

MAJOR PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN HISTORY SERIES

GENERAL EDITOR

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*Major Problems
in the History
of American Workers*



DOCUMENTS AND ESSAYS

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relied on its decision in *West Coast Hotel* to sustain the constitutionality of the Fair Labor Standards Act which legislated minimum wages for men and women. But it abandoned sex difference as the crucial criterion for undermining freedom of contract. In *United States v. Darby*, the case that affirmed the FLSA and cleared the path for the social legislation of the modern period, the Court transcended gender and argued that "it is no longer open to question that the fixing of a minimum wage is within the legislative power."

How do we explain the shift? Part of the answer lies in the change in social conditions in the fourteen years between the two decisions. Sutherland, in dissent from the majority in *West Coast Hotel*, tried once again to make the case that there was no longer any reason why women "should be put in different classes in respect of their legal right to make contracts. Nor should they be denied, in effect, the right to compete with men for work paying lower wages which men may be willing to accept." This argument carried little weight in the depression climate. But much of the shift in Court opinion lies in the way that language about women and agitation around them had demonstrated the evident social purposes of such legislation. By the 1930s, when public opinion was once again ready to consider the search for social justice as part of the legitimate end of government, the idea that women constituted a separate and deserving class could and did serve to illustrate the rigidity of old doctrines of freedom of contract. Attention to gender differences had kept alive the possibility that all workers deserved state protection. As Justice Stone put it in his dissent from the Court's final attempt to preserve the sanctity of freedom of contract in *Morehead v. New York*, "In the years which have intervened since the *Adkins* case . . . we have had opportunity to perceive more clearly that a wage insufficient to support the worker does not visit its consequences upon him alone; that it may affect profoundly the entire economic structure of society and, in any case, that it casts on every taxpayer, and on government itself, the burden of solving the problems of poverty, subsistence, health and morals of large numbers in the community."

Fighting for Industrial Democracy in World War I

JOSEPH A. MCCARTIN

When a General Electric worker who helped organize a union in his plant in 1918 was asked by friendly government officials whether he had to hide his union sympathies on the job, his answers surprised them. "In a way, I didn't have any [union sympathies]," he replied, "only—I might say I had an American feeling, that is all. . . . I didn't have much thought in the matter . . . of union stuff." Upon further questioning, the examiners found that indeed this employee saw his union work as but an extension of the war effort that he loyally supported. That response signified something important about the industrial battle that rocked the United States in 1919, just months after this interview. . . .

From Joseph A. McCartin, "'An American Feeling': Workers, Managers, and the Struggle over Industrial Democracy in the World War I Era," in Nelson Lichtenstein and Howell John Harris, eds., *Industrial Democracy in America: The Ambiguous Promise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 67–86. Reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press.

This chapter argues that labor conflict of 1919 in the United States was in part a battle for legitimacy that was waged over language as well as over union organization. There is perhaps no clearer evidence that managers and workers battled over language in 1919 than the controversy that raged over *industrial democracy*, a term that, as historian David Brody points out, had become a "national byword" by the end of World War I. In developing their postwar American Plan attack, and in making their own version of industrial democracy an important feature of that plan, employers were not only trying to roll back trade unionism; they were attempting to reconstruct their legitimacy by incorporating the rallying cry of the wartime union upsurge into their managerial lexicon. For during the war, American labor militants had rallied behind industrial democracy—previously popularized by wartime government reformers—and successfully roused their followers with patriotic language. In doing so, militants cloaked labor protest—even demands that deeply challenged managerial authority—in a protective "American feeling." In 1919, the tasks of neutralizing that troublesome phrase, industrial democracy, and taking back the mantle of Americanism to which labor militants had laid claim, were integral to U.S. employers' counteroffensive against trade unionism. . . .

Paraphrasing E. P. Thompson, historian David Alan Corbin has observed that the "ideological impact of war propaganda on American workers may have been 'one of those facts so big,' . . . that it is easily overlooked, . . . and yet it indicates a major shift in the . . . 'subpolitical' attitudes of the masses." If the language of the wartime union movement is any indication, such a shift in attitudes indeed occurred in the United States during the era of the Great War. An important measure of that shift was the popularity of the slogan "industrial democracy," which, by the end of the war, was on the tongues of millions of American workers. While industrial democracy was not a new phrase—it had been used in the United States as early as the 1880s—wartime government labor reforms had given the term a new legitimacy, incorporated it into wartime propaganda, and spread it to virtually every corner of industry.

