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# Chicago Tribune

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## WORKING CLASS HEROES

SOME OF LABOR'S BLOODIEST BATTLES WERE FOUGHT ON THE STREETS OF CHICAGO AND CELEBRATED IN UNION HALLS AROUND THE WORLD

**By Ron Grossman**

Tribune staff reporter

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ON A FRIDAY EVENING in early spring, the season when trees bud and hopes are reborn, a small group of committed dissenters sits in the back room of a radical bookstore planning a celebration of a revolution that didn't happen and a dream that never dies.

The shelves of the New World Resource Center on Western Avenue are lined with the sacred texts of a vision of society no longer divided between rich and poor, bosses and workers. Karl Marx is represented in English and Spanish versions. Periodical racks are stuffed with newspapers of a dozen or more tiny radical sects, each claiming to be the rightful heir to Marx, patron saint of many leftist activists.

Once their causes and squabbles were aired on street corners by soapbox orators who thrust mimeographed manifestos into passing hands. Chicago was their political Mecca.

The road to revolution is less trod now. The handful of the faithful travel different routes to the age-old ideal of a society of equals.

"I found the Wobblies on the Internet," says Gregory Ehrendreich, 30, explaining how he came to be on the planning committee for the centennial of the Industrial Workers of the World.

The IWW, as the group was known, was founded here on June 27, 1905, in an era when Chicago was the radical epicenter of the nation. A militant blue-collar movement, in its heyday the IWW scared the wits out of "the owning classes," as those atop the social heap are called in the vocabulary of the left. They were affectionately called Wobblies by those whose battles they fought, the underpaid and underemployed. Their enemies, including the police, cursed them by the same nickname, sometimes while running them out of town on a rail. They preached their gospel with workers' anthems that passed into the repertoire of folk music.

A few years back, Ehrendreich was working in a camera store where he and the other clerks grasped a law of economics that each generation rediscovers: When the cash drawer is cleaned out at the end of the day, workers get the crumbs. The big bread goes to the bosses.

One of the clerks said they needed a union to fight for better pay. But organizing, they learned, means agreeing on which local should represent you. Unions fight intramural turf wars as well as bargain with employers, and in the face of those sobering realities the clerks' enthusiasm dissipated.

Then while surfing the Internet, Ehrendreich came across the IWW Web site and its rallying cry: "One Big Union of All the Workers."

"We have been naught," the old-time Wobblies sang. "We shall be all."

Ehrendreich resolved to add one more voice to the thinning chorus.

Though tiny now—perhaps 2,000 members, 75 in the Chicago chapter—the IWW's ideals articulated issues Ehrendreich had been trying to puzzle through on his own. His upbringing was apolitical, though he passed through a folk-music phase. But he was a deeply committed environmentalist, and is now a graduate student in that subject at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

"I've seen wanton destruction in the name of profits, like tearing down a mountain so we can burn coal that pollutes the air we breathe," he says. "I wanted to be involved in something, like the Wobblies, that wasn't a flash in the pan. I like being part of history. You can't sing 'I dreamt I saw Joe Hill last night' without wondering who he was."

The original Wobblies came to Brand's Hall at Erie and Clark Streets for their formative convention a century ago because Chicago was known as a feisty working-man's town. It's still thought of that way in other countries. Drop into a communist bar or socialist meeting hall in Italy and say you're from Chicago, and rounds of drinks will likely come your way. "Chi-ca-go!" they'll say. "May Day."

Your hosts will be recalling something most Americans don't know: The first May Day parade stepped off down Chicago streets. On May 1, 1886, 35,000 workers walked off their jobs, demanding the workday be reduced to eight hours from the 10 and even 12 hours then customary. On that and subsequent days, marches were staged through the city's working-class neighborhoods by battalions of freight handlers, tailors' assistants, lumber shovers, glue workers and Bohemian sausage makers.

Echoes of those demonstrations reverberated widely, and May Day was adopted as labor's holiday around the world. But not in Chicago, the city of its birth. Here, as in the rest of the country, prosperity robbed this country's workers of a historical sense of their predecessors' struggles.

