat strikes were demands of respect and redress melded with a broader movement to secure equal footing in 20<sup>th</sup> century America.

The success of the wildcat strikes was mixed. In some cases, the WLB ruled on the side of workers and granted them concessions and better working conditions. Other wildcat strikes, such as the famous North American Aviation strike in 1941 or the Philadelphia Transit Strike of 1944 were crushed by military personnel, who sometimes acted as strike-breakers in where

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

defense was concerned. Regardless of the mixed outcomes of wildcat strikes, the reputation of workers and labor unions was severely tarnished in the eyes of the mass media and the public.

### Chapter 3: The Debate

The wildcat strike wave during World War II caused a great deal of consternation among different sectors in the American public. The numerous causes of these labor disputes seemed to be lost in the popular rebuke and righteous indignation against labor unions and wartime workers. What replaced the nuances was a concern over how these strikes would affect the course of the war, framing their reactions within the confines of wartime patriotism, and what constitutes the proper amount of sacrifice to contribute towards winning the war. Various stakeholders' views and opinions of the wildcat strikes will be analyzed in this chapter. The vituperative nature of this debate was due to a mutual lack of understanding of the No-Strike Pledge and the economic well-being of the working class.

#### “Don’t They Know A War Is Going On?”



<sup>77</sup> “Relaxing On The Home Front,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), July 12, 1943, 2B.

The condemnation by soldiers of the strikes that were occurring on the home front were among the most acidic rebukes of labor and workers during World War II. These admonitions were gleefully published in newspapers due to the strong support that soldiers commanded with the US public during war time. They were the ones who decided to sacrifice the most by placing themselves in the cauldron of war to liberate a continent and roll back the rising tide of Axis aggression. The virtuousness and selflessness of soldiers was often mentioned to draw a comparison between themselves and the workers who were falling short of the requisite virtue and sacrifice that wartime demands. J.E. Real of Pittsburgh PA quoted an interview with soldiers about their experiences overseas: “Our worries are not all the great danger we are in...a lot of us will never be coming home.”<sup>78</sup> Arguments posed in the face of the sobering realities of the ravages of war seem to fall short. Four non-commissioned officers wrote the *Pittsburgh Press* that “they [strikers] value money more than a soldier’s sweat and blood.”<sup>79</sup> This lack of perspective of strikers seemed to be a common thread of discontent in the writings of soldiers. Private First-Class Charlotte Peterseil mused to her father that “these men are making more money than they’ve ever made in their lives,”<sup>80</sup> while soldiers are not privy to raises in the Army. This bitterness sometimes verged on the conspiratorial. “The way it looks they want to make the war last as long as it can go so they can continue to make those good wages.”<sup>81</sup>

Ironically, this opinion was conveyed to American soldiers by German counter-intelligence and propaganda efforts during the operations in North Africa. The *New York Times* wrote that “troops from the front who know how enemy propaganda operates and are sensitive to

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<sup>78</sup> “Soldiers Opinion of Homefront Quoted” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 14, 1944, 16.

<sup>79</sup> “Soldiers Would Trade Places With Strikers,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 8, 1944, 4.

<sup>80</sup> “Pittsburgh WAC Condemns Strikes,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 14, 1944, 4.

<sup>81</sup> “Soldiers on Strikes,” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, Indiana), Jan. 22, 1944, 10.

it said that German radio stations ‘tell us every night that Lewis and his crowd want to prolong the war to fill their jeans.’<sup>82</sup> This propaganda wrought from an inquisitive German counter-intelligence team identified strikes as a way to demoralize American soldiers and make them feel expendable in a fight that was not taken seriously on the home front. Strikes were among the list of topics that could invariably darken the moods and fighting spirits of the soldiers. A corporal from the Signal Corps admitted that “the most discouraging thing we all discuss here is the home situation – war workers striking, absenteeism, and complaints about rationing.”<sup>83</sup> All of these complaints could be directly linked to the labor unions’ lack of control over their workers and the perception of the mood of the workers. This demoralization was palpable enough that President Roosevelt reportedly was concerned about the severity of the psychological impact that the wildcat strikes had on soldiers.<sup>84</sup> This exasperation and deflated morale is palpable in Corporal J.W. Monroe’s plea to strikers written shortly before the Allied aerial and amphibious assault of Normandy. “That’s what takes the morale out of a fighting man. If we are fighting for you, will you please give us something to fight with?”<sup>85</sup> Risking one’s life for a noble cause while feeling that this sacrifice is not appreciated, taken for granted, and even desecrated weighed heavily on the minds of soldiers.

In the eyes of the men and women who were fighting, these strikes seemed like a betrayal of the highest caliber from workers who were supposed to be supporting them with the weapons of warfare and life-sustaining supplies. To go on strike would be “the same kind of treason...for General Eisenhower and the men under him to throw down their arms now.”<sup>86</sup> Soldiers did not

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<sup>82</sup> “Our Soldiers in Africa Condemn Strikes Here, Army Paper Reveals,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 6, 1943.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> “Soldier’s Reaction to Strikes,” *Detroit Free Press* (Detroit, MI), Feb. 25, 1944, 4.

<sup>85</sup> “Strikes in Wartime,” *Yank – the Army Newspaper* (London, UK), April 28, 1944.

<sup>86</sup> “Soldiers Opinion Of Homefront Quoted,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 14, 1944, 16.

have the luxury to go on strike to address perennial complaints due to the duty and weight of obligation that bound them. Furthermore, strikers possessed privileges they were unaware of, privileges that soldiers acutely noticed due to their absence. James Blankenship bitterly stated from the frontline that “strikers back home have a nice, warm bed and good food. They can go to a movie and also get a glass of beer.”<sup>87</sup> The life of a soldier was often spent outdoors in foxholes, tents, and trenches while at the mercy of the elements. Instead of a warm bed, soldiers during the 1944 Battle of the Bulge slept in snowy frozen earthen shelters without food that could be appraised as either good or hot. Soldiers in the North African campaign wished that strikers could experience the hardships unique to the geography. “Let’s put the strikers in the desert, let them be the soldiers we are, in heat that hits 130 degrees. After a few weeks, they would be glad to go back to work.”<sup>88</sup> Soldiers also noticed another absence which strikers did not – loved ones. Staff Sergeant Edward Ditchjuss, a union member, seethed that “strikes won’t help me and my buddies get back to our wives and families.”<sup>89</sup> The contrast between the soldier stoically enduring hardships and workers who complained about working conditions on the home front paint a profoundly unfavorable impression of the toughness and resolve of laborers.

The condemnation of soldiers extended beyond the chidings of a lack of toughness; strikers often had dire accusations leveled at them. Work stoppages in the war industries was often interpreted by soldiers as tantamount to murder. In the midst of the allied liberation in Italy in 1944, Captain Judson Williams wrote that “One member of the team refuses to move forward – the other cannot. That means lost time and lost time now is lost lives.”<sup>90</sup> Pfc. Peterseil opined

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<sup>87</sup> “Soldiers on Strikes,” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jan. 22, 1944, 10.

<sup>88</sup> “‘They’re Letting Us Down’ Says Soldier of Strikers,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), May 13, 1943, 14.

<sup>89</sup> “Our Soldiers in Africa Condemn Strikes Here, Army Paper Reveals,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 6, 1943.

<sup>90</sup> “Army Officer Replies To Letter On Labor,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 14, 1944, 16.



more strongly “It’s a disgrace, and we’re ashamed of what’s going on. It’s sabotage and it’s murder.”<sup>91</sup> Soldiers who expressed such views placed American workers who went on strike in a similar category with Axis soldiers in their degree of harmfulness to Allied soldiers. Stationed in the Pacific theater in 1944 on the eve of Operations Reckless and Persecution to invade New Guinea, Cpl. Robert Tatum drew a similar conclusion. “I think that any man who goes on strike during wartime is just as much or more our enemy as Germany and Japan.”<sup>92</sup> This categorization placed workers on par with the anti-German and racialized anti-Japanese wartime propaganda that would have been familiar to most Americans. Workers and labor unions were backed into a rhetorical corner to draw a line between themselves and the Axis. Sargent Robert S. Frankenburg quipped that “Labor shows poor common sense and the lack of judgement when it pulls off strikes in times of war. Soldiers get a firing squad for similar actions.”<sup>93</sup>

This insinuation of treason was often repeated among the letters of soldiers who mentioned the wildcat strikes in newspaper articles and letters to the editor. A leader of the American Legion, a veteran organization, was quoted telling William Green, the president of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), that “if it is treason for a man to refuse to use his gun on the front, then, too, it should be treason for a person to refuse to work on the home front – to do the things that keep a soldier from getting that gun.”<sup>94</sup> These accusations delivered to the American public backed by the ethos of military personnel during wartime had the potential to influence the home front’s opinion of how strikes were to be treated. Among the extreme rhetoric generated by embittered soldiers arose the label of strikers as unpatriotic and un-American, a

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<sup>91</sup> “Pittsburgh WAC Condemns Strikes,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 14, 1944, 4.

<sup>92</sup> “Wartime Strikes” *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (New York, NY), April 28, 1944.

<sup>93</sup> “Strikes In Wartime,” *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (London, UK), Oct. 29, 1943.

<sup>94</sup> “New Legion Commander Has Tilt At Strikers” *Guinea Gold: American Version* (Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea), Oct. 13, 1943.

serious accusation during wartime. A group of soldiers who were deployed a week before the D-Day operation of 1944 wrote to the *Evening Star* addressing patriotic citizens and stating that they did not “consider these types (strikers) to be real Americans. They are leeches who use the sacrifices of real Americans.”<sup>95</sup>

In the midst of the outrage of soldiers, there were various opinions (mostly published in military newspapers) that did not participate in the popular anger against labor and rejected notions about the disloyalty and un-Americanism of wartime workers. Since many of veteran unionists such as Lieutenant M.R.L. were among the first to be drafted, the armed forces had a considerable numbers of sympathetic personnel.<sup>96</sup> Pfc. Sid Bard wrote from the front in France that “as a soldier, I am even more contemptuous of those who point to strikes and loudly proclaim that labor is losing the war.”<sup>97</sup> The common consensus among these dissidents was that the impact of strikes were greatly overblown by a media that had never been friendly to labor. Sargent M. Chaves claimed that “only one-tenth of one percent of total time available was lost to strikes. That is a record that American labor can be proud of.”<sup>98</sup>

Charges of mainstream media dishonesty was a common theme among sympathetic soldiers, some of whom used to be members of labor organizations. “Why the hell do they play up, to gigantic proportions, these labor strikes and unrest, when in reality they are of small proportions?”<sup>99</sup> Other military periodicals claimed that the anger that soldiers felt was easily stoked by their separation from the home front and the events that they were hearing about. “But this attitude leaves them open to stories about how much money the workers back home are

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<sup>95</sup> “Soldiers Sign Solemn Appeal to ‘Real Americans’ at Home,” *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), May 30, 1944.

<sup>96</sup> “Keeping Labor’s Gains” *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (London, UK), April 15, 1945.

<sup>97</sup> “GI on Labor” *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (New York, NY), Oct. 29, 1944

<sup>98</sup> “Labor’s Share,” *Stars and Stripes* (Washington D.C.), Dec. 19, 1944.

<sup>99</sup> “Keeping Labor’s Gains” *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (London, UK), April 15, 1945.

making, how many women they've got, and how soft a life they have. It's the easiest thing in the world to put these ideas over, especially since a man overseas usually does not have access to all the facts."<sup>100</sup> Opinions such as these did not attempt to explain away the fact that strikes occurred, but rather call attention to the fact that soldiers were more envious of what workers had and what soldiers lacked. Among soldiers who abstained from criticism, many of them praised the quality of the work that labor consistently produced and challenged the conception of laborers as lacking toughness and manhood that was suggested by some of their comrades. "Who do you think made this stuff – pixies?"<sup>101</sup>

Some soldiers opposed the popular admonition of strikers and workers on political principles. At the beginning of the American involvement in the war, many veteran unionists were drafted or joined the armed forces and carried their views with them. Lt. M.R.L wrote from Luxemburg in the final days of the war that "many men fighting here now, such as myself, have fought and worked as civilians to bring some economic security, a just return for a day's work, collective bargaining" and blamed not the worker but those who worked in business and industrial management.<sup>102</sup> As previously mentioned, the excessive profits that were reaped in the war industries were chronicled but only half-heartedly criticized by the media. Soldiers sometimes criticized the excessive profiteering of industrial corporations such as Ford or Dodge. Technician Fourth Grade Paul Barton Johnson viewed "uncontrolled monopolistic private enterprise" as the largest threat to democracy, not uncontrolled unionism and disorderly workers.<sup>103</sup> While some soldiers, whether due to their insights fighting in a war which was

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<sup>100</sup> "Servicemen and Civilians," *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (London, UK), Nov. 19, 1944.