The federal government's role in spreading the industrial democracy slogan during the war derived from the Wilson administration's efforts to foster labor peace. Most historians agree that World War I constituted an important turning point in the relationship between American trade unionism and the state. Prior to the war, a hostile judiciary armed with the power of injunction offered American workers only what Christopher Tomlins in another context called a "counterfeit liberty." The massive strike wave of 1917 and the "inadequacy of the existent agencies for dealing with the industrial strife," however, pushed the Wilson administration toward important breakthroughs in the protection of trade union rights. These culminated with the creation by presidential authority of a powerful new agency, the National War Labor Board, in April 1918.

Set up as a kind of industrial court, the NWLB was chaired by William Howard Taft and labor attorney Frank P. Walsh and composed of an equal number of employers and AFL unionists. It adopted a set of progressive principles to serve as a bench mark in settling wartime labor disputes. These principles acknowledged the right to join a union, the duty to bargain collectively, and the impropriety of anti-union tactics. As a concession to open shop industry, the NWLB did not require employers to recognize unions if they had not done so prior to the war. In such cases, collective bargaining was to be accomplished through worker-elected shop

committees. The installation of these shop committees may have been the most important policy the NWLB pursued.

Altogether the NWLB program represented a great leap forward for U.S. trade unionism. Intervening in over one thousand strikes before the war ended and applying its principles on a broad basis, the NWLB sharply limited the arbitrary power of employers. In his typically enthusiastic language, the NWLB's cochair, Frank P. Walsh, announced that the board was creating "a new deal for American labor." Trade-union membership figures support Walsh's assessment. Under the board's protection, union membership grew by nearly one million by the war's end. As one autoworker put it, "For once every citizen, no matter how humble, was made to realize that the government was a real thing and that it wielded power, enormous power."

Some scholars argue that the AFL's cooperation with the war effort and its submission of the NWLB's mediation undermined the AFL's militancy and independence. To be sure, the AFL's participation in the government's program helped legitimize the brutal suppression of the "disloyal" Industrial Workers of the World and Socialist party. However, to argue, as one scholar has done, that working with the NWLB "practically meant the transformation of the AFL from an independent trade union center to a government department which assumed the duty of preventing strikes and if necessary breaking them," is to overlook a central reality of the war for labor: the importance of language, symbolism, and ideology. When one examines the influence of the NWLB on the language of working-class militancy during the war, it becomes clear that the war had far more complex implications for labor than these critics have understood.

In promoting its program, the NWLB helped to popularize the slogan industrial democracy. That phrase fit the board's purposes well. Its mission was, as the president defined it, to end undemocratic management practices at home while troops ended autocracy overseas. No one did more to link the board's mission to the establishment of industrial democracy at home than its cochair Frank Walsh. "Political Democracy is an illusion," Walsh was fond of saying in his numerous speeches on behalf of the NWLB, "unless builded upon and guaranteed by a free and virile Industrial Democracy." He aimed to use the board to achieve such a vision, and Walsh firmly believed "the process of democratization [initiated by the NWLB] will continue until there remains not one single wage-earner in the country deprived of his voice in determining the conditions of his job and consequently his life."

Undoubtedly, official speeches about industrial democracy were often motivated by utilitarian concerns. The slogan was used along with a remarkable cult of the flag—including daily flag ceremonies at factories and workshops draped with hundreds of flags—to arouse maximum output. The word in many shops was: "Not Just Hats Off to the Flag, But Sleeves up for It." War production was the key. But by so closely linking work to patriotism, the government endowed labor with a new prestige, as when one official speaker told a group of Cleveland steelworkers: "Your greasy overalls . . . are as much a badge of service and honor in . . . the eyes of your country today as the uniform of the army or navy."