"Our numbers are few," says John Berquist, 58, another member of the IWW centennial committee, glancing around the sparsely furnished room at the back of the bookstore. A red and black flag stands in one corner. "That's because the work of those who came before us was so successful. They won the battle for the eight-hour day, they got us Social Security."

Yet here and there, visible hints of Chicago's radical heritage survive. Take a closer look at the city's loft developments with their retrofitted balconies, as telling a symbol of the post-industrial upper-middle class as the red flag once was of the working class.

Those lofts were carved out of warehouses and factories furnished with metal-cutting lathes and punch presses, sewing machines and garment presses. To many of those who tended the machinery, Democrats and Republicans were Tweedledum and Tweedledee, mutually deaf to the problems of ordinary working men and women.

One measure of their discontent was the 1917 election, when the Socialist Party, running on an anti-war platform, won 34 percent of the vote in Chicago, electing two aldermen and carrying 19 of 29 towns in Cook County. The results sent a shiver through the local political establishment. Chicago's Democratic Party chief said it was "time to amalgamate the Republican and Democratic parties in the nation into a new lineup of conservatives and radicals."

A generation earlier, a similar alarm went off among the city's first families and resulted in the building of Ft. Sheridan. Land for the Army base, along Lake Michigan just south of Lake Forest, was donated to the federal government by the Commercial Club of Chicago, an organization of business and civic leaders. They saw it as a garrison for troops who would be close at hand if revolutionary barricades went up in Chicago's streets. Disputes between employers and workers had periodically escalated into pitched battles, and factory owners feared the police couldn't contain the "labor unrest," as they called it.

In 1886, during the campaign for an eight-hour day, an incident occurred that confirmed the local elite's view that the city teetered on the edge of an uprising. The event also made Chicago an emotional lodestone for union activists and political dissenters the world over.

CHICAGO WAS A BOOMTOWN in the late 19th Century, celebrated as the "Wonder City" that quickly rebuilt itself after the Great Fire of 1871. With new industries springing up overnight, its boosters touted it as a place where fortunes were to be made.

But there was another city, of slums and tenements, and an enormous gap of understanding separated the two Chicagos, as Mary Jones, a seamstress, noted in her autobiography. Later she would be revered as Mother Jones by the nation's coal miners, among whom she spent decades as an indefatigable union organizer. But in 1886, she was one of the anonymous toiling masses.

"Often while sewing for the lords and barons who lived in magnificent houses on Lake Shore Drive, I would look out of the plate glass windows and see the poor shivering wretches, jobless and hungry, walking along the frozen lakefront," she wrote. "My employers seemed neither to notice nor to care."

But a series of events soon riveted their attention on the boisterous campaign for an eight-hour day. During a demonstration on May 3, 1886, at the McCormick Reaper plant on the Southwest Side, police fired into a crowd of workers, killing several. The following day, a protest rally was held near Haymarket Square, at Randolph Street and Desplaines Avenue, then a grubby industrial area and now a trendy restaurant row.

Rain held down the size of the crowd, but several radical activists gave fiery speeches. Then a bomb was thrown into the ranks of the police, who opened fire on the crowd. When the smoke cleared, eight officers and at least four civilians lay dying. Outraged, city authorities ordered the Haymarket speakers rounded up and brought to speedy justice. One, Albert Parsons, eluded the police, but then dramatically showed up in court on the first day of the trial, taking a seat at the defendants' table.

No evidence linked the eight defendants to the bomb. The prosecutor made it clear they were on trial because their political beliefs endangered the American way of life. They were self-proclaimed anarchists who believed that government was a sham, a tool by which the rich exploit the poor.

"Gentlemen of the jury, convict these men, make examples of them, hang them and you save our institutions, our society," the state's attorney said in his closing argument:

The jury bought that argument, and five of the eight defendants were sentenced to death. One of them, August Spies, told the judge: "If you think that by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement, then hang us. Here you will tread upon a spark, but here, and there, and behind you, and in front of you, and everywhere, the flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out. The ground is on fire upon which you stand."

One defendant got off with 15 years in prison, presumably because he wasn't present during the bombing, and the death sentences of two others were commuted to life in prison. Six years later, all three were pardoned by Gov. Peter Altgeld, who decided the trial was a miscarriage of justice.

