

Key Anniversaries In Labor History

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The year was 1919, the first year after the end of World War I. Organized labor in the U.S. was weak, but the American Federation of Labor, adamantly determined to stick to its craft-union basis, moved to organize America's mass industry. Its target was the vast, unorganized steel industry, and hundreds of thousands of steelworkers signed up for the union. Big Steel said: "No union, no negotiations." And a strike was called in many states, but principally in Pennsylvania.

Local and state governments backed by the steel corporations recruited deputy sheriffs by the thousands. State troopers, many mounted on horseback, were turned loose on the strikers, their homes, and their families. The federal government was fomenting a massive red scare in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. After months of brutal physical and legal violations of the striking workers' rights, the strike was broken. The massive workforce of U.S. industry was to remain non-union for almost another generation.

Eighty years ago was 1929, the tenth year of so-called "free market" prosperity. Most American corporations were enjoying unprecedented profitability. Millions of Americans were putting their savings into the stock market on Wall Street. Union membership was at a low point. The wealthy few were flourishing, but the incomes of most ordinary Americans were stagnant or getting smaller. Newly elected, free-market Republican President Herbert Hoover went into office promising every American: "A car in every garage, a chicken in every pot." In the fall, the bubble burst. It was the start of the Great Depression. The stock market collapsed. The banks began to fail. Workers lost their jobs by the millions. Years of poverty and desperation began. The government wrung its hands and proclaimed that the free market would restore prosperity for all, if left to do its own thing. A desperate President Hoover proclaimed in 1932, as he sought re-election, that he thought he saw "a light at the end of the tunnel."

Seventy years ago was 1939, 10 years after the great economic crash. UAW

had won first contracts with all but one of the U. S. automakers, but Henry Ford held out, adamantly opposed to unions. But a bad recession in 1938 had cast doubt: would workers' progress under the New Deal continue, or would the corporations and the free market take over again and return the nation to the conditions of the 1920s? General Motors thought the latter. Many of the new UAW members had stopped paying their dues to the union. Workers were afraid that the worst of the Depression would return. The company refused to bargain on a second contract and dared the UAW to call a strike. The one strong UAW element in the auto workforce was the skilled trades. Walter Reuther was the UAW officer in charge of GM negotiations. He adopted the strategy to call on strike only the GM skilled trades, leaving the wavering production workers on the job. GM tool and die shops, particularly in the Detroit area, went on strike. The economy was changing for the better. GM saw its rival auto companies tooling up for what looked like a year of big auto sales. Company anti-union rhetoric against the UAW faded away. A good new UAW contract for all UAW GM workers was signed. GM never again made a serious attempt to break the union.

Sixty years ago was 1949, just a few years after the end of World War II. Many people wondered: would there be a repeat of the pattern set after World War I? Would organized labor's gains be reversed and the anti-union conditions of the 1920s be repeated? The answer was NO! — and that is another story — a good story.