Such powerful rhetoric—which became increasingly common throughout 1918—had manifold implications. On the one hand, it served to chasten employers

who were determined to persist in antiunion practices. On the other it reassured the AFL leaders who cooperated with the government that their loyalty was well placed. But at the same time, it evoked in millions of workers skyrocketing hopes for substantial change in their lives. Many came to believe that "Making the world safe for democracy" [would] go a long way toward lifting the burden of social and economic oppression" from their shoulders. The AFL's Matthew Woll later declared that as a result of the government's labor policy, "Men and Women came to think of democracy as they had never thought of it before. Democracy became the great, flaming religion of mankind." It was in this hopeful context that workers embraced the government's promised industrial democracy. . . .

By allowing workers to connect democracy in industry to democracy in Europe, the federal program had the effect of offering a potent vocabulary to the labor militants who had little trouble in seizing it to attack the authority of employers. If the NWLB implied that employers who opposed collective bargaining were subverting the war effort, on the shop floor union militants made the implication explicit, equating obstinate managers with the autocratic enemy. In the era when sauerkraut became "liberty cabbage," Bridgeport, Connecticut, machinists began referring to Remington Arms as "The American Junkers." The steelworkers of Birmingham, Alabama, called the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company the "Kaiser of Industrial America." "The American Hohenzollerns" was another favorite appellation. Most common of all, however, were the terms "prussian" and "autocratic." Indeed, the German "kultur," excoriated by George Creel's Committee on Public Information, seemed to offer a perfect analogy to industrial management and so bossism became "Kaiserism" in the language of union activists. By using this kind of language, the labor movement portrayed itself as demanding the "de-kaisering of industry," rather than merely seeking higher wages and shorter hours. Indeed, such language cast the labor movement as the agent of industrial democracy, making unionizing a patriotic act. . . .

Portrayed in this way, union organizing was as much an act of good citizenship as an act of self- or class-interest and workers could defend it as such. This gave activists a valuable ideological shield. When her foreman demanded to know whether Mrs. C. W. Brooks, an operative in the magazine department of a Colt firearms factory, had been attending union meetings, Mrs. Brooks could simply reply: "Yes, and as a free American citizen I have a right to go if I want to." For many labor militants it was a short step from identifying union organization as a citizen's right to defining it as a citizen's responsibility. The Machinists' organizing cry in Bridgeport was "Wake Up! Be Real Citizens!" With admonitions such as these sprinkling wartime union drives, it is little wonder that the GE activist mentioned above could claim that his union sympathies were really "an American feeling."

This "feeling," as the Wilson administration (and the AFL leadership for that matter) found, had many implications. It could be used by the union movement to ward off slanderous accusations that legitimate strikes were financed by the Kaiser's gold. Indeed, unions began to defend strikes as actions taken in defense of democracy at home and hence as *supportive* of the war effort. Thus, strikers at one electrical plant informed President Wilson that their walkout was "the only course of action that true Americans [could] pursue." But this same reasoning enabled militants to clothe in patriotic garments demands that challenged managerial

authority; industrial democracy, militants proved, could serve subversive ends. Perhaps nothing illustrated this truth more clearly than the response of workers to the NWLB's shop committees.

While some government officials initially felt that shop committee representation "might help in getting hold of some [workers]," such was rarely the case. In practice, the shop committees came to represent a new covenant, the inauguration of "democracy in the shop." Thus, evidence indicates that shop committees encouraged rising expectations among the workers in the more than 125 factories where the NWLB installed them. Most workers apparently agreed that, as one put it, the creation of shop committees was "the most important thing the Board did." Government investigators confirmed this sense. "The interest of the employees [in the shop committee] was so great as to strike me as almost pathetic," reported one federal investigator about shop committee elections in munitions plants. . . . His counterpart at Bethlehem Steel agreed that shop committee elections put workers "in a mood of great hope."

In many shops, militants found it easy to translate these hopes into aggressive shop-floor organizations that sought to erode managerial prerogatives under the banner of industrial democracy. Union delegates swept the slates in almost all shop-committee elections held by the NWLB. And in many—particularly in the metal trades—radicals dominated the committees. In such cases, NWLB-created shop committees became major headaches to employers. Committee delegates "spent most of their time going from department to department and keeping things generally upset," groused one manager. His complaint found many echoes. In some shops—such as the GE plant in Lynn, Massachusetts—workers embraced the committee system as a mechanism to roll back the authority of the foreman and achieve greater autonomy in the workplace. The chief vehicles of the NWLB's promised industrial democracy, then, sometimes became the staging grounds for militant shop-floor organizations that did indeed demand something like [historian David] Mofitgomery's "workers' control." But, it is important to remember, even when this occurred, workers tended to call it not "workers' control" but "self-government in the workshop . . . part of the democracy for which our armies are fighting in France."