One of the others committed suicide in his cell. The remaining Haymarket martyrs, as they were dubbed-including Spies-were hanged at the old Cook County Jail at Hubbard and Dearborn Streets, since renovated into an upscale office building. They were buried in Forest Home Cemetery in west suburban Forest Park. Thereafter, the cemetery became the Arlington National Cemetery of the left, as dissenters and disciples of myriad lost causes asked to be buried alongside the Haymarket martyrs. Emma Goldman, who preached free love and women's rights, lies there; so, too, does her lover, Ben Reitman, a free-spirited doctor who ran Hobo College, a storefront school for tramps and seasonal workers in the west Loop, then Chicago's skid row.

Their gravesites are shadowed by an imposing sculpture depicting Justice laying a wreath on a fallen worker. Its base is inscribed with Spies' parting words to his executioners: "The day will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you are throttling today." Four decades later, novelist D. H. Lawrence wrote about May Day in a Mexican village where the townspeople were laying their own monument to "The Martyrs of Chicago."

Three days before the Haymarket defendants were executed, the first soldiers arrived at Ft. Sheridan. City fathers were nervous, fearing an uprising that never came. It wasn't until seven years later that the fort's garrison was called into action.

GEORGE PULLMAN HAD BUILT a capitalist's version of Utopia on Chicago's Southeast Side, a self-contained community with homes for his workers and factories for them to build his sleeping cars. He placed his company town well beyond what were then Chicago's city limits to insulate it from union organizers. When it opened in 1881, it was hailed as a model of social planning. Some residents, though, chafed at the regimentation.

"We were born in a Pullman house," one worker said, "fed from a Pullman shop, catechized in the Pullman church, and when we die we shall be buried in the Pullman cemetery and go to a Pullman hell!"

Squeezed by the depression of 1894, Pullman cut his workers' wages-but not their rents, which continued to be subtracted from their pay. Left with pennies to feed their families, 3,000 workers struck and appealed for support to the American Railroad Union. When it instructed members to refuse to handle Pullman's passenger cars, the quarrel between George Pullman and his employees escalated into a nationwide confrontation between owners and wage workers. Under pressure from the railroads, a federal court issued an injunction against the strike, and Pullman's streets were occupied by soldiers, including the Ft. Sheridan contingent,

Eugene Victor Debs, the railroad union president, was jailed for contempt of court, and the strike and the union collapsed. While in the McHenry County Jail in Woodstock, Debs was visited by a parade of radical luminaries, bringing him the classics of their political faith. Some were the texts that are still sold at the New World Resource Center.

Debs emerged from jail to find he had become a folk hero. The train that brought him back to Chicago was met by an immense crowd, upwards of 100,000, according to some newspaper accounts.

"Whichever way the labor leader turned there was a fresh outburst of cheers, but so great was the crowd that it remained wedged together," the Chicago Chronicle wrote. "Those who were near enough reached out to touch the leader's garments and those who were not were madly striving to do so."

Debs soon announced that his jail-cell reading had converted him to socialism, and he became the Socialist Party's perennial presidential candidate. Because of his fame, he was a natural invitee to the IWW's formative convention in 1905. Chicago was the logical site, given its heritage of Haymarket and Pullman.

THE ORIGINAL WOBBLIES didn't mince words. Theirs wasn't going to be like other unions, content to win a few scraps from the tables of the rich, a piddling wage

increase here or there.

"The working class and employing class have nothing in common," the IWW announced in its constitution. "There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people, and the few who make up the employing class have all the good things of life."

For all its emphasis on worker unity, the Wobblies were an ideological mixed bag. Among the delegates to the founding convention were Debs, with his newfound socialism, and anarchist Lucy Parsons, widow of one of the Haymarket martyrs. Mother Jones, the great trade-union organizer was there, as was a Catholic priest, Thomas J. Hagerty. He was on bad paper with his church superiors for preaching what's now called liberation theology, a conviction that clergy should help the meek inherit the Earth.

Though it had a peak membership of 100,000, the IWW tended to break up into splinter groups. Factionalizing is the perennial political handicap of the left, and an anarchist organization is, after all, a contradiction in terms. Many Wobblies worked the mines and lumbering camps of the West; they moved with the work and the season, making them hard to organize.