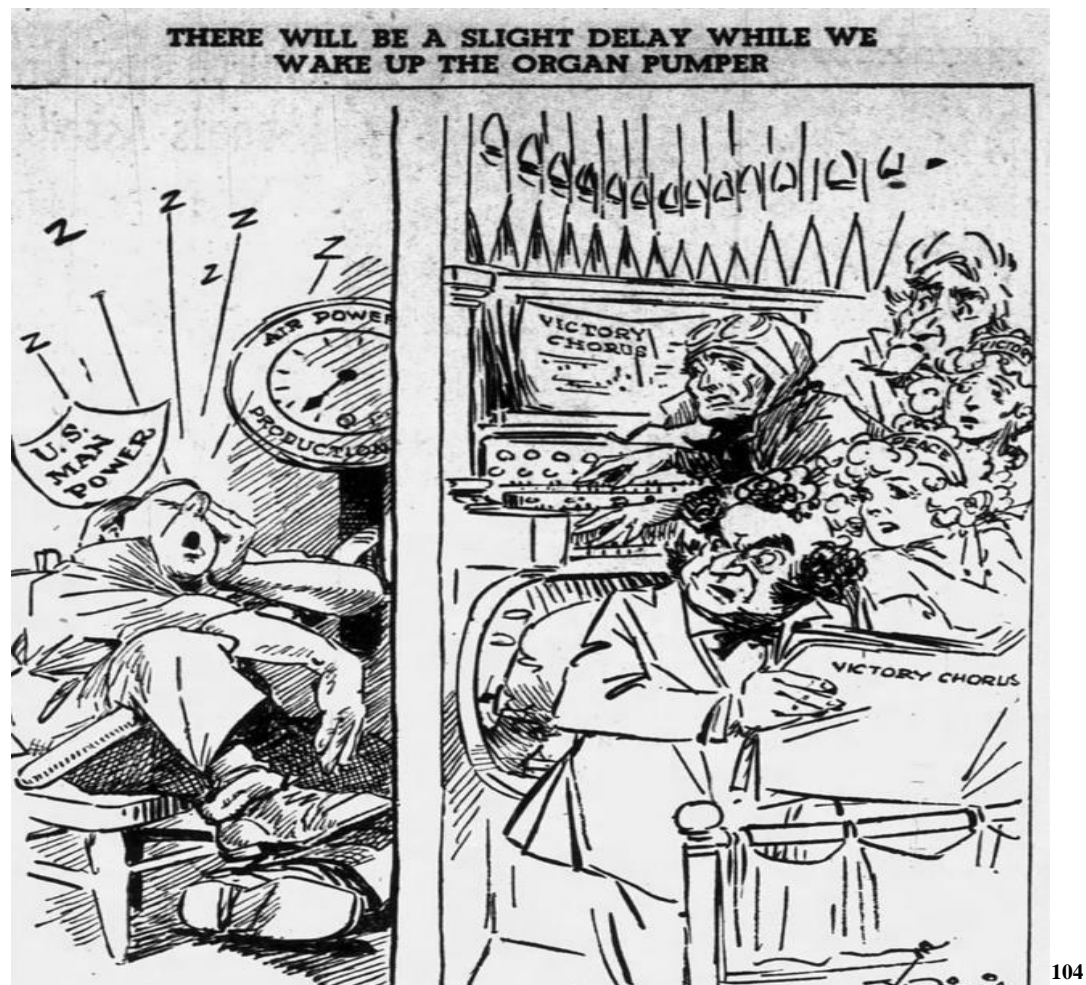
<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> "Keeping Labor's Gains" *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (London, UK), April 15, 1945.

<sup>103</sup> "Wartime Strikes," *Yank – The Army Newspaper* (London, UK), April 28, 1944.

supposed to defend democracy or their union backgrounds, sympathized with workers, the public was less sympathetic

**“Look Here, Mr. Striker”**



104

While a vocal majority of soldiers that expressed their opinions which ranged from strikers as weak willed to strikers deserving a traitor’s bullet, the American public’s opinion appeared to more strongly oppose the wildcat strikes. The reasons for this are manifold. Many of these angry citizens had a personal stake through relatives or loved ones who were in the armed

<sup>104</sup> “There Will Be A Slight Delay While We Wake Up The Organ Pumper,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Aug. 19, 1943, 16.

forces and fighting in the war. A strike in the war industries seemed to directly threaten loved ones in the military, especially since newspaper articles often discussed the shortage of supplies that wildcat strikes could cause. Other Americans undoubtedly opposed the wartime strikes out of a sense of patriotism. The Allied forces were engaged in a titanic struggle against Fascism, militarism, and Axis aggression. The idea of liberal democracy - the system which sought to preserve individual rights through a representative government - was challenged by countries such as Germany, Italy, the Soviet Union, and Japan who sought to create a new political system through conquest. It would then seem unconscionable to oppose and hinder the American war effort which raised suspicions of fifth-column activity and un-Americanism.

In early 1941, during the mobilization and defense increase in industry, the American public blamed the proliferating strike wave on Communist agitators. They seemed to be a likely suspect after signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which guaranteed non-aggression and closer economic ties between Nazi controlled Germany and the Soviet Union. Communist rhetoric swiveled from lampooning fascist aggression and seeking a popular front to opposing the further spread of fascism to criticizing the west for antagonizing the Third Reich in hopes of igniting an imperialist war to increase profits. While Communists did note the increasing profits of the defense industry and were involved in strikes, the American public viewed them as “enemies within.”<sup>105</sup> “Nazism has been curbed but Bolshevists are still permitted to order strikes propagate all kinds of lies to retard defense measures,” claimed W.W. Miller of Shattuck, Oklahoma about a month before the American entrance into World War II.<sup>106</sup> Miller, among other Americans, saw communism as a subversive threat that was drowned out by Hitler’s iniquities in Poland and

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<sup>105</sup> “Enemies Within,” *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK), Nov. 11, 1941, 6.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

Yugoslavia. After a war of annihilation placed the Soviet Union in German crosshairs, Communists became some of the stoutest defenders of the No-Strike Pledge.

Public blame shifted away from Communist agitators and towards unions and the nebulous idea of the labor racketeer.<sup>107</sup> Unions were often blamed for the wildcat strikes despite their best efforts to control their workers. The charge that unions cared more about themselves and less about the collective sacrifice that the war required was not uncommon. Albert Kelly of Reno, Nevada claimed that “When labor waves a flag and shouts ‘the union forever,’ it means not American, but the labor union. . . Labor used to mean those who work, now it means those who strike.”<sup>108</sup> Wildcat strikers were also accused of orchestrating a “strike against the American people” which emphasized their otherness and could place strikers on the side of the Axis since they too were on the opposing side of the Americans during the war.<sup>109</sup> Labor, by allowing strikes to continue despite the No-Strike Pledge, allowed “the will of the American people be defied” and courted anarchy and chaos.<sup>110</sup> This criticism of the CIO’s United Rubber Workers strike in Akron, Ohio during 1943 also warned that labor’s decision to defy the wartime labor mediation board ran the risk of labor “becoming a law of its own,” which rhetorically placed labor on the opposite side of law-abiding citizens and the democratic tradition of heeding public opinion which was an indefensible position in a war that many Americans interpreted as against autocracy and militarism.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> The general idea of a labor racketeer is the accusation that a leader or organization is operating their union like a criminal organization through the use of fraudulence, blackmail, and other underhanded methods.

<sup>108</sup> “Reply to Labor,” *Reno-Gazette Journal* (Reno, NV), Sept. 25, 1942, 11.

<sup>109</sup> “This Correspondent Sees Coal Strike as the Last Straw,” *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), May 6, 1943, 14.

<sup>110</sup> “Vanishing Days of Grace,” *Akron Beacon Journal* (Akron, OH), May 27, 1943, 6.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

The accusation of divided loyalties and a want of money was also commonly voiced by angry Americans. Oliver Earle sarcastically wrote from Binghamton, New York during 1942 “Let’s strike right now and get ours, and the devil take the hindmost – our desperately hard-pressed warriors. Is it our country we are defending or our own individual aggrandizement?”<sup>112</sup> Earle continued, “Take a look at our sons [and theirs] who are fighting on distant battlefields and sinking ships at the munificent wage of 21\$ or thereabouts a month. They cannot strike for higher wages, shorter hours, nor can they dictate their working conditions.”<sup>113</sup> This want of money has an implication of workers lack the willingness to answer the call to endure hardship and make sacrifices for the sake of the war effort. “While our boys are fighting and dying over there, while everyone else is suffering and undergoing hardships and taking cuts, labor is not only not taking less than its luxury wage, but howling for more.”<sup>114</sup> According to Albert Kelly of Reno, Nevada, labor had grown too accustomed to their overinflated wages and could not handle the necessary sacrifices of warfare. Disputing over prices and haggling for more would undoubtedly appear to many onlookers of the strikes that the worker, oblivious to the stakes, was “throwing down his tools and crying for 25 or 30 cents more an hour.”<sup>115</sup> The image of war industry workers crying and throwing a tantrum like a toddler did not help improve their esteem in the eyes of the public.

Accusations of worker ingratitude and lack of perspective became insistent as the strikes persisted. “Thank God that most of us realize after all that we are very fortunate, in spite of our problems. So, go on back to your jobs and quit whining. Just thank God that you are not slaving

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<sup>112</sup> “The Laborer Today,” *Press and Sun Bulletin* (Binghamton, NY), Mar. 7, 1942, 6.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> “Reply to Labor,” *Reno-Gazette Journal* (Reno, NV), Sept. 25, 1942, 11.

<sup>115</sup> “Reader Mails Out 100 Copies of Walsh Letter,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 25, 1944, 10.

for the Nazis with a beastly Gestapo watching your every move.”<sup>116</sup> Americans pointed out that those on strike were not the only ones suffering on the home-front. Rationing and price inflation made the lives of many Americans difficult. However, those who were against the wildcat strikers saw that the alternative of living under a fascist regime under political surveillance was much graver than the loss of wages or weakened working conditions. After all, if the war was lost, the Axis victors would not highly value American working conditions and higher standard of wages. If striking lost the war, workers might lose the rights that they were striking for.

The sympathy for soldiers and acknowledgment of the danger that soldiers were placing themselves in was often mentioned in statements of public opinion against strikers. The lack of complaint from soldiers about their wages was compared to the demands of increased wages from workers who were safe at home.

Ideas about what should be done to the wildcat strikers were far ranging and in some cases extreme. The public often seemed at a loss for how to address and solve the problems and prevent the strikes in the future. For some, acknowledging the strikers’ demands as legitimate was naturally out of the question due to the negative impact on the war effort and lack of patriotism that these labor disputes demonstrated to many Americans. If mediation did not work, extreme measures were often called for. In response to a 1941 transit strike in Philadelphia, WM Curtis opined that “Canada has the right idea in dealing with those who try to call strikes against defense industries by putting them in concentration camps for the duration. More power to

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<sup>116</sup> “Thoughts on the Strike,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), June 24, 1943, 18.



her.”<sup>117</sup> This method of detaining strikers into mass prisons was not new, and used during World War One in the copper fields of Bisbee, Arizona.<sup>118</sup>

Many Americans viewed drafting strikers as a more palatable and effective way to curb the rising tide of wildcat strikes. In Cleo Pierce’s letter to the *Daily Oklahoman* titled “Draft or Beg,?” she wrestled with the issue that even getting down on her knees and begging “please, Mr. Lewis, will you call off the strike and let the men go back to defense work?” would not solve anything and that more severe actions are needed since there was a war on the horizon.<sup>119</sup> Four days after Mrs. Pierce’s angry letter, a national poll was published in the *New York Times* which revealed that 76% of interviewed Americans favored drafting strikers into the military as a punishment.<sup>120</sup> The majority opinion held that strikers were “violating a trust imposed on them when the Army allowed their deferment” from the draft.<sup>121</sup> The 20% minority who opposed this idea did so mostly because they thought that conscription “would make a poor soldier out of a striker.”<sup>122</sup> Many Americans believed that strikes negated the fact that workers who went on strike were exempted from conscription. “If they refuse to work, the draft boards should reclassify their ratings and put them in 1A [available for military service classification], where they can be called on to shoulder a gun.”<sup>123</sup>

Not all Americans who were hostile to strikes believed in extreme efforts that would put workers in harm’s way. As the strike wave of 1941 and the inevitability of entering into the

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<sup>117</sup> “Car Stops and Strikes,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA), May 31, 1941, 7.

<sup>118</sup> John L. Lindquist, James Frasier, “A Sociological Interpretation of the Bisbee Deportation” *Pacific Historical Review* 37 (1968), 405.

<sup>119</sup> “Draft or Beg?” *Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, OK), Nov. 11, 1941, 10.

<sup>120</sup> “Drafting Strikers Favored In Survey” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 15, 1941, 8.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> “Work or Fight,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), July 20, 1944.

conflagration of war loomed large in the public imagination, a series of national polls were conducted. These surveys concerning labor's role in national defense were conducted by Dr. George Gallup and the American Institute of Public Opinion. The results showed an increasing distrust of the American public towards labor and unions. In March of 1941, 72% of polled Americans supported anti-strike legislation which would hamper worker's ability to strike.<sup>124</sup> This is revealing as it demonstrated the public's lack of faith in the validity of the No-Strike Pledge. Over a month later, however, another national poll revealed that "more than two-thirds of the voters have said that strikes in defense industries should be prohibited and that a "cooling off" period should be invoked during which time U.S. mediation could bring the disputing parties to agreement."<sup>125</sup> Mediation would be arbitrated by a board made up of both labor leaders and industrial owners. Several government boards were established to deal with the increasing number of labor disputes but succumbed to the refusal of management to acknowledge the board's ruling and political in-fighting.