Nor should this surprise us. For the industrial democracy slogan and the rhetoric attacking "prussian" management provided a language both sweeping and flexible enough to accommodate the interests of semiskilled operatives as well as artisan radicals. Workers whose shop-floor experience and worldviews were not conducive to the development of a "workers' control" consciousness—women who worked as semiskilled operatives for example—could still find in the vague term industrial democracy legitimation for their desires for dignity on the job. Thus federal investigators found that women who were "afraid of the term unionism" were still "anxious to take advantage of committee representation" promised by the industrial democracy crusade.

Far from suppressing labor unrest, then, the rhetoric of the government's program empowered the workers' movement in ways no one could have foreseen. The spread of aggressive shop committees, the talk of industrial democracy, the hard-hitting attacks on "prussian management," it can be argued, helped shift the "sub-political" attitudes of American workers, igniting Woll's "flaming religion." By

the end of the war, more workers were flooding into union ranks than served in the American Expeditionary Force in Europe. Many were simply swept up in the "pentecostal" mood that saw the lines between trade unionism and "American citizenship" blurred. . . .

By the time the Armistice was signed, not only were an increasing number of U.S. workers joining unions, they were doing so believing, as a Minneapolis trade-union paper put it, that "the dream of industrial democracy [was] coming true." Moreover, they looked to the postwar Reconstruction era, as most people termed it, for the fulfillment of that dream. As one steelworker told a Reading, Pennsylvania, throng during a celebration of the peace treaty, "You have been fighting for democracy, [but] there can be no peace until you have obtained . . . industrial democracy." Those kinds of statements led a contemporary observer, John Graham Brooks, to conclude that workers had "learned the troublesome liturgy about 'self-determination'" and were determined to have "something of it for themselves."

It was this "troublesome liturgy" as much as the growth of union organization that employers sought to reverse following the war. The task must have initially seemed awesome to them. So widespread had become the wartime demands for industrial democracy that reformers of many stripes, church groups, and trade-union leaders alike had adopted the term in their calls for "social Reconstruction" after the war. By 1919, industrial democracy had become, as one journalist at the time observed, a national "fetish," "the most ecumenically satisfying phrase now at large." Employers ignored the demand at their own peril.

But what had been labor's strength during the war turned out to be its weakness in peacetime. Industrial democracy provided an attractive organizing principle as long as the federal government—and specifically the NWLB—continued to play an active mediating role in labor conflict. While the government played that role, militants could even exploit its stance to advance a brand of radical workplace politics under the banner of industrial democracy. In effect, militants had labored in the ideological free space inadvertently created by Wilsonian labor reform. Following the war, however, the government's stance dramatically shifted toward demobilization, powerful labor allies—including Frank Walsh and Felix Frankfurter who headed the War Labor Policies Board—left government service, and as a result the free space within which workers had begun to organize was radically constricted.

Several factors account for this shift. First, the entire war labor administration had been created by emergency presidential initiative and lacked a solid legislative basis. Any hopes that the NWLB would be put upon sturdy legal footing after the war were quickly dispelled by the 1918 congressional elections that swept into office conservative legislators bent on hastily dismantling the war labor administration. At the same time, employers' hostility to wartime interference in their affairs by "petty government officials and shop committees" had coalesced into a powerful lobby for labor deregulation. But perhaps most importantly, President Wilson and his advisors concluded that postwar union demands would fuel spiraling inflation. Consequently, the administration set itself against postwar wage demands, using the remaining federal labor boards to block the unions (particularly in the railroad and mining industries) rather than defend them as they had done during the war crisis. Wilson thus threw the moral authority of the government against not "autocratic" employers but "unreasonable" unions.

That the shifting stance of the state was the crucial factor in American labor's defeat in 1919 is widely recognized. The impact of this shift on the language that workers had used during the wartime upheaval, however, has not been fully explored and is thus deserving of attention.

