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LABOR ON NEW FRONTS

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Has the Wagner Act prevented strikes?

What does the C.I.O. want?

Why has labor gone into politics?

Should unions be incorporated?

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Labor on New Fronts

By Robert R. R. Brooks

IN the autumn of 1934, approximately 425,000 textile workers took part in a two weeks' strike which was one of the largest and most spectacular in American labor history. "Flying squadrons," thousands of militiamen, floods of pro- and anti-union publicity, nausea gas and rifle fire, nation-wide radio hook-ups, mass funerals, and action by high government officials all combined to drill into the public mind the idea of a major social disturbance. "This is a communist revolution," declared Governor Green of Rhode Island as he appealed for aid from the federal army. Actually, the strike marked the beginning of a period of decline for union labor under the New Deal.

Decline of Labor, 1934-1935

A few weeks after the strike was settled it became clear that the workers' demonstration of solidarity had failed. Textile union membership rapidly fell away. In other industries, wholesale losses occurred among the large newly formed unions—especially in automobiles, rubber, electrical goods, and metal industries. Distrust of union leadership and disappointment over results were evident among the rank and file of many other unions. Rebellion against A.F.ofL. officials in the 1934 convention lay close beneath the surface of the customary tide of turgid oratory. The Supreme Court's decision against the NRA in the spring of 1935 hastened the retreat of labor from the high point gained in its advance in the summer of 1934.

There were two sets of reasons for this retreat. First was the revival of the organized opposition to unionism which existed in the 1920's. Company unions incapable of real bargaining power, expensive and subtle anti-union propaganda,

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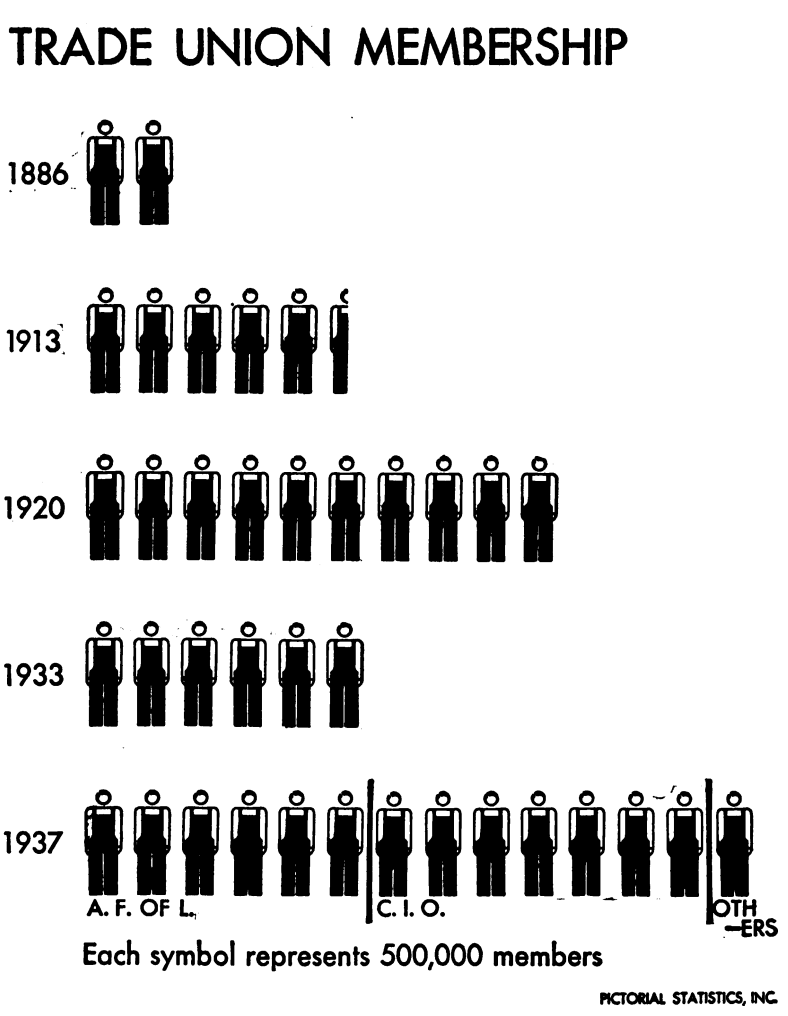
blacklisting of active union workers, hired spies, and even physical violence against union organizers and members were employed throughout the country.