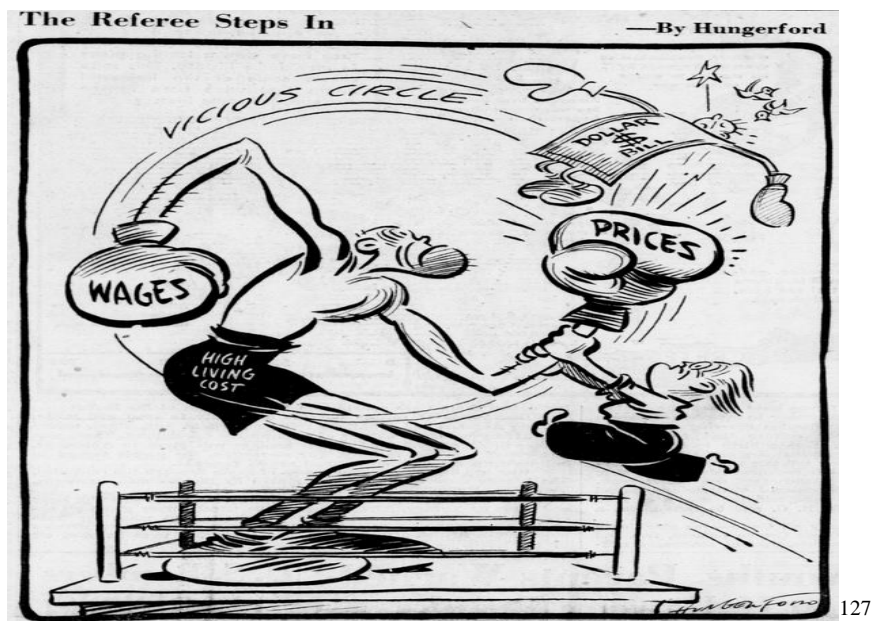
While much of the public fell in line with the popular narrative of the renegade striker who needed to be drafted and controlled, a few voices rejected this mythology. What did the dissenting minority believe and why did they sympathize with the strikers despite the abundant valid reasons supplied by soldiers and civilians against sympathy? Those who challenged the established narrative generally wrote from working-class dominated industrial cities like Pittsburgh or Baltimore. The sympathetic public viewed the strikers demands of increased wages as legitimate and rejected the claim that workers were becoming rich beyond their wildest fancies. For example, A. Rectenwald wrote to the *Pittsburgh Press* in the winter of 1944 during a

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<sup>124</sup> "Sentiment on Labor Unions in Gallup Polls" *Knoxville Journal* (Knoxville, TN), Mar. 30, 1941, 11.

<sup>125</sup> "Voters Favor Strong Measures to Curb Labor Troubles; Would Deal With Reds" *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), May 4, 1941, 63.

wave of steel strikes, “In the first place, why do workers demand more pay? Because they cannot cover expenses with what is left over from their wages. Why? The OPA [Office of Price Administration] allows prices to rise beyond the reach of wages, while the WPB [War Production Board] does not allow an increase in wages.”<sup>126</sup> This problem was well known and a source of complaints. The Stabilization Act of 1942 froze the wages of many of the nation’s workers and left their stagnant wages vulnerable to inflation. A cartoon critical of the damage done by inflation of prices and frozen wages corroborated Rectenwald’s argument.



In addition to this cartoon’s criticism of inflation and President Roosevelt’s desperation to stop the rising prices and falling wages was the criticism of profiteering and greed of the management and corporations which employed the workers. Edgar L. Kelly of Pittsburgh, PA conceptualized workers serving a similar role to the armed forces as guarantors of liberty. “The steel workers have to protect the rights of the men and women in the armed forces and not let the

<sup>126</sup> “Government Confusion Blamed for Delays,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 29, 1944, 4.

<sup>127</sup> “The Referee Steps In” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Pittsburgh, PA), Oct. 23, 1943, 1.

profiteers run the country.”<sup>128</sup> In the eyes of some, a strike was a way to call to attention the excessive war profits that defense industries reaped, which was tepidly covered by the media. In the fight for democracy that many Americans supported abroad, it seemed scandalous and hypocritical to tolerate plutocracy on the home front. “Most strikes are caused by economic inequality – the result of unequal distribution of wealth...and unsatisfactory working conditions. The worker creates a large part of the profits that are pocketed by industry. Therefore it seems logical that he be permitted to share in them.”<sup>129</sup> Another sympathetic citizen, A.L. McCray of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania blamed the industrial powers in America for cynically using patriotic rabbleroxing for their selfish purposes. “The Tory capitalist in times past has always taken refuge behind an army of professional soldiers...the Tory tries to drive a wedge between the working man in uniform and the working man in overalls by propagandizing a few threatened strikes.”<sup>130</sup> McCray lampooned industrial powers in language that evoked the American Revolution, referring to them as Tories (loyalist Americans who supported the British empire during the revolution). He also argued that workers and soldiers belonged to the same working class. In response to those who criticized strikers as greedy and ungrateful, Edgar L. Kelley retorted, “You say the Government is shamefully surrendering national issues to selfish issues? The cost of living is surely an unselfish issue, and a national issue and the steel union means to bring wages in line with the cost of living.”<sup>131</sup> According to Kelley, the strikes that were occurring were over affording the bare necessities of survival and not the product of a working class luxuriating in excess.

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<sup>128</sup> “Steel Worker’s Strike Defended” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Feb. 9, 1944, 14.

<sup>129</sup> “Labor-Management Co-operation Essential,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Feb. 9, 1944, 14.

<sup>130</sup> “Labor’s Wartime Record Defended,” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Jan. 29, 1944, 4.

<sup>131</sup> “Steel Worker’s Strike Defended” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), Feb. 9, 1944, 14.

Several interesting phenomena were present during the public debate over wildcat strikers. Despite the deluge of negative press and angry opinions from citizens that were directed towards labor, public opinion polls sometimes portrayed contradictory findings. In 1941, the American Institute of Public Opinion found that a majority of Americans harbored hostility and condemnation toward unions. On May 6, 1942, a Gallup Poll asked Americans ‘Are you in favor of labor unions?’ The poll reported that 67% of Americans answered that they were in favor of labor unions.<sup>132</sup> The strike problem did not vanish during 1942 nor did public anger against unions abate. What was even more surprising and puzzling was that 66% of businessmen, 67% of white-collar workers, and 77% of professional employees answered that they too were in favor of labor unions.<sup>133</sup> While only 37% of those polled believed that labor was doing everything it could to win the war, the support of labor unions did not reflect their disapproval of labor’s performance during the war.<sup>134</sup>

The second and more revealing part about the public debate about wartime strikes was that the public and soldiers did not distinguish between a wildcat strike and a union-sanctioned work stoppage. As a result, union leaders and labor organizations who were determined to keep the No-Strike Pledge and desperate to quell rebellious workers’ efforts to stage unauthorized strikes took the brunt of the blame for the interruption of production. Pleas to wildcat strikers from union leaders became more frantic as the public invective increased. R.J. Thomas, president of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) bemoaned that “public opinion has become inflamed against our union. Word of these strikes is going to reach to our millions of men in uniform. Our union cannot survive if the nation and our soldiers believe that we are obstructing the war

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<sup>132</sup> The Office of Opinion Research. “Gallup and Fortune Polls” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 6 (1942): 480.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

effort.”<sup>135</sup> Thomas’s comments on the wildcat strikes typify the confusion and loss of control faced by union leaders

### “Wrong Way War!”



136

Labor unions occupied a vulnerable sliver of the public debate over wildcat strikes. Their opinions were caught between the strict patriotic adherence to the No-Strike Pledge, exasperation at the prospect of losing control over their rank-and-file members, and anger towards the perceived betrayal of the war effort by big business’s blatant profiteering and lack of patriotic sacrifice. Above all else, the labor unions harbored a righteous indignation towards the media

<sup>135</sup> “The Foe in Labor’s Ranks” *Press and Sun Bulletin* (Binghamton, NY), June 1, 1944, 6.

<sup>136</sup> “Wrong Way War!” *The CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), June 21, 1943, 4.

and the majority of the public for holding them personally responsible for the wildcat strike waves which spread despite labor's best efforts to contain and pacify them.

Labor unions were anxious to represent themselves as loyal adherents to the No-Strike Pledge and the patriotism that it symbolized. This was achieved through the constant reiteration of the Pledge, even when strikes seemed to contradict these statements. "The CIO at the outset of this war gave its no-strike pledge which it has religiously maintained...the Md.-D.C. Industrial Union Council hereby reaffirms its solemn pledge without any qualifications or conditions that for the duration of the war there must not be any strike or stoppage of work."<sup>137</sup> This treatment of the purposeful abstention of strikes was referred to multiple times in almost quasi-religious overtones. Representatives of the CIO wrote about the labor organization's "solemn duty"<sup>138</sup> to keep the No-Strike Pledge, its "devotion to victory above all else,"<sup>139</sup> and its willingness to "suffer the injustices"<sup>140</sup> of various aspects of the wartime economy.

The leadership of the CIO wasted little time in condemning those workers who did decide to break the pledge. In the midst of a strike wave in 1944 which saw a total of 4,956 strikes and lockouts (over 200 more strikes and involving hundreds of thousands more workers than the legendary labor unrest of 1937)<sup>141</sup>, the UAW passed a resolution which proposed a more aggressive policy of discipline. This promised "to proceed even to the extent of revoking charters and reorganizing locals which fail to take the proper steps to comply with the constitution and the no-strike pledge."<sup>142</sup> The threat of expelling union members or dissolving whole local

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<sup>137</sup> "No Strike Pledge" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Jan. 4, 1944.

<sup>138</sup> "UAW in Strong Ban Against Strikes" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Mar. 13, 1944, 14.

<sup>139</sup> "Looking Ahead" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Jan. 17, 1944, 4.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> "UAW in Strong Ban Against Strikes" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Mar. 13, 1944, 14.

organizations for striking against the CIO's wishes betrayed the desperation that labor unions faced in regaining control of its unions. This sentiment was mirrored by the President of the CIO, Phillip Murray, in a speech to steelworkers shortly after. "If I thought that any of you were going to participate in wildcat strikes or slowdowns, I couldn't be your leader any longer."<sup>143</sup>

Since American soldiers were the most popular concern and invocation within the debate on wildcat strikes, the CIO also used the image of directly supporting the soldiers in war through meeting wartime production quotas as a way to counteract the accusations of disloyalty and indignant letters from soldiers in Europe and the Pacific theatres of war. These invocations also tried to link the titanic efforts of the union and its workers to the successes at war. The story that Staff Stg. Richard J. McHugh related to a CIO affiliated newspaper shortly after the allied invasion of Normandy provided ammunition for the union's efforts to stand with the soldiers on the front: "Several times, I saw trucks keep on advancing with their radiators and chassis shot through with holes and their drivers slouched dead over the wheel. It was almost as if the vehicles were human and determined to carry on despite what the Jerries had done to them."<sup>144</sup> Stories like this showed that CIO affiliated workers and their enthusiasm for their work could transcend the human and augment the performance of the machinery of warfare. This bond between the union and soldiers through the high-quality weaponry that was produced was also elucidated in a cartoon where the CIO was giving a progress report to the average American soldier. "Our first big war job has been making those tanks and planes and guns you need...we've broken plenty of records and we'll smash a lot more of them. All-out, continuous production, that's what we're here for."<sup>145</sup> With the emphasis that victory on the battlefield is

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<sup>143</sup> "Wildcat Strikes Out – Murray" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), April 1944.

<sup>144</sup> "Wounded GI Proud of CIO Workmanship" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Aug. 7, 1944, 10.

<sup>145</sup> "Letter to a Soldier" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Nov. 8, 1943, 14.



contingent on the work that was facilitated by union card holding workers, the CIO suggested that they were sacrificing the most and directly contributing the most to the victories that the allies were experiencing with increasing regularity from 1943 to the end of the war.

The military did not fail to commend unions for their tireless work, welcome material that labor newspapers were eager to publish. *Stars and Stripes* Army Newspaper published a glowing defense of labor's efforts: "Bad news travels fast. Labor strikes and lockouts are no exception, for in a time of war such news is sensational. The loyalty of American labor, on the other hand, seldom makes the headlines, for in time of war such loyalty is expected and often taken for granted."<sup>146</sup> The CIO also proudly noted praise by government officials at their diligence and important role within the war effort. The Under-Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson said that "it is gratifying to note the excellent record made by your union [United Electric, Radio, and Machine Workers of America] in observance of its no-strike pledge. With that kind of backing, our soldiers will move into the decisive phase of the war with an overwhelming superiority of firepower and equipment over the armies of Hitler and Hirohito."<sup>147</sup> This kind of praise from the military and government lent a measure of gravity to the claims of labor. However, not all who read these stories were convinced of the loyalty of labor. As a result, labor unions such as the CIO had to spend much of their resources defending themselves and attacking those whom they saw as truly responsible for wildcat strikes.

