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LABOR MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

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BY JACK BARBASH

PUBLIC AFFAIRS PAMPHLET No. 262



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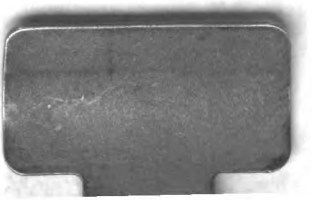

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LABOR MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

BY JACK BARBASH

Jack Barbash is Professor of Labor Education at the University of Wisconsin. He was formerly Research and Educational Director, Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO; and Staff Director, United States Senate Subcommittee on Labor and Labor Management Relations. He is author of The Practice of Unionism, *1956, and* Universities and Unions in Workers' Education, *1954. . . . This pamphlet was illustrated by Visual Services, Inc.*

IN LESS THAN a generation we have had an industrial relations revolution. Though it has not been accompanied by violence, it has been a revolution nonetheless.

The salient feature of the revolution has been the recognition by most industrial managements of collective bargaining.

This is not meant to suggest that unions and management in the United States are now one happy family, with everybody agreeing about everything. Of course not. There are strikes — frequently long strikes. There are geographical and industrial areas of the nation where unions are few and far between, as will be noted later. But collective bargaining as a way of life between unions and management is an established institution in the United States.

We can measure the impact of these twenty-five years of change more precisely. In 1933 union membership was slightly under 3,000,000 or about 6 per cent of the labor force. By 1956 union membership stood at about 18,000,000, about 25 per cent of the total labor force — or about one-third of non-agricultural employment, which is a closer measure of the real union potential.

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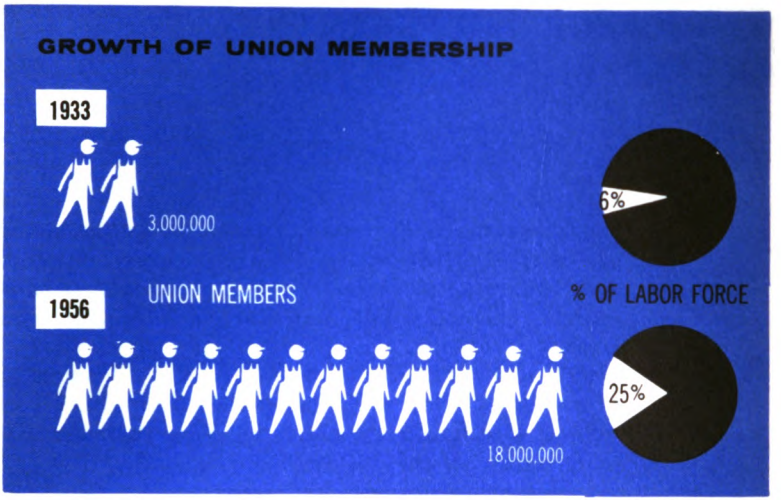

In 1933 there was virtually no union organization in autos, steel, rubber, electrical products, glass; today there are large and effective unions in those industries. There was union organization in 1933 in many industries: construction, railroad, maritime, printing, apparel, and mining. But these unions were struggling to keep their heads above water. Today the unions in these industries have reached new heights of effectiveness.

In addition to these older established areas of union influence, the hard core of union membership is now to be found in manufacturing, particularly in large-scale mass production. Unions are of consequence but not a predominant factor in the services, wholesale and retail trade, public service and public utilities other than transportation. Except in teaching, journalism, and the theater, unions are of little consequence in the professions and near professions, and in the so-called "white collar" fields of banking, finance and insurance. Unions are virtually nonexistent in agriculture. Although union membership is something under half of its full potential, this is not a really accurate indication of union influence because the conditions of work in the non-union sectors tend to reflect the union gains.

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guaranteed employment

Of more recent vintage is the union drive for guaranteed employment. Here again the idea of a guaranteed work week, or guaranteed work year, is not especially new. The classic guaranteed annual wage plans of Nunn-Bush, Proctor and Gamble, and Hormel were introduced a generation ago but other companies failed to follow these examples.

The recent developments in guaranteed employment through collective bargaining represent a new application and concept, as is indicated by the term "supplementary unemployment benefits" — which means the programs are tied in with the state schemes of unemployment benefits.

In general outline, the S.U.B. programs in force provide that an unemployed worker receive a proportion of his take-home pay — from 60 to 65 per cent typically — made up of two parts: (1) the unemployment compensation benefit to which the worker is

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domestic policy support of welfare legislation; and in international policy, internationalism.

political activity

Unlike the labor movements of most other countries, the American labor movement adheres to a policy of supporting candidates for public office irrespective of political labels. There is no labor party in the United States and the sentiment of union people makes it unlikely that a labor party with union support of any consequence will emerge in the near future. Labor leaders will support both Republicans and Democrats, although in national politics the Democrats are more likely to get labor support. In state and local politics the edge which the Democrats have is not nearly so outstanding. In any case, labor spokesmen say they support the candidates who come closest to their position.

community activity

Union interests reach beyond the four walls of the union hall in other ways. Thousands of union representatives sit on the boards of social agencies. The positive participation of the local labor movement is an indispensable element in the fund-raising activities of many social agencies. The idea of union counselors has developed whereby union people are trained to know about the resources available in their community through voluntary and tax funds and to refer the union member in times of personal need to appropriate social agencies.



