

# **UNION LABOR IN PEACE AND WAR**

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Union Labor in Peace and War by Walter V. Woehlke

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**WALTER V. WOHLKE**

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AND WAR

WALTER V. <sup>W. D. W.</sup>WOEHLKE

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## CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.	Why the Pacific Coast Became the Union Paradise.....	1
CHAPTER II.	The Boycott and Its Abuses.....	15
CHAPTER III.	Who Killed Cock Robin?.....	27
CHAPTER IV.	What Can Your Boy Do?.....	39
CHAPTER V.	The Unions' Family Feuds.....	46
CHAPTER VI.	The Unions' Mailed Fist.....	57
CHAPTER VII.	The Striker and Low Justice.....	66
CHAPTER VIII.	The Unions and Democracy.....	76
CHAPTER IX.	Bolsheviki of the West.....	86
CHAPTER X.	Slackers in the Western Shipyards.....	96
CHAPTER XI.	Wages and Output.....	105
CHAPTER XII.	Labor Monopolies and Their Results.....	114
CHAPTER XIII.	The Problem of the I. W. W.....	125
CHAPTER XIV.	The Square Deal Pays.....	134

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## FOREWORD

**T**HE next time you ride home on the car between five-thirty and six, look at the man with the dinner pail across the aisle. His finger nails are not manicured; there are no kid gloves on his hands, his clothing is stained with black oil spots and the odor of perspiration betrays the lack of a shower bath. The young person with the imitation seal scarf and the salary of nine a week tries to avoid contact with him, but aside from her penciled and lifted brow he attracts no special attention.

Why should he? His nose, even though it has a black smudge that was not removed by the hasty ablution, is in the middle of his face. He breathes, moves his hands, feet and jaw just like other people, reads his paper, discusses prohibition, the movies, baseball and politics just like you and I. He is made of the same clay, has the same skin, the same elemental hopes, joys, fears, the same bald spot and the same kind of corns as the rest of us. Change his clothes, put him into the hands of a competent barber, and in half an hour you could not tell him apart in a group of our leading citizens.

Yet the man with the dinner pail is a Problem, the biggest problem before us. Multiply him a few million times and he becomes Labor. His stature grows into the sky, his rather commonplace face changes expression, assumes a threatening mien, his relaxed hands contract into gigantic iron fists. As a plain person riding home in a crowded street car between a shop girl and hardware clerk the man with the dinner pail asks for and receives no special treatment; he pays his nickel, takes his transfer, gives up his seat to the woman with the baby and hangs by the strap like any other citizen. But when he becomes a Problem, when he drops his individual capacity and turns into Labor, especially Organized Labor, he loses the aspect of an ordinary citizen.

The change that takes place is analogous to the transformation of the civilian into the soldier. As member of a military force the individual exercises rights and privileges which, performed by a private citizen, would promptly get him into jail. When he dons the uniform and takes the oath, the soldier's status is completely changed. He is removed from the control of the civil authorities; his doings are judged by a special code; his freedom of action is limited; his standard of conduct is radically altered.

A somewhat similar change takes place when the individual ceases to be just a plain worker and, by a process of agglutination, turns into Organized Labor. As a component part of Organized Labor, he claims rights and privileges which he would not

dream of receiving as a common, garden-variety citizen. If he eats dinner in a restaurant, finds hair in the soup, his steak tough, his coffee bitter and the bill high he does not rush out, print handbills, paint signs and hire men to keep people from patronizing the place; if he, in his private capacity as an unadorned citizen, has a quarrel with his grocer or butcher because they will not knock five dollars off the monthly bill, he does not endeavor to induce all the patrons of the tradesmen to take their custom elsewhere, nor does he publish lists of the offending merchants in his paper. But as a member of Organized Labor he considers the boycott his own peculiar privilege, fights vociferously against its surrender and complains loudly when it is turned against him.

The merchant who sees his livelihood and his capital take wings because his competitor undersells him, never dreams of hiring pickets to patrol the sidewalk in front of his rival's store, yet Organized Labor claims this extraordinary privilege. Our friend across the aisle would never think of waylaying his neighbor who pays five dollars a month less rent for similar accommodations; it does not occur to him to break his neighbor's ribs, his landlord's head or to burn the offending premises. Such acts would constitute a common black crime like burglary or embezzlement. But when these identical acts are committed in the cause of Organized Labor, their character suddenly changes, they become chameleons, turn pure white and, in the opinion of our friend, are wholly justifiable and a righteous punishment for the wicked.

Of course there is a reason for the colored glasses our friend with the dinner pail wears in his collective capacity, glasses that give him a distorted picture of his relations to his fellowmen. That reason is the balance of power. Just as Belgium was given a certain extraordinary status in the family of nations, a status based upon the country's inability to protect itself against its powerful neighbors, so Labor has been given by common consent a privileged position. Because Labor was weak, because the industrial revolution brought about through the introduction of power-driven machinery left the individual worker helpless in the hand of the employer, society intervened, placed an increasing number of restrictions upon the employer's liberty of action and at the same time released Labor from the necessity of obeying certain statutes which continued to be in force as against all other elements of the population. To put it tersely, society in its own interest shackled the employer with numerous special laws while at the same time it untied the hands of Labor.

Right at this point let us remark that, had society failed to act on behalf of Labor as it did, anarchy, chaos, turmoil and bloody

strife would have been the result. The special position was accorded Labor not because the individual workman was intrinsically better entitled to it than the rest of humanity, but because the bitter necessities of the moment made the action imperative and inevitable if society was to continue to exist.

But society, in extending a helping hand to Labor, in extending extraordinary rights and privileges to one element, overlooked something. It forgot to state that, in return for the extraordinary privileges, Labor should and must balance the account by assuming certain duties. The bargain was one-sided. Labor took and took, but Labor gave nothing in return for the protection it received. Labor gradually arrived at a state of mind in which it believed that it—Labor, especially Organized Labor—actually *was* society, that no other element counted, that the collective manual workers had a God-given right to further their group interest in any way they pleased, regardless of the welfare of society as a whole.

The best example of the result of this mental attitude is supplied by recent events in Russia.

In Russia the man who works with his hands, carrying the policy of Organized Labor everywhere to its logical conclusion, has proclaimed himself dictator. In Russia the reddest dream of the reddest radical has become reality. For a year the workers have had exclusive control not only of the political government and of the army, but of all industrial processes as well. And all the world knows by this time the results of pure and unadulterated working class control. The theoretical paradise of Karl Marx, Proudhomme and Kropotkin in actual practice turned out to be a sample of red-hot hell.

What will happen in the rest of Europe and in America when the war ceases, when the external pressure is relieved, when the temperature goes down and thirty million men suddenly are thrown back upon their own resources?

Thirty million men and their dependents, equivalent to the total population of the United States, are now being fed, clothed and housed by the belligerent governments. Who can imagine the tremendous upheaval resulting from the sudden unemployment of almost the entire working population of the United States? England by no means has the largest army, yet England is planning to distribute the process of demobilization over twelve months at least in order to forestall chaos and misery. The problem of merely getting the boys out of the trenches and back to the benches is daily assuming larger proportions.

And what will Labor do once the fighting is over?

In every belligerent nation the gigantic pressure of war has speeded up the machines, smashed union shop rules, pushed