Much of labor's defense of itself rested in the accusation that the media and opponents within the larger public debate cherry-picked isolated strikes as typifying aberrant behaviors. In their opinion, the vast majority of workers were doing their duty yet were being smeared by the

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<sup>146</sup> "Army Paper Praises CIO Output Record" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Mar. 13, 1944, 8.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

opponents of labor at every possible opportunity. “For instance, a single, short-lived wildcat strike of a few hundred workers rates more press attention as ‘news’ than does the fact that millions upon millions of other workers are faithfully observing their no-strike pledge.”<sup>148</sup> This accusation correlated with the opinions of pro-union soldiers like Stg. Chaves who claimed that only one tenth of one percent of all production time was actually impeded by strikes or slowdowns. An angry harangue delivered by union members to the editors of the *Akron Beacon Journal* echoed similar sentiment. “Akron labor is becoming rather tired of being the whipping boy for the *Beacon’s* editorial animus...Delays due to labor are played up on page 1. Delays – many of them of long duration – due to faulty planning, lack of materials, and competitive jockeying, and other causes are not mentioned.”<sup>149</sup> These sentiments, which were supportive of workers, balked at what was perceived to be a concerted smear campaign by united and implacable enemies.

These enemies of labor – big business and the hostile media wanted to “concentrate on conflict, on disagreement, and on the exceptional, rather than on attitudes and activities that are the rule and not the exception.”<sup>150</sup> The industrial titans, such as Ford and Dodge, were lightning rod of blame for the labor unrest in the eyes of labor organizations. Union attitudes applied the same monikers of sabotage and betrayal to large corporations that were often used to describe labor organizations by angry soldiers and civilians. The initial refusal of corporate cooperation with labor organizations in the 1941 meetings with President Roosevelt and the continued agitation against workers who forsook their primary weapon against industrial management was not viewed kindly. “The refusal to cooperate for a commonly recognized good is a strike. It is

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<sup>148</sup> “Looking Ahead” *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Jan. 17, 1944, 4.

<sup>149</sup> “Making Labor the Whipping Boy” *The Akron Beacon Journal* (Akron, OH), Mar. 29, 1943.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

more than a strike – it is sabotage. Strikes and sabotage are not confined to factories or mines...they occur in high places as well as low. They are plotted in dark corners and around mahogany tables.”<sup>151</sup>

Underhandedness and dishonesty were also common condemnations that were leveled against corporations. Corporations were aware of the negative press that surrounded strikes and tried to use the popular indignation against unions. In August of 1943, amid the collective fury directed against the UMW and John L. Lewis’s wildcat strikes, UAW President R.J. Thomas accused Chrysler of circulating pamphlets which contained false information about his views on strikes to workers in an attempt to incite the workers to go on strike.<sup>152</sup> Since the No-Strike Pledge’s efficacy was the subject of scrutiny and vituperation, additional strikes would have rubbed proverbial salt in labor’s wounds and increased popular support for harsher anti-strike legislation. This was seen again in the large racially motivated Philadelphia Transit Strike of 1944, where the CIO blamed the management for purposely stoking racial tensions with the goal of starting a strike. The CIO stated that the media attention called to the violation of the No-Strike Pledge, President Roosevelt’s decision to order soldiers to break up the strike, and the arrest of several union leaders was to “whitewash the real instigators of the strike located in high places in industry, city government, and Republican organizations...the CIO has fought for equal rights for all, against wartime strikes.”<sup>153</sup>

Finally, labor unions were apoplectic over the lack of Equality of Sacrifice that was being carried out by big business and largely downplayed by the mainstream media of the day.

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<sup>151</sup> “Strikes and Sabotage” *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Oct. 9, 1944, 1.

<sup>152</sup> “Chrysler Foments Strikes, UAW Charges” *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Aug. 3, 1943, 10.

<sup>153</sup> “CIO Union Charges Transit Strike Report Used as a Political Weapon.” *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Oct. 9, 1944, 5.



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Some newspapers such as *The Capital Times* in Washington D.C. followed the meteoric rise in corporate profits and their findings were shocking. Despite the popular ideal of sacrifice and denial on the American home front, companies in the defense industry such as “Harnishfeger Corp. of Milwaukee, whose 1942 profits, after taxes, reached \$2,795,000 as compared to \$561,000 in 1940. The Elastic Stop Nut Corp., with 1942 profits after taxes of \$3,480,000 compared with \$432,000 in 1940.”<sup>155</sup> Extreme cases showed a staggering 2,820% increase in profits by Bell Aircraft between 1940 and 1941.<sup>156</sup> The *Times* went on further to explain that these companies were actively engaged in “spending large sums for newspaper and magazine

<sup>154</sup> “Get All The Way In!” *The CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), August 17, 1942, 4.

<sup>155</sup> “The Bare Facts of War Profiteering” *The Capital Times* (Washington D.C.), Jan. 10, 1944, 14.

<sup>156</sup> “Inequalities” *The CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), August 17, 1942, 4.

advertising claiming that business is not making money out of the war.”<sup>157</sup> With this blatant profiteering, the CIO went to great lengths to heap criticism on the lack of patriotism and the preoccupation for material gains of business. The idea of Equality of Sacrifice, that promised that if labor was going to forsake striking then business should have to forsake the pursuit of profits, was challenged. An article in the CIO’s newspaper printed a skeptical story about the validity of the Equality of Sacrifice. “It is questionable, too, whether cutting the richest married couple to spending money of \$50,000 a year represents an ‘equal sacrifice’ to that of a worker’s family deprived of some of the bare necessities of life, and still less to that of the soldier who sacrifices his life.”<sup>158</sup> After all, an aggressive taxation of wartime profits which was still leading to 4-5 fold increases in profit still would not compare to the destitution that some workers experienced. Sacrifice was measured by suffering in this war, either from battlefield wounds, explosions in mines, hunger ravaged stomachs, and weariness caused by long work hours. Business was not incurring any of this. CIO President Murray put the strikes over minimal price raises into perspective during a convention in 1942. “As to the corporate bigshots who have been arguing so fervently against wages increases of a few cents for their employees: Eugene Green considered 5.5%, or 44 cents a day, too much of a boost for the steelworkers. But he took a raise of \$55,000 himself – from \$478,114 in 1940 to \$537,724 in 1941.”<sup>159</sup> These statistics carry an irony and a challenge to the civilians and military personnel who accused labor of unduly profiting off of the war without acknowledging the lack of economic sacrifice that Americans believed everyone should undertake.

### **“We Were Allies of Hirohito”**

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<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> “An Ample Cushion” *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Mar. 15, 1943, 4.

<sup>159</sup> “Inequalities” *The CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), August 17, 1942, 4.

The perspective of the American worker during this time was not loud in this debate. They were, however, angry and skeptical of many of the facets of this debate, such as the validity of the Equality of Sacrifice campaign, the No-Strike Pledge, and the common misrepresentation of workers as avaricious and money-hungry. They further felt alienated from unions who they exceedingly viewed as strike-breakers and stooges of big business for enforcing the No-Strike Pledge.

Many members of the working class were confused and embittered with the supposed exchange of a No-Strike Pledge for guarantees of sacrifice and the forswearing of profits. During the initial debate on how to implement the pledge, John McGill, a UAW member and worker at a Flint, Michigan Buick factory vented his incredulity at this idea. “We figured that there would be no such thing as equality of sacrifice. We just did not believe that. The only ones that were going to sacrifice would be the workers themselves and the coupon clippers would soon get their take even during wartime...the only effective weapon the worker has (were strikes) and we gave it away.”<sup>160</sup> Norm Bully, a fellow worker at the Flint GM plant, gave similar complaints about the No-Strike Pledge since it gave companies and management permission to behave in a reactionary and repressive manner towards the workers. “The company took advantage of this situation. The fact that we pledged that we would not strike meant that when we went in to negotiate for something, a mere “no” was enough.”<sup>161</sup> The notion of the equality of sacrifice was met with scorn by workers like Bully who opined that “The corporations were showing no sense of patriotism or loyalty and were contributing nothing. All the sacrifices were on the part of the

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<sup>160</sup> Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1980), 6-7.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

workers. When real and pressing grievances arose and there was no solution, management hid behind the no-strike pledge.<sup>162</sup>

The opinions of these autoworkers agreed in their scorn for the lack of patriotism that corporations showed. However, unlike the union leaders, many workers felt hamstrung by the stipulations placed before them by their unions. People predictably responded to a perceived pressure and a narrowing of avenues of redress with anger and disregard of conventional rules if those regulations do not suit them. Workers responded to the rising economic pressures with the most effective method they knew how – strikes and work stoppages. In 1942, a worker for Ford vented that “A lot of these companies deserve to be treated pretty miserable. They treated us that way during the depression. Didn’t even say, ‘sorry, old man, we ain’t got nothing for you today.’ Just said, ‘Get the hell out of here.’ So now it ain’t no wonder if some of the boys treat the company miserable.”<sup>163</sup> This sense of retribution was common among workers who expressed their anger towards the No-Strike Pledge.

Many wartime workers and miners were also sharply indignant at the commonly held view that they were striking because they were greedy and ungrateful to the sacrifices that the soldiers were making. The desperate situations of workers who were being subjected to frozen wages and rising inflation were expressed through interviews and letters written to local newspapers. In 1943, a large number of miners wrote to their local papers in an effort to broadcast their perspectives on the large UMW strikes. A miner who grimly called himself John Burns expressed that the strikes were not because he wanted to increase his earnings. Instead, “We coal miners are all true and hardy Americans who are only asking that our three meals be

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> James Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law During World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 137.

assured.”<sup>164</sup> Four days later, a woman who identified herself as a miners’ wife, mother of a miner and soldier boy wrote to the *Knoxville Journal* pleading for Americans to understand the economic realities that were at work behind the strikes. “So many people really don’t know what a miner’s wages are. This \$12 to \$14 a day isn’t true. All shift men don’t get seven dollars a day. My husband only gets \$6.72 a day.”<sup>165</sup> For other miners, they claimed that they did not have fixed wage, but instead fluctuated for better or worse. “Most miners do not have a guaranteed wage for their day’s work. What they make is based on their strength and skill.”<sup>166</sup>

The hidden costs that reduced their paycheck concealed a grim reality behind the loosened safety regulations and enormous risks that miners bore. At this point in the war, miners had higher casualty rates than American soldiers fighting in the war. “By May 1943, US armed forces in World War II tallied 27,172 killed or wounded. During the same 17 months, mining accidents had claimed 34,000 injured and almost 2,000 dead.”<sup>167</sup> Another miner’s wife from West Frankfort, Illinois wrote about the incessant mining injuries as if they were almost a universal phenomenon: “You can walk down the street of this coal mining town and see men minus arms, legs, hands, fingers from all from mine accidents. When he goes down that 500-foot shaft, he doesn’t know whether he is coming out on his feet or a stretcher.”<sup>168</sup> While low wages and accidents rankled the working class, this only began to scratch the surface of their anger.

In 1942, journalist and labor activist, Mary Heaton Vorse travelled around the country to interview wartime workers and take a sample of their opinions on their treatment in the war. Her

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<sup>164</sup> “The Miner’s Side” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), June 6, 1943, 16.

<sup>165</sup> “Miner’s Wife Denies Men Are Paid High Wages for Work” *Knoxville Journal* (Knoxville, TN), June 15, 1943.

<sup>166</sup> “The Coal Miner’s Side: Had to Quit; Couldn’t Make a Living at It.” *Des Moines Register* (Des Moines, IA), May 16, 1943, 11.

<sup>167</sup> James Atleson, *Labor and the Wartime State*, 131.