But what the Wobblies lacked in stability, they made up for with a romantic streak rare to politics of any stripe. When they led a successful strike of female textile workers in Lawrence, Mass., in 1912, they set goals that were aesthetic as well as economic. One picket banner boldly proclaimed: "We want bread and roses too."

They had a bit of the singing cowboy about them: They were the white-hat good-guys, defending underdogs while singing their praises. Their "Little Red Songbook" was an anthology of lyrics like "Dump the Bosses Off Your Back" and "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum."

Some IWW members romanticized violence as well, suggesting that industrial sabotage might quicken capitalism's downfall. Those sentiments came back to haunt them, enabling their enemies to justify violence against them. They often fought running battles with police while "soapboxing," as they called it, which amounted to merely expressing their political views in public.

In 1915, their greatest troubadour-organizer, Joe Hill, was executed by a Utah firing squad for a murder his legion of admirers, then and now, are convinced he didn't commit. None of the witnesses identified him as a man seen leaving the scene of the crime, but the police chief of San Pedro, Calif., where Hill had helped lead a longshoremen's strike, congratulated his counterpart in Salt Lake City on nabbing the right man. "He is certainly an undesirable citizen," the chief wrote. "He is something of a musician and writer of songs for the IWW songbook."

In his cell, Hill penned a final poem. He asked to be cremated and his ashes spread to the wind:

Perhaps some fading flower then

Would come to life and bloom again.

This is my last and final will.

Good luck to all of you.

Joe Hill

Hill's remains were brought to Chicago, and the size of his funeral procession rivaled Debs' earlier reception. He was cremated at Graceland Cemetery, where George Pullman had been buried under tons of concrete for fear someone would take posthumous revenge. Some of Hill's ashes were scattered at the Haymarket martyrs' gravesite in Forest Park. The rest were divided up and sent to every state in the union-except Utah.

Within a few years, the golden age of the Wobblies was over. After World War I, the country turned more conservative. With Russia in revolutionary turmoil, anything Red was considered potentially subversive. Foreign-born radicals were rounded up and deported, among them Emma Goldman. Debs, who had spoken out against the war, was again sent to prison. He ran for president from behind bars-his supporters wore buttons urging: "VOTE FOR PRISONER 9653" -- and got 900,000 votes in the 1920 election. That was 3.4 percent of the total, far greater than the other third-party candidates.

William "Big Bill" Haywood, the Wobblies head, also faced jail. He jumped bond and fled to the Soviet Union. First honored, then ignored by the Bolsheviks, he died there in 1928. Some of his ashes were sent back to the Haymarket martyrs memorial in Forest Home Cemetery.

In the boom times of the Roaring '20s, the left seemed dead. But radicalism, no less than the business cycle, has alternating seasons of want and prosperity. "When they hung the Haymarket guys, the business community thought, 'We've won,' " says Les Orear, president of the Illinois Labor History Society. "But somehow the spark always re-ignites us."

He is sitting in the Loop offices of the History Society, a crowded repository of buttons and fading pamphlets for half-forgotten causes. The organization was founded in 1969 when The Weatherman, a radical New Left group, exploded a bomb at the statue of a policeman that stood at the Haymarket site. Amid the attendant publicity, Orear and other unionists realized how little they knew about their own movement's origins. They banded together to preserve its history.

Orear, 94, recalls how he came to the leftist faith at the University of Wisconsin in the 1920s. "Sophomore year we read Marx's 'Communist Manifesto.' I said: 'God! This makes a lot of sense. This explains everything.' "

After graduating, he went to work at the Armour meat-packing company in Chicago's Stock Yards. When the country was plunged into the Great Depression, there was a revived interest in unionizing and political alternatives to capitalism. As the shop's "college boy," Orear was made editor of the newspaper of a newly formed packinghouse workers union.

Many of its organizers and officials were communists. Their party was born in Chicago in 1919. Actually, two parties were born. The communists didn't wait to break into factions, they started off with a split.

But they were dedicated organizers. Through the 1930s, unions were formed, often with communists taking the lead, in industries that previously seemed impregnable, like automobiles and steel. Their aggressive organizing sometimes was resisted with violence. On Memorial Day in 1937, Chicago police fired on demonstrators near Republic Steel's plant on the Southeast Side. Ten marchers were killed and 40 officers injured.

