

# Ten Epic Struggles in the History of American Labor

Memorable Industrial Battles That Mark the Development of the Labor Organizations of Today

AMERICAN LABOR STRUGGLES. By Samuel Yellen. 398 pp. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$3.50.  
By JOSEPH SHAPLEN

THIS book makes no claim to originality. It is merely a record—but a valuable one—of ten epic struggles in American labor history, from the railroad strikes of 1877 to the general strike in San Francisco in 1934. Mr. Yellen, who from his youth has been intimately associated with labor problems, presents the factual story of these struggles as helping to reveal the development and crystallization of the modern labor movement from a sporadic assertion of militant groups to a mass movement clamoring for recognition as a vital, determining, organic element of American society.

Despite the direct, prosaic method employed by Mr. Yellen, who is obviously competent to handle the material, the accounts of the memorable industrial battles presented in the book will make a deep impression upon all serious students of the labor movement. And, despite the matter-of-fact presentation, the chapters dealing with the ten big struggles in question are, as Mr. Yellen says, more than chronicles. They are "revealing segments of the entire picture," the picture of the rise of American labor in a society wedded for a long time to rugged individualism, but stirred, nevertheless, in ever-increasing measure by the new collectivist forces born out of the profound economic changes of the past fifty years.

The struggles described by Mr. Yellen are confined to basic industries, transportation, steel, coal and textiles. He analyzes the causes of each conflict, the line of development taken in each instance, and the significance of each to the growth of the labor movement as a whole.

Specifically, Mr. Yellen deals with the railroad uprisings of 1877, which gave great impetus to the growth of labor unions in this country; the Haymarket tragedy and its part in the struggle for the eight-hour day; the Homestead lockout and its significance in the efforts, not very successful, to organize the steel industry; the American Railway Union strike of 1894, led by Eugene V. Debs, one of the most dramatic conflicts ever waged by labor in this country; the anthracite strike of 1902; the Lawrence strike of 1912, a brilliant demonstration of labor solidarity; the bitter struggle of the miners in Colorado in 1913; the great steel strike of 1919, the most ambitious effort made to date to organize the steel workers; the Southern textile strikes of 1929 as the prelude to the wider and more significant general strike of more recent date, and the waterfront battle culminating in the general walkout in San Francisco.

As he traces the history of all these conflicts Mr. Yellen discusses the evolution of weapons and methods in industrial warfare used by both capital and labor, the part played by government and social agencies, the ideological changes produced in the minds of the workers, the problems confronting labor organizations, the complex economic factors involved as they concern the respective industries and the general trend of the labor conflict in this country.

The result is a picture of the class struggle as it has asserted itself in the United States with changes in the social and economic structure, despite the denial of the existence of this struggle by those

who cling to the psychology and traditions of an earlier, individualist period in the development of this nation.

Mr. Yellen does not pretend to be "impartial." He is definitely on the

side of labor, but he manages, nevertheless, to maintain a commendable objectivity in his statement of the facts. No one will question the record.

Summarizing the historical sub-

stance of the struggles he describes, Mr. Yellen writes:

The struggles of labor for better living and working conditions have led it to combine in organizations both for mutual assistance and for mutual protection. While many of these organizations were short-lived, as was the American Railway Union founded in 1893 by Eugene V. Debs, others existed over a period of years (and continue to exist) and exercised a steady influence upon the ideology and practice of organized labor in the United States. All degrees of attitude toward capital, the government and society are represented in these organizations. The brotherhoods of railroad workers, originally fraternal societies which slowly acquired the trade union function of collective bargaining, have retreated gradually from the principle of collective bargaining to the policy of partial collaboration with capital and regulation by the government. Likewise, a large part of the American Federation of Labor has exhibited an inclination toward the idea of cooperation with capital and the practice of mediation and arbitration. On the other hand, the Chicago anarchists of 1886 and the Industrial Workers of the World renounced cooperation with employers and condemned arbitration as enervators and partitioners of the ranks of labor. Between these two groups there developed a sharp conflict; one group was conservative, the other radical, in the sense that it wished to get at the root of labor's difficulties in the existing society, and, if necessary, to change the basis of that society. As a consequence, interwoven in the struggles of labor can be detected the influences of anarchism, syndicalism, communism, and other doctrines for the conversion of society. In other words, labor was led from its immediate desire for higher wages and fewer hours to an examination of causative defects in the structure of society.

Emphasizing problems confronting labor today, Mr. Yellen lays stress on the conflict between craft and industrial unionism and the fact that, despite the recurrence of events in American labor history, so far as outward manifestations of the struggle are concerned "there has been an unmistakable and steady cumulative development" of experience and maturity, which, one may add, is leading to an integration of the movement on broader philosophic and organization principles.

Nor does the conflict now being waged in the American Federation of Labor between the craft and industrial union camps, an apparently centrifugal phenomenon, exclude the process of integration. A closer examination of the situation will reveal that the movement as a whole is today better fitted to withstand the shock of ideological and organizational differences and yields more readily, despite the resistance of more conservative elements, to the necessity of change.

But this aspect of the problem is outside the immediate range of Mr. Yellen's book. As one reads the book and views the struggles dealt with from the larger viewpoint of the entire historical development of the movement, its present problems and fermentations, one realizes the progress made by trade unionism in the United States and the increasingly important rôle it is likely to play in the social and economic readjustments that lie ahead.

As Mr. Yellen says, the material speaks for itself.



Destruction of the Union Depot and Hotel at Pittsburgh in the Railroad Strikes of 1877.  
From a Drawing in Harper's Weekly, Aug. 11, 1877.