<sup>168</sup> “Miner’s Side” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Nov. 10, 1943, 10.



summary, “And the Workers Say...,” was full of glum workers recounting their sense of powerlessness and anger of poor working conditions within the defense industry. Workers expressed skepticism at the efficacy of government mediation organizations like the National Labor Relations Board to properly protect them. Vorse was told by a worker that before a factory inspection that the factory management “ran the ventilation plant for the first time in over a year last week when the Navy Inspectors went through.”<sup>169</sup> Vorse independently noted that “Absence of showers, insufficient, locker space, and even too few and filthy restrooms are found only too often.”<sup>170</sup>

The demands of total war and raising quotas were mentioned by workers as irritants. They felt that the endless demands of work rapidly encroached into their break time. A shipbuilder in the Los Angeles Harbor area described the shortness of his lunch break with exasperation. Breaks began and ended with the screech of a whistle to signal for workers to get back to work. “Often the whistle blows before a man gets to the canteen or wolfs down what he has. The food’s all caked with grease, so the men throw it on the ground.”<sup>171</sup> Vorse noted that these working conditions harkened back to Great Depression levels of wretchedness. “The conditions under which shipbuilders eat are as bad as the food; some canteens have four lines converging on them from different directions, and those lines barely move. The workers stand, shoulders hunched, rain dripping from them, waiting for their turn at the canteen. Watching this at night is like seeing the most miserable breadline of depression days.”<sup>172</sup> While Vorse’s observations may appear to be laced with sensationalism, the workers corroborated her story to

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<sup>169</sup> Mary Heaton Vorse “And The Workers Say...,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7 (1943), 449.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 450-451.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

various degrees. “Why don’t you print some pictures of mining towns and miners’ homes, and tell the public of the conditions under which the miners work?”<sup>173</sup> Ray Storey of Avery, Iowa similarly directed a scathing rebuttal against the public for being willfully ignorant of the conditions of working people. “Mrs. Harvey Phillip’s letter said the coal miners have their homes, beds, and free sunshine. I wonder where they get sunshine, working underground in damp artificial air. She must have seen a strip pit once. She is right about no bombs dropping, but a miner is in danger at all times, poison gases, falling slate, and gas explosions. Surely she has read of the mine disasters.”<sup>174</sup>

The public debate surrounding the wildcat strike waves during World War II were heated and fractious. Each side of the debate, American soldiers, civilians, labor unions, and workers within the defense industry, believed that their perspectives were not understood by their countrymen and countrywomen. The soldiers were generally incensed by the feeling of betrayal on the home front with a few notable exceptions from union card carrying military personnel and civil rights conscious troops. The American public decried both the lack of consideration and sacrifice that strikers showed with a loud minority of working-class citizens who believed that strikers were being smeared and misunderstood. Prominent labor organizations such as the CIO believed that wildcat strikes were an anomaly that were taken advantage of by a coalition of labor’s enemies: the mainstream media and large corporations. Finally, workers felt angry due to the lack of understanding of the economic destitution and physical risks involved while working in the defense industry.

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<sup>173</sup> “The Miner’s Side” *Akron Beacon Journal* (Akron, OH), May 14, 1943, 6.

<sup>174</sup> “Miners Helping in War Effort, Too.” *Des Moines Register* (Des Moines, IA), May 16, 1943, 11.

## Chapter 4: The Answer



Nineteen Forty-Three was a tempestuous year on the home front in the United States. While spreading race riots blighted the image of domestic unity like black ink stains on a white starched shirt, the strike wave typified by John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers (UMW) was the crown jewel of vituperation and discord. It started with an anthracite strike, which extended from December 30, 1942 to January 22, 1943. This strike swept up resentful miners as it grew to encompass 15,000-25,000 of the 80,000 existing anthracite harvesters.<sup>2</sup> This galvanized miners who were already upset and angry over their low wages and high rates of

<sup>1</sup> "The Start of A New Gold Rush" *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO), Nov. 13, 1943.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II* (Detroit: Brunswick Editions, 1980), 92-93.

mortality. The situation was further exacerbated by the volcanic personality of the UMW's president, John L. Lewis. During the early months of 1943, Lewis was called to testify before the Senate about his miner's actions. An apoplectic Lewis declared that the No-Strike Pledge was void by alterations of the Little-Steel wage formula which allowed a 15% wage increase to cover the inflationary costs of living.<sup>3</sup> He furthermore erupted at various senators and future president Harry Truman: "Hunger is a relative term. I said the coal miners are hungry, they suffer from a dietary insufficiency. When you say I am a demagogue I say to you that you are less than a proper representative of the common people."<sup>4</sup>

Attempts to negotiate for a wage increase in the new annual contracts were interrupted by President Roosevelt's "Hold the Line" executive order which effectively froze wages as a measure to combat inflation. In late April, Lewis defied the War Labor Board's (WLB) summons to negotiate the new contract within the confines of frozen wages and a demand for uninterrupted coal production.<sup>5</sup> As wildcats spread and workers' tempers flared, President Roosevelt ordered miners back to work. Despite the President's wishes, all UMW mines shut down on May 1. Roosevelt ordered all striking mines to be seized and operated by the government in order to prevent a lapse in coal production. The miners were unmoved by the President's pleas and his May 2 radio address, only returning to work on May 4 in accordance to a 15-day truce called by Lewis.<sup>6</sup> Over the summer and most of the autumn, strikes spiraled out of control which

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<sup>3</sup> "Lewis Challenges No-Strike Pledge" *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 27, 1943, 6. The Little Steel Formula refers to the fixed and limited wage increases that were instituted to fight against inflation.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Wartime Strikes*, 94.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

culminated into the National War Labor Board (NWLB) capitulating to the miner's demands for a pay raise on November 20, 1943.<sup>7</sup>



**United States Property!**  
**THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR**

**Order for Taking Possession:**

*By virtue of the authority vested in me by the President of the United States, I hereby find from the available information that a strike or stoppage has occurred or is threatened in each of the coal mines operated by the companies specified in Appendix A attached hereto, and therefore take possession of each such mine including any and all real and personal property, franchises, rights, facilities, funds, and other assets used in connection with the operation of such mine and the distribution and sale of its products, for operation by the United States in furtherance of the prosecution of the war.*

The president of each company (or its chief executive officer) specified in Appendix A attached hereto, is hereby and until further notice designated Operating Manager for the United States for such mine and is authorized and directed, subject to such supervision as I may prescribe, and in accordance with regulations to be promulgated by me, to operate such mine and to do all things necessary and appropriate for the operation of the mine, and for the distribution and sale of the product thereof.

All of the officers and employees of the company are serving the Government of the United States and shall proceed forthwith to perform their usual functions and duties in connection with the operation of the mine and the distribution and sale of the product thereof, and shall conduct themselves with full regard for their obligation to the Government of the United States.

No person shall interfere with the operation of the mine by the United States Government, or the sale or distribution of the product thereof, in accordance with this order.

The Operating Manager for the United States shall forthwith fly the flag of the United States upon the mining premises, post in a conspicuous place upon the premises on which such mine is located a notice of taking possession of the mine by the Secretary of the Interior, and furnish a copy of such notice to all persons in possession of funds and properties due and owing to the company.

Possession and operation of any mine may be terminated by the Secretary of the Interior at such time as he should find that such possession and operation are no longer required for the successful prosecution of the war.



**Harold L. Ickes,**  
**SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR**

U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1943 O - 52825

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>8</sup> "Order for Taking Possession" poster, ca. 1943. (National Archives Identifier: 640355).

Throughout this fight between the UMW and the government, the public and media screamed in inchoate rage. Newspapers during this time choked with indignation. Westbrook Pegler, a prominent media commentator attributed “strike, riot, and pillage against the lawful established government, the public authority and the peace and security of the United States” to Lewis’s actions.<sup>9</sup> An editorial written in Union, Missouri captured the special hatred that Americans felt towards Lewis. “I suspect that a great deal of interest and most of the indignation over the coal strike comes from the fact that it is John L. Lewis’ strike.”<sup>10</sup> This sentiment was repeated ad nauseum. For example, the digital archive *Newspapers* contains 32,505 mentions of John L. Lewis between the months of May and June, 1943 and 128,387 individual articles about him dated from 1942-1944. It appears that this concentrated coverage on various strikes and anti-labor sentiment had an impact on the public mood during the duration of the war. In the spring of 1943, as the UMW strike wave began to gain momentum, the American Institute for Public Opinion (AIPO) and the Gallup Poll began to concentrate on the public opinions views of the labor movement’s role of the war effort. An AIPO poll taken on May 4, 1943, the day which Lewis’s UMW decided to return to work, found that 72% of Americans favored a law which forbade strikes during wartime.<sup>11</sup> What is more interesting is that the AIPO reported that 64% unionized war workers believed that strikes should be outlawed.<sup>12</sup>

This was a paradox which has befuddled researchers of labor and class, as Martin Glaberman notes that a majority of workers in the auto industry were staunch supporters of the No-Strike Pledge but also overwhelmingly participated in wildcat strikes.<sup>13</sup> It later noted that

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<sup>9</sup> “Not the Owner” *The Atlanta Constitution* (Atlanta, Georgia), June 9, 1943, 6.

<sup>10</sup> “Sarah Bolling Says” *Franklin County Tribune* (Union, Missouri), May 7, 1943, 5.

<sup>11</sup> The Office of Opinion Research. “Public Opinion Polls” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7 (1943): 310.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Wartime Strikes*, 121.

public regard of labor unions dropped by 38% on May 13, 1943. As the crisis deepened into the summer of 1943, the American public was galvanized and saturated with stories of John L. Lewis's intransigence. An AIPO poll reported on June 17 that 87% of Americans had unfavorable opinions of Lewis<sup>14</sup> which was hardly surprising given the amount of attention he was receiving. Furthermore, as the truce that Lewis called began to deteriorate, a staggering 78% of Americans supported laws which would make striking a crime and result in a seizure by the government.<sup>15</sup> With such levels of publicity and outrage, it was only a matter of time for the machinery of government to respond in kind.

### **The Smith Connally Act**

The War Labor Disputes Act, popularly referred to as the Smith-Connally Act, was introduced by Senator Thomas Connally of Texas in September of 1942. The bill largely echoed public wishes and gave "statutory authority to the President to seize war facilities, made it a criminal offense to instigate, direct, or aid a strike in a Government-operated plant or mine, prohibited, for the period of the war, political contributions by labor organization, and required the representative of employees of a war contractor to give notice of a labor dispute which threatens seriously to interrupt war production," according to President Roosevelt's interpretation of the bill.<sup>16</sup> This bill reiterated the president's existing power to seize mines via executive order as demonstrated by Roosevelt's seizure of striking UMW mines a month before the passage of the bill. This was also designed to target the political influence of unions and reflected the public concern of racketeering and malfeasance in handling union dues and other

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<sup>14</sup> The Office of Opinion Research. "Gallup and Fortune Polls" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7 (1943): 485.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

<sup>16</sup> US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943. Vol. 89, pt. 5, 6487-6488.

funds, as racketeering was a common trope of anti-labor sentiment.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the bill called for a 30 day “cool down” period before a union could actually carry out a strike. Between the time that a strike was announced, the WLB would adjudicate the case closely and try to head off any potential strike actions. If this was not followed, the union involved would be liable for any damages or financial loss that occurred during the strike.

The congressional debate surrounding the bill was heated and contentious. On May 5, 1943, the Senate convened to vote on its passage and present final arguments on the merits and demerits of the bill. Among the defenders of the bill, a common argument was that Congress had been too slow to react to the issue and waited to address strikes only when they had reached a fevered pitch. Senator Robert Taft (R-OH) claimed that “The matter has been before the Senate for 2 years; it has been in every Senator's mail; it has been in every Senator's consideration; it has been given, in the Senate, the fullest kind of debate. In my opinion, the people of the country desire the Congress to deal with strikes.”<sup>18</sup> This populist appeal to listen to the people of America was echoed by Sen. Connally and Sen. Wilbert O’Daniel (D-TX) and to do their job as legislators. “We cannot afford to admit that our arms are paralyzed and our brains numb and our consciences dead, when the country calls for action.”<sup>19</sup> O’Daniel charged that the strike problem was led by “labor leader racketeers.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, due to the novel nature of the Smith-Connally Act, Sen. Connally described using the power to legislate in new territory was an act of “courage”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Office of Opinion Research. “Public Opinion Polls” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 7 (1943): 486.

<sup>18</sup> US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943. Vol. 89, pt. 3, 3977.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3978.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3982.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 3979.



Other arguments in favor of anti-strike legislation drew on legal and literal interpretations of the No-Strike Pledge and seizures of striking facilities. In response to the worries raised about the legality of President Roosevelt's seizure of the mine, Sen. Alben Barkley (D-VA) stated that the President's constitutional role as commander and chief legitimized the action. "The Constitution also places on the President the responsibility and vests in him the powers of Commander in Chief of the Army and of the Navy. These weapons for the protection of the continued existence of the Nation are placed in his sole command and the implication is clear that he should not allow them to become paralyzed by failure to obtain supplies."<sup>22</sup> This rationale of war materials falling under the jurisdiction of the Commander in Chief was also used in the mammoth North American Aviation strike of 1941. Sen. Taft viewed anti-strike legislation as little more than insurance for the No-Strike Pledge – if there was such a pledge in place, there is not a reason to object to a law which prohibits strikes. "The labor unions and all the employers agreed that the men would not strike, but would continue to work on the terms on which they were working...certainly the men cannot object and the unions cannot object, and there is no basis for any such objection or argument."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Taft evoked the age old conservative argument about addressing poor working conditions – "the men have the right to quit."<sup>24</sup>

Later deliberations in the Senate before the passage of the bill in the house revolved around the conception of the UMW strikes as an existential threat to the United States. Sen. Harry Byrd (D-VA) stated on June 4, as negotiations began to break down between the UMW and the WLB, that "today America is faced with the greatest threat on her home front since the dastardly attack at Pearl Harbor. There must be no compromise on the issue of whether John

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3992.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 3974.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3973.