Leftists also formed unemployment councils in hard-hit blue-collar neighborhoods, setting up picket lines to keep Cook County sheriff's deputies from evicting out-of-work tenants. They worked across racial lines long before other whites took up the civil-rights cause.

Nor did their message of class struggle sound esoteric. With millions on the breadlines, it was the establishment's philosophy-keep a stiff upper lip, prosperity is just around the corner-that seemed empty, even a bit un-American. "It was like a curtain came up" on capitalism, Orear says. "You could see the skeletons."

But the communists had an Achilles' heel. Their party was slavishly loyal to the Soviets, which made their membership a revolving door. Recruits were attracted by the ideal of a society of equals, then put off by Soviet dictator Josef Stalin's totalitarian regime.

Richard Wright, the celebrated African-American novelist, served his literary apprenticeship in communist cultural groups on Chicago's South Side. Eventually, he rebelled against the organization's strict discipline, and by 1936 he and the party had mutually divorced each other. Watching a May Day parade from the sidelines, he recalled stories he had written glorifying the Communist Party. Though he realized how naive they were, he didn't regret having written them:

"For I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment of faith."

The American communists' foreign ties also left them vulnerable to a second Red Scare during the Cold War. Loyalty oaths were the new order of the day, and all union officers had to attest that they weren't communists.

They also were purged from the confederation of unions they had helped to build in the '30s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations—something like the One Big Union of the old Wobblies' dream.

IN THE PROSPEROUS YEARS after World War II, Karl Marx and Joe Hill seemed ancient history. Then globalization started sending industrial jobs overseas, and union membership declined from a third of the workforce in the 1950s to 12.5 percent currently.

Yet every grail always has a few seekers, and the blue-collar cause is no exception. Among them is Franklin Rosemont, a student at Roosevelt University in Chicago. His parents were labor activists; he'd been on picket lines before he could walk.

In the 1960s, he climbed a rickety staircase to the IWW's headquarters on North Halsted Street. The youthful New Left was being born, but something about the handful of grizzled Wobblies, old-timers and retired hobos made Rosemont feel he'd found a home.

"I took out a Red Card on the spot," says Rosemont, now 61. "I was the youngest member then."

He and his wife, Penelope, eventually took over the Charles H. Kerr Co., which has been publishing in Chicago since 1886. Passed down from one generation of Old Left caretakers to the next, it's the world's oldest socialist publisher.

"Our motto is: '119 years on the verge of bankruptcy,'" says Rosemont.

"Someone has to fight for the working class," adds Penelope, 62. "We don't want to have to hear only what the ruling class has to say."

Next weekend, the Rosemonts, now the IWW's grizzled veterans, will join in celebrating the Wobblies centennial. They've mounted an exhibit of IWW posters at the Heartland Cafe, the North Side meeting ground for a younger set of rebels. There will be academic symposia at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a concert of Wobblies music at the Preston Bradley Center on Lawrence Avenue.

It also will be an occasion for a bit of nostalgia and for burying old political hatchets. The Wobblies are putting out a new, more comprehensive edition of the "Little Red Song Book." Up to now they and the communists each had their own song anthology, with the bards and tunes of one group's barred from the other's.

"But we have something in common," says Penny Pixler, a member of the centennial committee. "We both remember a lot of lost dreams."

There have been moments of glory to remember too.

Like that day, 100 years ago, when the Wobblies first came to Chicago. As the convention was about to open, Big Bill Haywood, the IWW leader, looked out at the

delegates and paused for a moment. There was a palpable sense of hope in Brand's Hall. He pondered how to express it.

He picked up a piece of board and slapped it on the podium.

"Fellow workers," he said. "This is the Continental Congress of the working class."

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SIDEBAR

## ON THE TRAIL OF CHICAGO'S LABOR HISTORY

**By Leon Fink. Leon Fink is a history professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago**  
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A labor historian by training, I admit that when I arrived at UIC five years ago, my local knowledge was limited to a few "classic" moments like Haymarket, Pullman and the Memorial Day Massacre of steelworker organizers in 1937. Upon arrival, however, it soon dawned on me that few long-term residents of the city knew much more.