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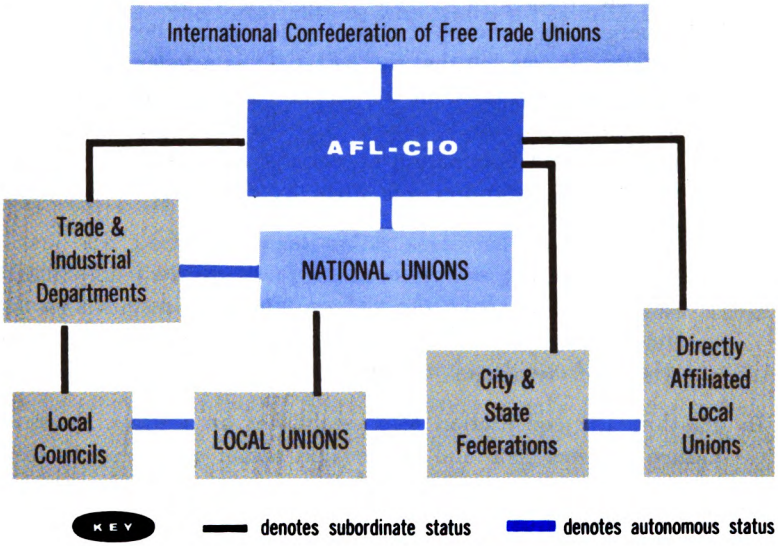
STRUCTURE OF AFL-CIO



analysis does it have the authority over affiliates except the ultimate power of expulsion. And expulsion does not necessarily put a corrupt union out of business.

The AFL-CIO has also been pressing for a comprehensive disclosure law that would require all health, welfare, and pension administrators to report in considerable detail who gets how much and for what purpose. The federation takes the position that the public availability of this information would be a considerable deterrent to wrong-doers. In the states, the AFL-CIO is urging the insurance departments to deal with unethical brokerage and insurance practices.

Many labor spokesmen are also urging the enactment of a disclosure law with respect to all union finances so that the individual union member may know in detail how his money is being spent.

The labor program to deal with racketeering goes beyond legislation, however. Even before the AFL-CIO was formed as a new

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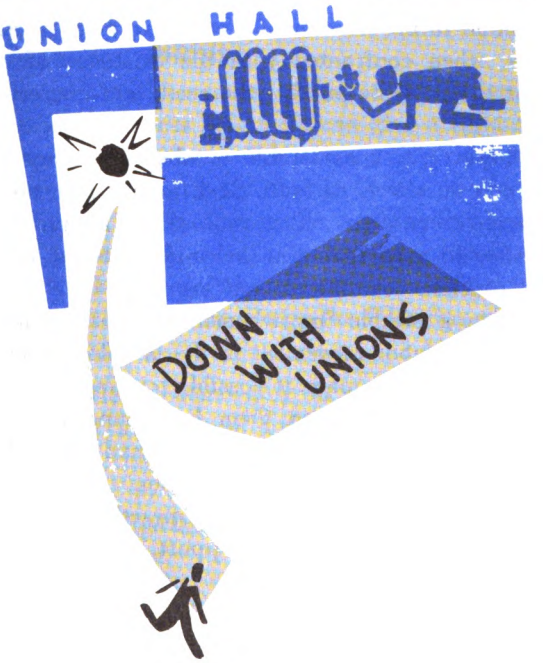
The determination of the AFL-CIO to rid itself of corrupt elements is indicated by the forthrightness with which it has utilized all of the disciplinary sanctions at its command to enforce basic trade union morality, including the expulsion of the largest affiliate — the Teamsters. The end is not yet in sight, but it is clear that the AFL-CIO is committed to the preservation of a clean labor movement.

anti-unionism

There are pockets of anti-union sentiment distributed over the United States which persist because certain employers or their agents have refined techniques of union opposition to a high degree. These anti-union techniques are of two kinds — open and subversive.

The open kind of anti-unionism is seen most frequently in the textile areas of the South. Here employers openly denounce unions to their employees and make use of injunctions to prevent strikes or organizational drives. The subversive type of anti-unionism has been most conspicuously revealed by Congressional investigation in retail



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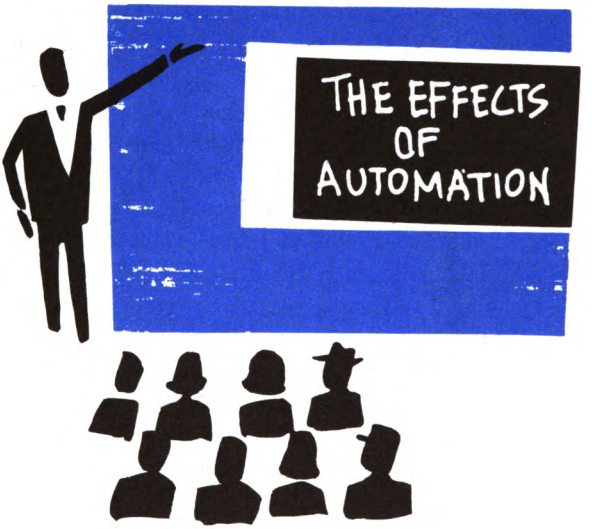
things as responsibility for equipment, responsibility for materials and products, visual effort, and mental tension and fatigue.

The impact of automation is giving increasing importance to shorter hours. Reduction in working hours is seen as a major element in permitting the labor-saving benefits of automation to be shared by the workers.



Many unions urge the establishment of automation committees composed of union and management representatives in advance of the installation of automated equipment to plan the installation in ways that will minimize the disruption in the lives of the workers.

Of fundamental importance is the prevailing union view toward automation as a springboard for a higher standard of living and for release from the drudgery of certain tasks. There is no disposition to oppose automation; rather to accept change, and at the same time to endeavor to see that the opportunities of workers for an expanded standard of living are realized.

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