Labor's call for industrial democracy in 1918 was indeed a powerful rallying cry. But it was powerful partly because it was such an amorphous concept: to government administrators it promised greater war production; to AFL leaders it meant the acceptance of trade unionism; to rank-and-file militants it often symbolized "self-government in the shop." . . . In the absence of state support, labor found it impossible to prevent employers from applying a denuded definition of democracy to industrial democracy and then using that very phrase to battle trade unionism.

One employer put the postwar objectives of his class this way: "With labor crying for democracy," he wrote, "capital must go part way, or face revolution." Many employers had grasped this inevitability even before the war ended. As early as the ninth Yama conference of the National Industrial Conference Board, held in October 1918, there was evidence that an increasing number of employers were willing to go "part way." At that meeting, employers discussed demands for industrial democracy and debated possible counter strategies. Although conferees arrived at no consensus, many delegates returned to their respective companies to begin implementing representation plans or company unions like those pioneered by Midvale Steel and the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company in order to head off the demand for democracy in their shops. Soon the famous Special Conference Committee that included the executives of America's largest corporations was busily coordinating the spread of Employee Representation Plans (ERPs), the employers' alternative to shop committees and "self-government in the shop."

With the role of the state in guaranteeing workplace representation receding quickly, employers moved to implement ERPs "with a maximum of publicity and a minimum of interference." In doing so, employers played an important part in shaping what historian William Graebner has aptly characterized as a "new and profound appreciation for democratic modes of social control" in postwar America. Before 1919 was six months old, William Leiserson of the Labor Department reported that "a deluge of shop committees and employee representation plans [was] flooding the country." While such schemes bowed in the direction of democracy, they did so, as one of their proponents put it, "without surrendering any final authority" to the workers represented. Their purpose, the manager of a GE factory frankly acknowledged, was to "transmit the personality and character of the management to the men most effectively." Unions resisted the introduction of employee representation schemes, the hated "Rockefeller unions" that intended to "bunco . . . employees into thinking that they are getting a real taste of industrial democracy." When they were skillfully introduced, however, as at the Lynn plant of GE where nonradical AFL unionists were even encouraged to serve as delegates, the ERPs did gain approval from workers. In all, workers were in a poor position to resist the spread of ERPs in the industries where unions had secured only a tentative foothold before the war ended. By 1921, over seven hundred thousand workers labored in plants with this truncated version of shop committee representation.

The story of management's postwar representation movement has been well documented. Less thoroughly understood is the attempt by employers to capture

the patriotic terminology that labor insurgents had used during the war. Yet this too was an important thrust of the postwar managerial counteroffensive; indeed, it was one of the factors that underlay the success of the employers' strategy. Following the war, employers proved that the patriotic language around which workers had built their movement could indeed be Janus-faced. If workers had begun to equate unionism with "an American feeling" during the war, employers made it their task to Americanize their version of employee representation. Thus their open shop movement became the American Plan. According to the propaganda of the open shop associations, their plan embodied "the spirit of the Declaration of Independence"; it constituted "a perfect manifestation of the American spirit."

Perhaps the most striking evidence of employers' attempts to capture the language of the wartime mobilization concerns their conscious use of the industrial democracy rhetoric that workers had used against them only months before. The employers' success in neutralizing or co-opting that rhetoric following the war revealed the fundamental ambiguity inherent in the language labor had used to articulate its wartime demands. During the war, the notion of industrial democracy had served as an instrument for both unions and employers. On the one hand, by linking war production and democracy it served as a tool for getting more work and greater loyalty out of workers. On the other hand, workers and unions used it to their own purposes. In this trade-off, employers had gotten more work at the cost of investing workers with new conceptions of citizenship; unions recruited more members at the cost of phrasing their demands in a language less working-class than American. During the war, labor had gained more than it lost in embracing industrial democracy; following the war, the tables were turned. In the language of industrial democracy, patriotism, citizenship, and Americanism were more at issue than class solidarity. Thus the phrase could be used with as much facility by employers following the war as it had been by labor militants during the war—a factor that helped to undermine labor's defense against the postwar open shop drive.

To be sure, this is not to suggest that the success of the employers' American Plan turned solely—or even largely—around the question of language. . . . But to ignore the importance of the postwar struggle over language—and employers' efforts to capture the industrial democracy slogan thus denying workers an effective language with which to both conceptualize and rally their movement—is to miss a central theme in the story of the employers' counteroffensive.