Lewis or the constitutional authorities govern our Republic.”<sup>25</sup> The suggestions that John L. Lewis was guilty of treason and being an enemy of the people were also liberally used by angry senators. Sen. James Eastland (D-MI) claimed that “I think John L. Lewis should be in jail. His acts amount to treason. Lewis is as deadly an enemy of America as Hitler and Tojo.”<sup>26</sup>

The discussion of the dangers of labor movements, however, did move beyond intangible assertions and over-zealous acclamations. Sen. O’Daniels spent a considerable amount of time reading telegrams and news stories to the senate about the violence that was perpetrated by labor racketeers. One story, which accused AFL “goon squads” of attacking workers and contractors who were not unionized, claimed that “Blood will run like water in southeastern Missouri, Scott, and Girardeau Counties unless the Government steps in at once Monday to rid labor racketeers from interference with peaceful construction...”<sup>27</sup> Many of these stories also involved labor contractors who were found dead under mysterious circumstances from gunshot wounds in the back. Furthermore, if these strikes were not quickly contained, they would invariably lead to “force and violence being used, and possibly the shedding of blood, and perhaps many men will lose their lives.”<sup>28</sup> This accusation of O’Daniels was quite pernicious, as it connected violent crimes and stories with unrelated workers and their struggles for better working conditions. The implication of labor leaders acting more harmfully than Hitler’s Fascism and Emperor Hirohito’s Militarism was quite astounding as one sought the betterment of working conditions the other sought genocide and aggressive expansionism.

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<sup>25</sup> US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943. Vol. 89, pt. 4, 5372.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5373.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*,

The opposition of the Smith-Connally Act was heated, even though the bill was passed with relative ease. Early arguments cited a point that labor organizations held: that such a law would only serve to agitate the working class into further action. Sen. Robert Wagner (D-NY), an ardent opponent of anti-strike legislation, thought that such measures would make the United States appear more authoritarian. “I think the idea of criminal compulsion is repugnant. I do not think that a provision of this kind in the bill would be of any help, it has never worked when tried in other democratic countries, and in my opinion the American worker will resent it.”<sup>29</sup> The number of telegrams from angry workers and union leaders that were read to the Senate resoundingly spoke of the resentment that workers felt towards the government. Philip Murray, president of the CIO, telegraphed to accuse Congress of the “repression and degradation of the living standards of labor.”<sup>30</sup> Martin Wagner, the president the United Gas, Coke, and Chemical Workers of America, said that the Smith-Connally Act was “legislation designed only to humiliate and discourage them [the workers].”<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the criminalization of strikes, which would presumably lead to the incarceration of striking workers would furthermore hurt the morale and choleric temperament of workers. Sen. Wagner noted that heavy-handed labor laws in Britain in the war backfired and led to the unjust imprisonment of factory workers who were seeking redress. He noted that “that workers in jail produce no more war materials than soldiers' bayonets.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, not only does imprisonment wound morale but it also wastes precious resources that are needed to power the engine of a total war economy.

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<sup>29</sup> US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943. Vol. 89, pt. 3, 3971.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 3969.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Senators Burton Wheeler (D-MT), Arthur Shipstead (R-MN), and John Danaher (R-CT) raised the issue of the fairness of the mediation process of the WLB. Sen. Wheeler stated that from speaking to the striking miners, they felt that approaching the WLB to arbitrate a wage increase was fruitless due to President Roosevelt's "Hold the Line" executive order which froze wages.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, asking the proper authorities for a needed pay raise when the answer would automatically be in the negative was a waste of everybody's time. Sen. Wheeler analogized the miner's plight thusly: "I would not go into a court to try a case if I thought the court was prejudiced; and no other lawyer who has the interests of his client at heart would go into a court if he thought it was prejudiced or if he thought the case had been decided in advance or if he thought that, because of an order which had been issued by the President, the court could not give him justice."<sup>34</sup> Sen. Shipstead cast further aspersions on the impartiality of the WLB by citing discriminatory practices within the organization, which were covered in the newspapers recently. "I am told that at one time two members of the Board were officers and members of the union (UMW), and were removed as officers and as members of the union."<sup>35</sup> If the Board does not tolerate union representatives and members within their ranks, how could they be trusted to fairly judge the case and influencing conditions of the miners? Sen. Shipstead further elaborated that the "misery and destitution and the bad living conditions and poor working conditions" of miners was to such a degree that one must see and experience them for themselves in order to believe these legends of squalor.<sup>36</sup> Without members to impart such experience on the Board, its

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3974.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

judgement would be severely impaired and incapable of considering the dire situations in which miners existed.

Finally, while Senators Connally and Taft framed the passage of the bill in terms of listening to the people who demanded all due haste, those in opposition to the bill and even some supporters demanded more deliberation and cool consideration. Sen. Wheeler argued that the very existence of hysteria in the American public over strikes is a reason itself to prolong deliberations on the Smith-Connally Act. In replying to Sen. Connally's demand for courage, Sen. Wheeler retorted: "Where is the courage? Because some persons are saying that we ought to take every workingman out and shoot him, Members of Congress become frightened and intimidated. Because the great newspapers in the East are harping on one thing, and all the financial interests are saying we ought to do this or do that, members of Congress are intimidated and frightened."<sup>37</sup> This call for cool-headedness of governance has roots that trace back to James Madison's vision of a republic's role "to guard against the confusion of a multitude" in *Federalist Papers No. 10*.<sup>38</sup> Wheeler also viewed the mainstream newspapers such as the *New York Times* as culpable for the tide of anti-labor sentiment and misrepresenting the causes of the strikes. Sen. Barkley echoed this sentiment and took issue with Sen. Connally's exhortation to courage. "With the excited temper of the people who have been aroused by a particular situation, it takes more courage to vote against a bill than it does to vote for it." Once again, the Madisonian dispassionate approach to governance appeared in the halls of the Senate. Furthermore, the chiding of the Senate for not acting with courage and the implication of cowardice was not acceptable to Sen. Wheeler. "When any Senator denounces the Senate and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 3980.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006), 57.

calls it cowardly, and says it must act, he is like the bird which befouls its own nest.”<sup>39</sup> While these vigorous objections were raised, they were not enough. The bill was overwhelmingly passed in the Senate with 63 voting in favor, 16 voting against, and 17 abstentions on May 5, 1943. The bill passed in the House of Representatives with similar ease on June 12, 1943 with 233 voting for and 141 voting against the passage of the Smith-Connally Act.

The last barricade that the Smith-Connally Act had to overcome was the presidential veto. As a long-time friend of labor, President Roosevelt’s objections both defended the American workforce and expressed support for anti-strike legislation. In his veto letter, which was read to the Senate on June 25, 1943, the president opened with an acknowledgement of the sterling effort of the labor force. “For the entire year of 1942, the time lost by strikes averaged only five one-hundredths of 1 percent of the total man-hours worked. The American people should realize that fact—that ninety-nine and ninety-five one hundredths percent of the work went forward without strike.”<sup>40</sup> This statistic was the same that was cited in *Stars and Stripes* defense of the efforts of American workers. The president, along with other defendants of the labor movement in World War II, sought to dispel the hysterical accusations of labor losing the war and reminded the American public that strikes made up an infinitesimally small percentage of the total work completed. The president later confessed that he did not take issue with the criminalization of strikes in government-run facilities or with his prerogatives to seize striking industrial installations that were vital to the war effort.<sup>41</sup> “This [Section 6 of the Smith-Connally Act] would make possible the arrest of a few leaders who would give bond for their appearance at trial. It would assure punishment for those found guilty, and might also have some deterrent

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<sup>39</sup> US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943. Vol. 89, pt. 3, 3980.

<sup>40</sup> US Congress. *Congressional Record*. 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1943. Vol. 89, pt. 5, 6487.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 6488.

effect.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, Roosevelt broke with labor and its congressional allies with his allowance of imprisoning strike leaders, something that would have been unthinkable in his tenure during the 1937 strike wave.

The president’s objections resonated with the “cooling off” period before a strike could take place. This objection was based in his belief that requiring labor leaders to provide a 30-day notice before going on strike would invalidate and obliquely subvert the principles of the No-Strike Pledge. “In wartime we cannot sanction strikes with or without notice... Section 8 ignores completely labor's "no strike" pledge and provides in effect for strike notices and strike ballots. Far from discouraging strikes these provisions would stimulate labor unrest and give Government sanction to strike agitations.”<sup>43</sup> This objection is interesting because it dovetailed with the beliefs of labor organizations that the Smith-Connally Act would serve to aggravate the workers, but still was argued within the framework of supporting anti-strike measures. Additionally, the President Roosevelt disapproved of the prohibition of political contributions of labor organizations. “This provision obviously has no relevancy to a bill prohibiting strikes during the war in plant.”<sup>44</sup>

In closing his letter, the president submitted his suggestions as to what should be done about the epidemic of strikes. In some ways, it was harsher and more draconian than the prohibitions of the bill. His idea for quelling strikes was “induct into military service all persons who engage in strikes or stoppages or other interruptions of work in plants in the possession of the United States. This direct approach is necessary to ensure the continuity of war work.”<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

forcible drafting of striking Americans shows the dubious lengths that wartime governments often strive in order to maintain order on the home front. While Roosevelt does vaguely suggest that all of these draftees would not be sent into combat roles, this act of compulsion and conscription was vicious and reflected some of the more extreme views of the public's expression on what to do with striking workers. The veto was overridden by the Senate, only 25 Senators voted in favor of supporting the president's motion.

The idea of the Smith-Connally Act was met with strong support from the public and revulsion from labor organizations. Due to the visibility of the labor problem in 1943, 75% of Americans reported in a Gallup Poll that they have heard of or read about the bill and 67% supported it.<sup>46</sup> This is a telling statistic considering that only 52% of Americans knew what the Little Steel Formula was by the end of the war, even though the Little Steel Formula influenced the livelihood of most Americans during war-time.<sup>47</sup> The responses to the bill ranged from skepticism from the media, mixed optimism from the public, and prophecies of damnation from labor unions.

Newspapers enthusiastically covered the developments of the Smith-Connally Act yet many thought that it was not strong enough to completely deter strikes. There was a common theme that while it was a step in the right direction, it was not enough. "The Smith Connally Act, as a matter of fact, is not an especially strong weapon against strikes in war industry. It outlaws strikes only when the government has taken possession of war plants."<sup>48</sup> Despite the questionable interpretation of the law by *The Daily Telegram*, its sentiments were shared. A few months after it was passed, a reprinted article from the *New York Times* reported that "The more experience

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<sup>46</sup> Dr. George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1972), 395.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

<sup>48</sup> "Anti-Strike Measures" *The Daily Telegram* (Adrian, MI), June 25, 1943.



we have with it, the more ill-considered and mischievous many of the provisions of the miscalled Anti-Strike act appear to be.”<sup>49</sup> The article considered that the 30 day cooling off period was counterproductive and served to agitate instead of cool the tempers of workers. The *Baltimore Sun* reported that the Smith-Connally act “does not provide an impeccable plan for such control (of strikes). The bill was enacted in a hurry. It is internally incoherent, for unquestionably experience under it, if it is firmly and fairly enforced, will indicate changes that can be made by later legislation.”<sup>50</sup>

While it acted as a first step, the lack of provisions in place for the conscription of strikers did not actually deter strikes. There was also the sense that the Smith-Connally Act was such a common sense provision that it “should have been written long ago, in calmer times.”<sup>51</sup> This unhappiness with the perceived laxity of the bill by the media was also tinged with a panicked hysteria over the possible political ramifications over the strike which bordered on the conspiratorial. A newspaper columnist, Sam Tucker, believed that the Smith-Connally Act created a dangerous opening for unions. “Suppose, for example, that the governing board of the CIO should decide that national socialism is an experiment worth trying in the United States. The Smith-Connally Act provides all the power that is needed, in order to change our entire economic organization.”<sup>52</sup> Tucker’s confused terminology of national socialism referred to the sovietization of the United States economics, not Hitler’s national socialism due to the government running defense industrial installations (which they had already heavily subsidized). While this may seem an odd reaction, it was not the only one. “Moreover, it [the government