Another problem was the way that "labor history"-a story too often only of unions, strikes and collective-bargaining contracts-was usually separated from the day-to-day life of the succession of migrant and immigrant communities who have performed the city's hardest work.

Two years ago, a group of us associated with the newly established Chicago Center for Working-Class Studies determined to change things. The research efforts of half a dozen history graduate students at UIC and Northwestern, aided by the accumulated wisdom of several older Chicago history hands and funding from the Illinois Humanities Council, produced a map, "The Labor Trail: Chicago's History of Working-Class Life and Struggle."

Users will find an annotated guide to nearly 150 sites related to Chicago labor history arranged in 11 city neighborhood tours, as well as an introduction to Downstate Illinois highlights.

Like Boston's famous Freedom Trail, the Labor Trail is a story of American freedom, in this case the freedom of self-government, or what we can do for ourselves. This theme emanates from many still-vibrant, yet too little known, locations across the city, encompassing houses, parks, churches, settlements and community centers, as well as workplaces, cemeteries and union halls.

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Maps may be ordered by e-mailing Jamie Daniel at [orders@labortrail.org](mailto:orders@labortrail.org) or by writing to Chicago Center for Working-Class Studies, c/o Jamie Daniel, 11 E. Adams, #1106 Chicago, IL 60603.

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SIDEBAR

## LABOR'S PAINS

OFTEN BATTERED BY ECONOMIC SHIFTS, THE MOVEMENT REFUSES TO DIE

By Eric Arnesen, professor and chair of the history department at the University of Illinois at Chicago

Published June 19, 2005

FOR AN INSTITUTION THAT IS WIDELY REPORTED TO BE DEAD, the study of labor is remarkably healthy and thriving. Each year, a growing number of freshly minted Ph.D.s join the labor history professoriate or, as often, stand in line waiting for the next available job. Three major journals provide scholarly outlets for labor scholars, while the field boasts one annual national and three regional biennial conferences, not to mention scattered gatherings around specific events, anniversaries or subjects. A new organization, the Labor and Working-Class History Association, brings together hundreds of historians, labor educators and union activists. University and occasionally trade presses regularly publish monographs on the history of unions, strikes, social movements and the like. I can hardly keep up with the steady flow of literature in my own subfield, dealing with labor and race. There are more of us—with more to do—than ever before.

But what's up with all this academic activity around a supposedly moribund subject? After all, unions have shrunk to a minuscule percentage of the private labor force. Deindustrialization, capital flight and international trade agreements are sending all those high-paying union jobs in manufacturing to Mexico or overseas to Vietnam, China or Bangladesh. Haven't we entered a post-industrial society where brains have replaced brawn, where the shop floor has given way to the office cubicle or telecommuting, where non-union Wal-Mart and fast-food franchises have become the nation's largest employers?

Besides, what's the point of having all these labor historians with so few jobs waiting for them? It's not as if history departments are making the hiring of American labor historians their top priority. That's so 1970s. In the 21st Century, class is out; race, gender and ethnicity studies are in.

So isn't labor a dead subject?

No, actually. Its obituaries are, to say the least, premature.

Labor—or that part of the subject we in the academy call "the labor process"—has never stood still. That's the nature of a capitalist economy: Employers seek to reduce labor costs and increase productivity; workers seek to maintain a modicum of control over

their on-the-job lives and the maximization of returns on their efforts; managers continually reorganize the way work is performed-increase the division of labor here, introduce an assembly line there, computerize this and outsource that; workers resist, adapt, move on or are fired.

Business also exhibits an inherent restlessness, forever seeking out better ways to increase profits. Proximity to natural resources, power supplies or transportation outlets once governed the location of textile or steel mills. Now, businesses are drawn to locations whose attractions include low wages, anti-union laws, low taxes and weak environmental regulation. Entire regions are again transformed. Like workers, communities resist, muddle on or adapt; unlike workers or businesses, they can't move on.

For labor historians, then, their subject is a moving target, constantly in flux and anything but dead.