Second, there were important weaknesses in the labor movement itself. Union membership in some instances was virtually a closed affair; frequently only friends and relatives of existing members were taken in. Leaders were often content to raise wages by cutting production at the expense of



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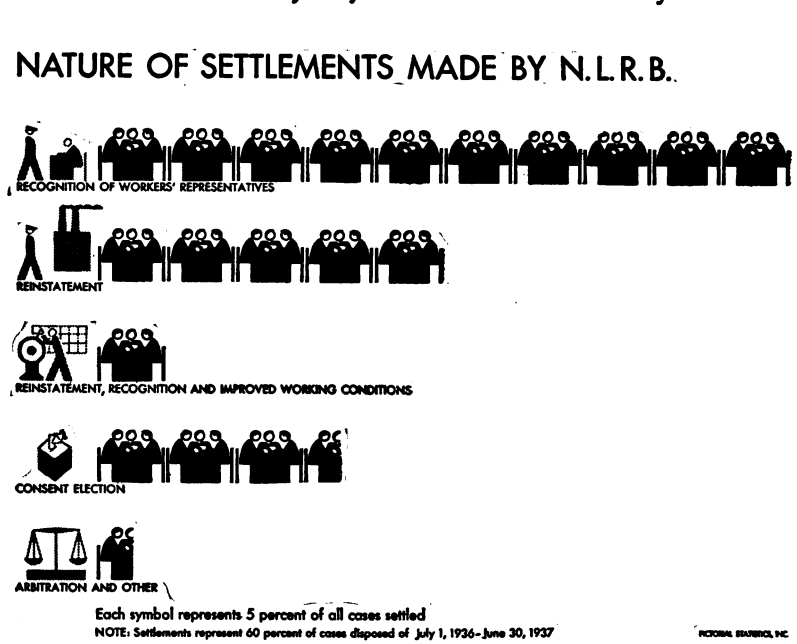
of struggles for recognition have taken place at the ballot box or been settled by action of the board which would otherwise have been fought on the picket line, there can be little question that many strikes have resulted from the stimulation provided by the passage of the act. Many of these strikes have been "organizing" strikes although they have had recognition as their stated objective. That is, strikes have been called, when less than a majority of the workers have joined the



union, in the belief that the strike will encourage a majority to sign up. The act is not designed to prevent strikes of this kind and may well have encouraged them. To the extent, however, that strikes for recognition have been replaced by legal action before the board, the Wagner Act has been an important instrument for industrial peace. Furthermore, although the board does not officially mediate in disputes, the existence of the board serves to reduce the number of strikes for causes other than recognition to the extent that it compels employers to try peaceful bargaining before precipitating a

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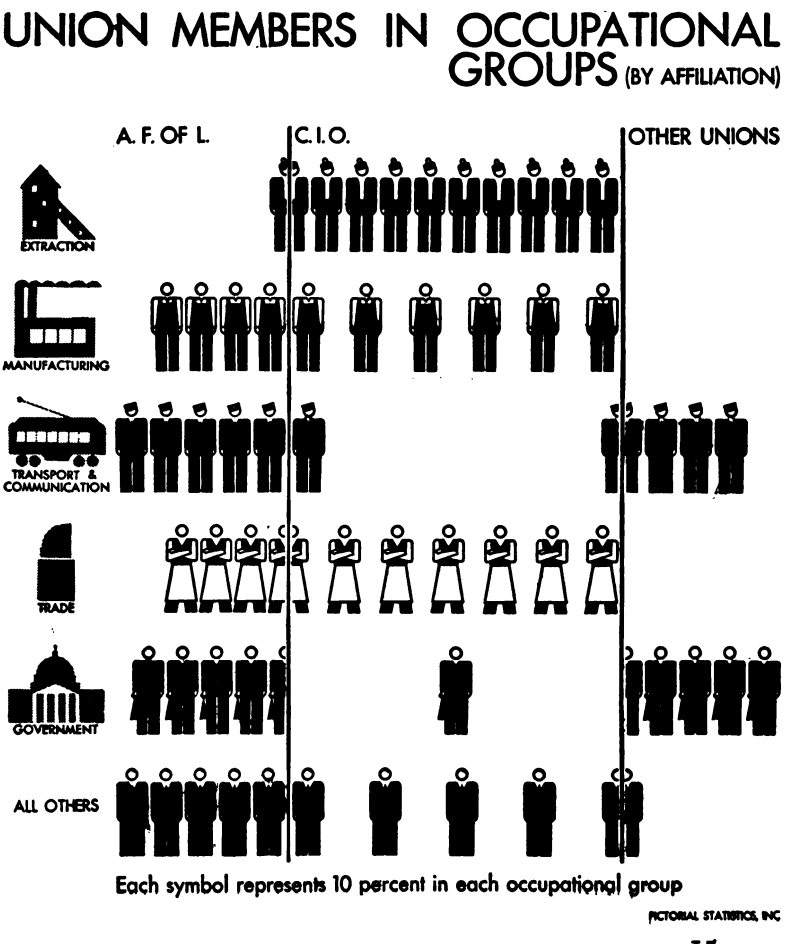
creasing the scope of the power of union officers in proportion with the scope of the problem; second, by intense emphasis upon the political education of the members, the development of a critical attitude toward leaders and by making the process of election, recall, and the laying down of broad lines of policy thoroughly democratic.

Membership Gains

At the Atlantic City conference, the C.I.O. also made public its estimates of membership figures. The original eight



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