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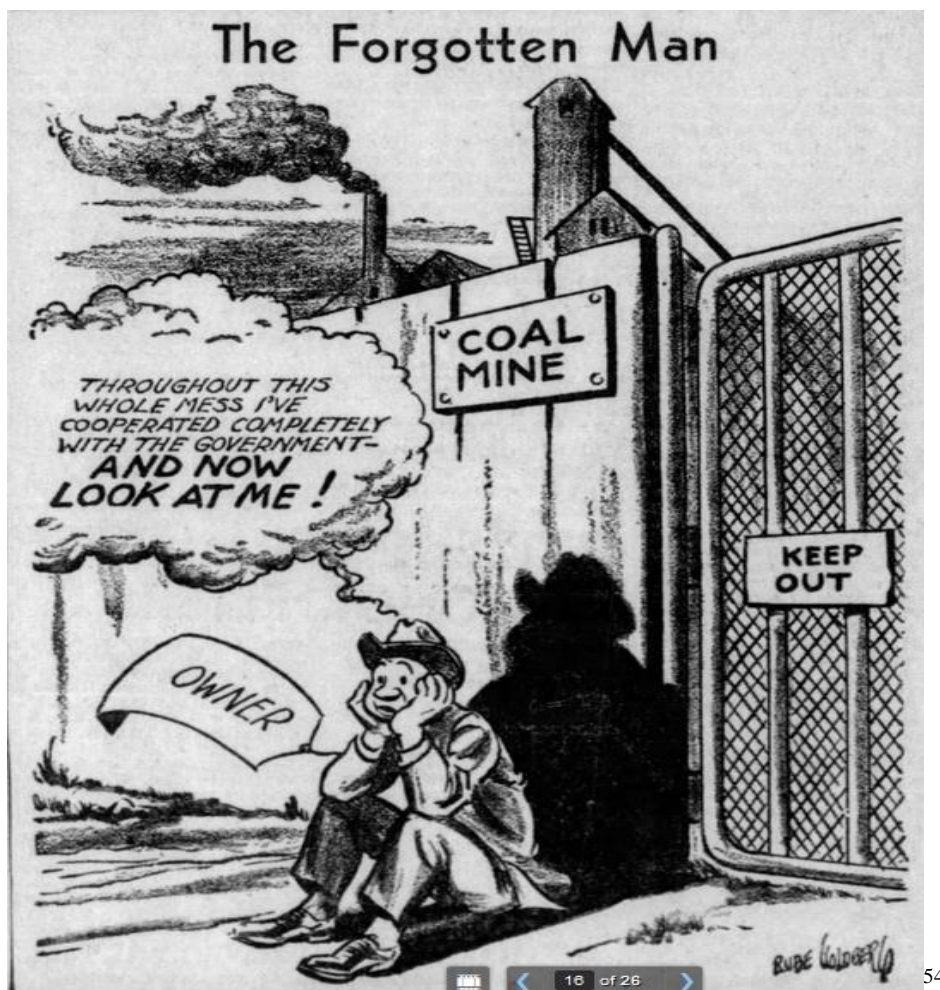
<sup>49</sup> “Pro-And-Anti-Strike Act” *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton, OH), Sept. 2, 1943.

<sup>50</sup> “Let The President Sign The Smith-Connally Bill” *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), Jan. 20, 1943.

<sup>51</sup> “Take Time To Be Right” *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), May 13, 1943.

<sup>52</sup> “As I View the Thing” *The Decatur Herald* (Decatur, GA), Aug. 22, 1943.

seizure of mines] establishes A COMMUNISTIC PRINCIPLE. IT VIRTUALLY ELIMINATES PRIVATE ENTERPRISE FROM THE COAL MINING INDUSTRY.”<sup>53</sup> This panicky response reveals much about the fear and outrage that the coal strikes produced in the war’s dire hour.



While some were skeptical about the effectiveness of the act, other newspapers reported the passage jubilantly. Not a few stories cited public opinion as the engine which drove the formulation of the bill. The *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* reported that “The public demanded

<sup>53</sup> “President Roosevelt Makes a Deal for Votes” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* (Pittsburgh, PA), June 29, 1943.

<sup>54</sup> “The Forgotten Man” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* (Pittsburgh, PA), June 29, 1943, 16.

that John L. Lewis should be brought up with a round turn, and congress has responded” two days after the overridden veto.<sup>55</sup> Some newspapers could not contain their mockery of Lewis’s fallen fortunes with the passage of the bill. Several small-town papers reported on the perceived effectiveness of the bill: “now all that is changed, and the roaring lion of the UMW becomes as a lamb in its [the WLB] presence. Score one for the anti-strike legislation!”<sup>56</sup> An article published in Oshkosh, Wisconsin sarcastically quipped that “Under the Smith-Connally act, it is illegal to strike in a government operated war industry. What a fine example for the nation and for the men overseas of united effort to win the war!” (Pause for Bronx cheers.)”<sup>57</sup>

### Labor’s Outrage



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<sup>55</sup> “Editorial Comment on Congressional Vote To Override Veto of Labor Bill” *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton, OH), June 27, 1943.

<sup>56</sup> “The Docile Mr. Lewis” *Town Talk* (Alexandra, LA), Aug. 11,, 1943.

<sup>57</sup> ““Biddle-Lewis” Strike” *The Oshkosh Northwestern* (Oshkosh, WI), Aug. 30, 1943.

<sup>58</sup> “Waiting For the Axis to Collapse” *News-Pilot* (San Pedro, CA), June 29, 1943, 4.

The passage and implementation of the No-Strike Pledge was not well received by labor organizations and unionized workers. To them, the law was heavy-handed and punished the vast majority of the workforce who had faithfully held to the No-Strike Pledge throughout the hardships on the home front. The CIO met the passage of the bill with shock and outrage. “Taking full advantage of the John L. Lewis strike in the coal fields, the US Senate this week rushed through – with only two days of debate and without hearings – the Connally bill (S796) that subjects unions to criminal penalties...that throws collective bargaining apparatus into the lap of the courts and endless litigation.”<sup>59</sup> While the CIO struggled throughout the war to contain the spread of wildcat strikes, they saw this as an example of anti-labor elements making use out of the crisis of the UMW strikes. The cresting tide of popular indignation allowed a narrow window to pass reactionary legislation that would far outlive the problem that it was created to address. They also cast aspersions on its legitimacy by noting the lack of a public hearing to “give labor people a chance to show Congress the unfairness of such a measure and adverse impact its passage would have upon the morale of the workers and their sons and brothers in the armed forces.”<sup>60</sup>

This idea of the Smith-Connally Act and the haste in which it was passed acting as a way to silence the working class’s voice in the matter was taken up elsewhere. Len De Caux, a worker and columnist for the *CIO News*, noted acerbically that “A complete give-away of the anti-democratic intent of the Smith-Connally Bill is its ban on political contributions by labor unions...the workers, under this bill, are denied the right to poll their meager resources through their unions to offset the political influence of the wealthy.”<sup>61</sup> De Caux’s concern about the

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<sup>59</sup> “Connally ‘To Hell With War’ Bill Passes Senate’ *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), May 8, 1943.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> “Looking Ahead” *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), June 21, 1943.

increasing cashflow and sway which wealthy families infused into political sphere of the 1940's creates an uncomfortable parallel to the modern reader after the passage of *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* which allowed for unlimited private donations. The CIO also claimed that "It is actually designed to provoke strikes, rather than to stop them."<sup>62</sup> Perhaps they were correct in assuming that this bill would be added to the mountain of irritants that workers faced, as the instances of strikes jumped from 3,734 in 1943 to 4,958 in 1944 and turned into a mammoth general strike wave in 1945-46.<sup>63</sup> Even pro-business media outlets had not failed to notice the effect that the law had on workers and questioned if the Smith-Connally Act was the correct solution to the problem of labor unrest. "The law has fomented strikes, has encouraged wildcat stoppages, and has 'been responsible for a resurgence in political activity in the AFL and CIO which promises to make itself felt distinctly in 1944,' *Business Week* declared."<sup>64</sup>

The American Federation of Labor (AFL), responded with similar outrage and accusations of betrayal. They, however, spent a considerable amount of time addressing and analyzing specific mechanics of the Smith-Connally Act. In Section 6a-2 of the law, while banning the aiding or guidance of a lockout or strike, it also contradictorily states that "No individual shall be deemed to have violated the provisions of this section by reason only of his having ceased work or having refused to continue to work or to accept employment."<sup>65</sup> It was not forbidden for an individual to walk off the job and withhold their labor, however it was illegal to be seen discussing or planning to do so. This oddity was examined closely in the *American*

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<sup>62</sup> "Veto Called For" *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), June 21, 1943.

<sup>63</sup> Rosa Lee Swafford, "Wartime Record of Strikes and Lockouts, 1940-1945," 79<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2d sess., 1946, S. Doc 136, 34 and Robert H. Zieger, *American Workers, American Unions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 102-103.

<sup>64</sup> "Connally Law is Botched Job, Should Be Killed," *CIO News* (Cumberland, MD), Sept. 20, 1943.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph D. Padway, "Involuntary Servitude" *American Federationist* (Washington DC: American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, July, 1943), 4.

*Federationist*, the AFL's monthly periodical. "Thus, workers who are unjustly dealt with, or who believe they have just grievances, will be compelled to cease exercising the right to free speech and discussion of their grievances in the open because to do so will subject them to prosecution."<sup>66</sup> This section could be liberally interpreted, as complaining about poor work conditions or wages could be viewed as agitation and "giving direction or guidance in the conduct of such interruption" (a work stoppage) as according to Section 6a-2 of the bill.<sup>67</sup> Such vague wording could have invited abuses of the law and the AFL was very concerned about the possible consequences that would follow the Smith-Connally Act. "The first act of a dictatorship is to prohibit freedom of speech, freedom of press, and of assemblage. That is exactly what Section 6 does."<sup>68</sup>

Along with President Roosevelt's objections with the "cooling off" period, the AFL did not miss the impact that it would have on the efficacy of the No-Strike Pledge. "Section 8 ignores completely the no-strike pledge and provides, in effect, for strike notices and strike ballots. Far from discouraging strikes, these provisions would stimulate labor unrest and give government sanction to strike agitations."<sup>69</sup> Unions were once again struck by the oddity of acknowledging the validity of striking in a law that was ostensibly designed to prevent war-time strikes. By the allowance of a thirty-day notice for a strike and secret ballots, the AFL was worried that this would serve as a distraction from production. Instead of focusing on maintaining quotas of vital materials, workers would have been consumed with discussing

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

whether or not they should go on strike and recruiting votes for or against the strike for the secret ballot.<sup>70</sup>

The AFL further agreed with President Roosevelt's condemnation of the prohibition on political contributions of labor organizations. To them, this section of the law provided a strong case for the dubious constitutionality of this law. This provision "is to discriminate against labor unions in a manner which renders the law unconstitutional, under those provision of the Constitution which guarantee to all persons and organizations similarly situated the equal protection of the law."<sup>71</sup> Under this argument, if the government wanted to prohibit labor organizations from financially aiding in elections, they would also have to prohibit farmers organizations, fraternal orders, and various interest groups from political contributions.

War workers within the AFL expressed a variety of reactions related to the passage of Smith-Connally Act. In their letters to the *American Federationist*, some addressed John L. Lewis directly. H.C. Leshinski of Chicago of Lewis "He has been attacked viciously by the press. So what? That doesn't make him a bad labor leader...He fights hard for the workers he represents. What's wrong with that?"<sup>72</sup> This hostility to the media and its treatment of the war effort among war worker's letters was common. Leshinski further quipped "Even if you dislike Lewis, use your head. Don't forget this war will end some day and then watch the enemies of labor try to do a job on us."<sup>73</sup> This was indicative of a common interest and fear among both civilians and laborites about the condition of the economy after the war. Would it lapse into

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> "Lewis Is All Right" *American Federationist* (Washington DC: American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, July, 1943), 32.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

another depression or could the industrial might of the United States be reconverted to produce consumer goods?

This sympathy was not universal. Al Danaher of Bridgeport blamed Lewis for all of labor's woes. "We feel that the only reason we have a Smith-Connally Law is because of the three strikes pulled by the United Mine Workers."<sup>74</sup> Danaher continued by warning of Lewis's pernicious influence on the labor movement as a whole. "As a plain worker I ask that all the responsible leaders of our movement take the same position. John L. Lewis will ruin if he can't rule...Keep him out. He's a menace."<sup>75</sup> Lewis's bombastic personality made many in the labor movement dislike him, especially his leadership style of despotism and maintaining a clique of sycophants in the UMW.<sup>76</sup>

Other workers turned their annoyance and disgust away from Lewis and towards Congress. A reader who signed their name as Just A Worker from Columbus, GA wrote to the *Federationist* to express their scorn for a hypocritical view of absenteeism. "Congressmen have been deploring strikes, absenteeism...all this is wonderful as long as it does not apply to them. But all of a sudden they realize the weather is warm, very warm, and that a vacation would be very nice. Not an ordinary vacation, but a three-month vacation with pay."<sup>77</sup> This anonymous worker was referring to the various congressional recesses that take place for holidays and during the month of August. For a wartime worker who was working 60-70 hours a week and 6 or 7

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<sup>74</sup> "Don't Take Lewis Back" *American Federationist* (Washington DC: American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, July, 1943), 32.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Robert E. Zieger, *The CIO – 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1995), 92.

<sup>77</sup> "Absentee Congressmen" *American Federationist* (Washington DC: American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, July, 1943), 32.



days a week, they naturally would feel scorn for talk of absenteeism from politicians who were vacationing for lengths unimagined to someone in a munitions plant or tank factory.