Over the past 200 years, we have seen artisanal shops close down and large manufactories take their place; chattel slavery give way to free labor; an industrial economy become a service economy; the number of factory workers shrink while the number of data-entry clerks grows.

Much of what used to be done at home is done abroad. If your PC hard drive crashes you'll likely be on the phone talking through the problem with a computer specialist in India. Your new television was likely produced in China. The steel in your car probably came from Asia or Brazil, and we've been buying foreign vehicles for some time.

The labor market continues to reward some professionals (lawyers, doctors, marketing executives, brokers) with impressive salaries. Countless others are shunted to the lower end where they toil away without health care, pensions or other benefits taken for granted by the educated elite. They flip burgers and wash dishes, scour nursing home floors, clean high-rise office buildings, provide day care for toddlers and tend the lawns and gardens of the affluent.

And what of the labor movement? Has it, too, gone the way of the dinosaur and the eight-track?

As with the study of labor and the labor process, the obit has appeared multiple times, only to be retracted when, Lazarus-like, the body miraculously lifts itself from the grave.

The depression of the 1890s knocked the young American Federation of Labor flat on its back. A revived economy at the end of that century witnessed a miraculous comeback. The struggles of the World War I years supposedly killed off the Industrial Workers of the World, and the AFL was placed on life support. With the 1929 stock market crash, American business all but pulled the plug on the federation.

But, lo and behold, mass strikes during the Great Depression breathed new life into the AFL and especially into the new Congress of Industrial Organizations. By the time they merged in 1955, they had organized as much as a third of the non-farm labor force and win grievance procedures, retirement plans, seniority provisions and paid vacations, not to mention higher wages

Then the patient became sick again-terminally so, we were told-in the 1970s. That decade's stagflation took its toll, as did President Ronald Reagan's firing of unionized air traffic controllers in 1981, waves of labor-contract concessions, the deindustrialization of America, and an aging, white-male union leadership out of touch with an increasingly diverse labor force. The unions' political power all but vanished, despite their lavishing vast sums on election campaigns, and its membership shriveled.

Beginning July 25, the AFL-CIO will meet in Chicago for a historic showdown, as militant challengers to the leadership seek to move the union toward a greater commitment to organizing.

Why should this matter? Haven't unions outlived their usefulness? Aren't they a drag

on productivity? Don't they constrain managerial flexibility and cost corporate America too much? After all, Western capitalism triumphed over communism; individualism trumped bureaucratic collectivism, and we are now stakeholders in President Bush's ownership society.

Whether you applaud or decry the country's economic direction, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that a) unions are in trouble, and b) those at the top of our society either don't care or relish their decline. Despite the lip service paid to "working families" each election cycle, politicians find it difficult to muster genuine enthusiasm for organized labor, much less lift a finger to aid it.

As imperfect as unions are, they can claim credit for a lot of things over the last century or so: the eight-hour day, company health care plans, a semblance of democracy in the workplace, health and safety regulations and better wages.

Imagine a world with a 12-hour workday, no vacations or no health care, and a workplace where employees can be dismissed without cause, without regard for seniority or without recourse to a grievance procedure. In many places across the globe, that's standard operating procedure. Actually, it's the case in many workplaces in the United States today, a development that should make us embarrassed, even apprehensive.

Finally and just as important as economic gains, labor history has bequeathed to Americans a legacy of idealism.

A century and a half ago, the Knights of Labor proposed making "moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness." The IWW popularized the phrases "An injury to one is an injury to all" and "don't mourn-organize." "Solidarity forever" properly remains labor's anthem.

These slogans are less a description of reality than testaments to an aspiration worth considering in an age of rampant individualism, social isolation and stark economic polarization. The marketplace, they suggest, might not be the best arbiter of human worth; that human dignity and human rights might better be achieved and preserved through collective activity, as they once were in the past.

Even if the goal is no longer to "bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old," as the words to "Solidarity Forever" go, the song's answer to its rhetorical question-"What force on Earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one"?-remains clear: None. If workers in the "new economy" don't look out for themselves and one another, no one will.

Regardless of what happens at the AFL-CIO convention in Chicago next month, don't write off either labor or the labor movement just yet. Chances are, as long as dignity in the workplace proves an elusive ideal, there will be a movement to pursue it.

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