Employers themselves were surprisingly frank in their efforts to make the language of industrial democracy their own following the war. John Leitch, a theorist of the ERP movement, argued before the 1919 convention of the National Association of Manufacturers that employers could not afford to "let labor think that industrial democracy means anything like Bolshevism as it is run in Russia." Management's task, as Leitch understood it, was to make sure that the definition of democracy, implied by the term industrial democracy, did not challenge managerial prerogatives. . . .

Whether called an Industrial Democracy or an Industrial Assembly or simply a conference committee or employee representation committee, postwar ERPs all attempted to redefine the notion of industrial citizenship that union militants had attempted to construct during the war. While union organizers had rallied their followers with the cry "Wake Up! Be Real Citizens!" in 1919, employers introduced a

new "citizenship theory of labor relations," as GE's Gérard Swope described it. If Americanism could serve as a language with which to unite workers during the war, it could also be wielded by employers seeking to foster division among workers after the Armistice. In 1919, steel mill owners circulated handbills that read: "WAKE UP AMERICANS!! ITALIAN LABORERS . . . have been told by labor agitators that if they would join the union they would get American jobs." If during the war workers challenged managerial authority by appealing to a higher loyalty—the nation's war effort—in peacetime, the government's antistrike stand allowed employers to claim that the country demanded loyalty to the company. Goodyear's Industrial Assembly drove home this point. "I want you to consider this company," Goodyear vice-president Paul Litchfield told his workers, "the same way as you would consider the United States." Litchfield aimed, he said, to create "a citizenship of the right type."

The Goodyear program, in fact, represented perhaps the most fully articulated effort by a corporation to clothe itself in the rhetoric and symbolism popularized by the war. Those who served as representatives in the Industrial Assembly took an oath of office that reinforced the dual loyalty to company and country Goodyear hoped to foster: they pledged to defend "the Constitution and laws of the United States and . . . the Industrial Representation Plan of the Goodyear Factory." "Loyal" employees earned the right to vote in Industrial Assembly elections. Significantly, however, while the NWLB allowed all workers to participate in shop committee elections, companies like Goodyear sharply restricted the franchise. Goodyear required voters to have been employed by the company for six months, to have obtained U.S. citizenship, and to have a command of the English language. In order to serve as Industrial Assembly delegates, longer tenure with the company was required. Those who could meet the requirements of Goodyear "citizenship" earned a new sobriquet designed by the company to describe its loyal employees: Goodyear called them "industrials." Goodyear "industrials," of course, enjoyed only a pale imitation of the "self-government in the shops" that the militant wartime industrial democracy movement had advocated.

The efforts of Goodyear and publicists like John Leitch to redefine industrial citizenship after the war direct our attention toward the importance employers placed on neutralizing the language and symbolism that served the wartime union upheaval. These efforts also indicate that U.S. labor's reversal between 1919 and 1922 was a more complex defeat than historians may have heretofore understood. For in that defeat, workers saw employers attack not only their organizations but the words and concepts upon which they had built them. The importance of this dimension of the conflict was not lost on the labor militants of that era. As employers laid their own claims to the language of the wartime upheaval, words such as industrial democracy and reconstruction that had fortified the wartime workers' movement left a bitter taste in the mouths of those who had once used them. Thus a textile union leader railed against the "57 varieties . . . of definitions of industrial democracy" that undermined labor's message. . . .

Labor militants did not abandon their claims to industrial democracy or their dreams of reconstruction after the war. Indeed, the wartime upheaval had in some ways permanently altered the language with which labor militants articulated their vision. Erstwhile labor radical turned scholar Frank Tannenbaum, for example,

still hoped in 1921 for "the displacement of the capitalist system by industrial democracy." Railroad unions advocated the Plumb Plan under the banner of industrial democracy and the influential Intercollegiate Socialist Society rechristened itself the League for Industrial Democracy after the war. Industrial democracy thus remained a contested term even in the midst of postwar managerial ascendancy. The labor movement, however, would not soon be able to challenge successfully the definition of the phrase that American employers deployed in 1919. In the final analysis, that fact, as much as the trade-union defeats of that eventful year, defined the bitter legacy of the "Great War" for American workers.

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