This AFL worker's sentiments were also shared by some angry civilians in Northeastern industrial bastions of war workers who likened the bill to fascism. Arthur W. Abbott wrote to the *Pittsburgh Press* in the summer of 1943 to express his alarm for the passage of the Smith-Connally Act. "One-half million half-starved coal miners can't be wrong...I have a son in Africa, and I thought I knew what he was over their fighting for, but now that we have slave labor like Hitler, I'm confused."<sup>78</sup> While certain congressmen and elements within the media saw the Smith-Connally Bill as communist, other citizens saw the bill in terms of compulsion and slavery through the silencing of strikes in protest of various industrial maladies. Another civilian, Charles L. Bauer of Dayton, OH, saw the law in similar terms. Bauer's chastisement of a supporter of the bill included a suggestion that "he should be sure to have the law provide an adequate reservoir of slave labor to replace the strikers. Perhaps Hitler could furnish him with a few ideas along this line."<sup>79</sup>

Further criticisms from upset civilians focused on the media's culpability in fanning the flames of hysteria which served as a catalyst for the passage of such a law. Chas Jackson of Baltimore wrote that "Both Hitler and the Smith-Connally methods either compelling or restricting the rights of workmen are unadulterated Nazi-ism. Yet the press, radio commentators, a majority of those comprising Congress and a lot of sob sisters, forgetting the implications of democracy and having succumbed to war hysteria, are content to adopt and follow the Hitlarian brand of freedom."<sup>80</sup> Jackson's ringing rebuke of the role of the media in the passage of the bill

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<sup>78</sup> "Persecution of Labor Unions Feared" *Pittsburgh Press* (Pittsburgh, PA), July 10, 1943, 4.

<sup>79</sup> "Strikers and the Army" *Dayton Daily News* (Dayton, OH), June 9, 1943, 10.

<sup>80</sup> "Opposing the Smith-Connally Bill" *The Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), June 20, 1943.

closely followed the AFL's focus on the bill as a restrictor of civil liberties. It also called into question the efficacy of the American political system, which served as an important distinction between them and Nazi Germany. "The people of the United States are only entitled to enjoy and have limited freedom as prescribed by the powers that be and not set forth in the Constitution of the United States."<sup>81</sup> Such criticisms of the media were reported closely by the AFL.

The AFL acidly condemned on the role of the media in the passage of the Smith-Connally Act. It is not a secret that the press was overwhelmingly anti-labor. The *Federationist* targeted corporate friendly groups such as the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) for its actions as propagandists and architects of widespread anti-labor sentiment. "After all, *they* got the front-page headlines, *they* got the editorial comments. *Their* story was broadcast over the radio. What *they* had to say was sensational and influenced the minds of millions of people."<sup>82</sup> The AFL believed that NAM was achieving their goal through mass advertising, pro-industry propaganda, and anti-labor agitation. "In 1940, \$450,000,000 was spend on advertising. In 1941, \$460,000,000. In 1941 – after Pearl Harbor - \$440,000,000 was spent on advertising. Advertisements repeat the theme, 'We Make the Planes,' 'We Make the Guns,' 'We Make the Tanks.' And, by implication, 'We Win the War.'"<sup>83</sup> Through this strategy, progress of the war and the impressive industrial output was shifted away from the efforts of the workers and refocused on the sacrifices of corporate oligarchs in the eyes of the public. "Every possible favorable incident or event is played up – and often deliberately staged or manufactured – to promote the credit of management, employer and business groups and to create an impression

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> "Labor and the Public" *American Federationist* (Washington DC: American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, April, 1943), 20.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

that everything these groups do is done with the purest of unselfish motives, entirely for the national welfare.”<sup>84</sup> What is more revealing were repeated assertions that labor was losing the war of public relations and that its image was being tarnished in the papers and to the public by various reactionary groups. This story was published in the midst of the escalation of the UMW strike waves and stood out in sharp contrast to the deluge of anti-labor vitriol.

The Smith-Connally Act was tested and used against the large 1944 hate strike in Philadelphia among transit workers. The army was called in to seize and operate the public transit system of the city. Thirty strikers were indicted and called to trial before a federal court. This strike wounded the public opinion of the CIO even further, as the members of an ostensibly progressive labor organization walked off of the job due to the promotion of 8 black employees. As the war approached its conclusion, strikes skyrocketed. The effort and hope of the Smith-Connally Act end labor strikes was met with a staggering 1,791,000 workers who walked off of the job in the first 6 months of 1945.<sup>85</sup> The immediate aftermath of the war also beheld the largest strike waves in US history along with labor’s influence cresting to its high water mark in spite of the wartime vitriol.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>85</sup> United States Department of Labor, “Work Stoppages Caused by Labor-Management Disputes in 1945” (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), 6.

## Chapter 5: Tides

The events that were described in this thesis happened at a critical time in American history. After years of violent struggle, the 1930's and 40's represented the peak of labor resurgence. The Great Depression's galvanizing effect on the complacency that welfare capitalism elicited created a more militant and emboldened working class. In this era of economic depression, they took on and won hitherto unfathomable victories against titanic corporations such as General Motors and Ford through political agitation and strikes. The 1940's and the story of wildcat strikes were also times of turbulence among Americans and especially workers. Old seasoned unionists were drafted into the armed forces, previously excluded groups of workers poured into such industrial centers as Detroit, Pittsburgh, or Birmingham, and the key weapon of unions – the strike – was disarmed through patriotic fervor. However, due to the cacophony of racial tensions, managerial abuses, wage stagnation, and dangerous working conditions, this weapon of workers exploded in spontaneous eruptions of anger and frustration.

Public opinion was galvanized, hatred flew across the airwaves and newspaper headlines like bullets in the warzones of Europe and the Pacific islands. Workers were castigated as traitorous, lazy, greedy, and allies of the enemy. Some, including notable references in the military, fought back against this hatred with incendiary language of their own and added dried kindling to the wildfire of public anger about these wildcat strikes. Public opinion poll after public opinion poll showed a majority of the nation's respondents were marching in step with the anti-labor rhetoric of the newspapers. Congress was swayed under intense pressure to pass a law which criminalized strikes and was designed to punish and diminish labor's ability to function as a political and social power. Instead of easing tensions, however, strikes rose to meteoric levels as the war ground to a halt. They continued to climb to unheard of levels immediately after the

war as general strikes rocked the nation. Labor's power in the tides of history was at an all-time high.

Even the highest tide must recede to lower and more tepid conditions. Seasons passed, and with-it labor's influence dwindled. It happened slowly at first, then in a cascade in the late 1970's and 1980's as union dominated industries were sent overseas and labor's appeal to the new working class diminished. Now, two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, working class politics is slowly entering the dialogue of news anchors and into the minds of Americans. Political currents are shifting and the future of current political arrangements appears uncertain.

Where does this humble story fit into the vivid tapestry of labor history? This thesis set out to accomplish two tasks. First, it added information and context to a neglected niche of labor's story during World War II. Historians such as Nelson Lichtenstein, Martin Glaberman, and Robert Zieger mentioned the existence of a public opinion firestorm which fed into the passage of the Smith-Connally Act, but no one has focused on the framework of that debate. How did Americans conceptualize the act of striking during wartime? Were there unlikely supporters of the striking workers? How did newspapers feed the fires of the public's anger? These were all questions that this thesis addressed. These questions needed further investigation, for without an understanding of what the public thought and why, the post-war actions of labor cannot be fully understood.

The second objective that this thesis accomplished was to illustrate the manifold challenges in interpreting public opinion. A contradiction arises between this narrative, which represented a cross-section of belief and opinion and the general historical narrative of labor history. The post-war period of American history was seen as a high-water mark for labor's influence in politics and in the workplace. This was the summit of union membership, as roughly

1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the working population was unionized. Progressive ideas, such as corporations sharing profits with workers and universal health care, entered the public mind and were entertained. For example, in January of 1946, 62% of respondents in a Gallup Poll thought that profit sharing was a good idea.<sup>86</sup> The embrace of such ideas in modern times swiftly earned a person odd looks and suspicion that one was a communist. Herein lies the contradiction: how could the public shift from a visceral hatred of labor unions during the war to the pinnacle of labor's influence in the matter of months? Public opinion does not quickly recede and such hatred is not often easily forgotten.

There is a possible answer to this bizarre juxtaposition of events which lies in the fault inherent in measuring public opinion. It is difficult to accurately capture someone's full belief with a few questions. Variables such as a person's ever shifting moods, familiarity or ignorance to the issue, and the wording of polling questions exert sway over how the results will be portrayed and interpreted. Late in 1946, Arthur Kornhauser, a member of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, published a repudiation of polls concerning labor in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the very place which published these polls throughout the war. Kornhauser selected all public opinion polls about labor between 1940-1945 and evaluated these 155 polls for fairness in their representation of labor; only 8 were friendly to labor. The results were quite telling. "The polls aid and abet the process of directing public attention persistently to the negative side of organized labor."<sup>87</sup> This study suggested that instruments which measured public opinion did so with loaded questions and flawed interpretations of the results. Many questions offered a false dichotomy between ignoring strikes and a law-oriented solution. These

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<sup>86</sup> The Office of Opinion Research, "Gallup and Fortune Polls" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10, (1946): 119.

<sup>87</sup> Arthur Kornhauser, "Are Public Opinion Polls Fair to Organized Labor?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10, (1946-1947): 486.

questions “follow the formula: a choice between the evil of wartime strikes and the proposed remedy of a law. Majorities of 69 percent to 86 percent voted for a law... the published results led to the spurious conclusion that the public overwhelmingly favored new legislation as the remedy. The reports thus supported the hand of the groups campaigning for anti-strike laws.”<sup>88</sup> If solutions were proffered that involved unions internally adopting stronger measures to discourage strikes, many members of the public would have probably favored this choice.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, while the public was perturbed and angered by strikes, the options that were presented to them were narrow and false. This fueled newspaper stories and anti-labor pundits who relied on the ethos of popular support. It further influenced the debates over the Smith-Connally Act, where supporters of the bill claimed to be acting in accordance to the will of the people.

Kornhauser also discovered that many respondents were answering complicated questions of which they knew little about. “The error lies in the use of specific question content to tap general attitudes. Bias is introduced by the pretense that the respondents possess information on the particular matters when, in fact, they have no such knowledge.”<sup>90</sup> Citizens could elucidate a general displeasure with strikes during wartime and desire a solution, but when the issues were over-simplified and presented in such a way where there was a logical answer to a patriotic American, support was expressed for anti-labor solutions that were not understood. This also may serve to explain in part the high percentage of war workers who supported anti-strike legislation. Kornhauser concluded that “compulsory arbitration and no-strike laws, for example, seem like desirable solutions to many housewives, farmers, and other average Americans who lack knowledge of what these measures entail-their practical limitations and

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 487-488.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

drawbacks-and what possible alternatives exist.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, the great zeitgeist of righteous anger was based on false pretenses and arbiters who had clear vested interests against labor. This also draws interesting parallels to modern American politics with the confoundment felt by many by President Trump’s election despite public opinion and electoral polls assuring the opposite conclusion.

A second contradiction that this thesis addressed in the examination of worker’s attitudes was the strong support of workers of the No-Strike Pledge and the incidence of many of those same workers engaging in wildcat strikes. How are historians to make sense of this? One theory believes that while workers nominally supported the idea of the No-Strike Pledge, alienating circumstances and restricted avenues of redress necessitated strikes. These strikes were not at first political in nature, they were over narrow work-related issues. However, the nature of the vitriolic attacks against strikes by the media, public, and government magnified the issue and turned it into a political issue. “The firings, use of the draft against militants, arrests and harassments, were directed not against what workers thought but what workers did. And in turn, what workers thought was changed by what those in power did. The wildcat strikes were, in fact political strikes because they were directed against the government. The government through military and other personnel, made sure to make that clear.”<sup>92</sup> If this interpretation is to be accepted, the strikes multiplied and assumed a more political cast due to the increased stakes caused by the passage of the Smith-Connally Act, which was ostensibly justified by public support which was misrepresented.

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

<sup>92</sup> Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes* (Detroit: Brunswick Editions, 1980), 128.



This contradiction of workers support of anti-strike attitudes and wildcat strikes could also be interpreted through similar lenses as public opinion. It is hard to represent the multi-dimensional complexities of the human soul through interviews or polls. A worker who filled out a No-Strike Pledge ballot while listening to war news on the radio would not see a contradiction in walking off the job the next day when they are assigned to menial and hated work by the foreman.<sup>93</sup> “If there were ten other workers involved, they may have had 10 different combinations of attitudes for joining the strike. These could range from aggressive militancy through a belief or sense of class consciousness to a lack of interest or fear.”<sup>94</sup>

Wildcat strikes did not disappear from the American mind after the end of the war. They continued to be a commonality of labor relations until the 1980's. The Smith-Connally Act, therefore, cemented its place in American history as the progenitor of aggressive anti-labor laws which targeted the right to strike. Only two years after the end of the war, the Taft-Hartley Act was passed which furthered the Smith-Connally Act's attack on the political power of unions. Closed-Shops, or workplaces that only hired union members was outlawed. The bill attempted to drive a wedge between employees and the unions that represented them. The Taft-Hartley Act, while met with significant opposition from labor at its strongest, greatly benefitted from the legacy of the Smith-Connally Act which acted as a forerunner of hostile legislation. Further anti-labor laws such as the Right to Work legislation, which is still the law in over half of American states, built on the anti-worker foundations laid down by the Smith-Connally Act. This oft overlooked bill was the first in a long line of legislation that was hostile to the collective bargaining power of workers which still holds sway over many Americans today.

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

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