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THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

22 April 1948

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COLONEL BAISH: Captain Worthington, ladies and gentlemen: We are fortunate to have as our guest speaker today Mr. Merlyn S. Pitzele. He is the labor editor of "Business Week" and has been in this position, for the past eight years. Mr. Pitzele is also a member of the New York State Board of Mediation by appointment of Governor Dewey.

We have already published his biography, so I will not go into it in greater detail. But, in addition to being a writer, a teacher, and a lecturer of labor subjects, he also has been a representative of labor in Government, in the AFL, and in the CIO.

His subject today is the labor movement in the United States. It is a pleasure to introduce to the College and our visitors Mr. Pitzele.

MR. PITZELE: I have been asked to discuss with you the nature and development of one of America's oldest institutions, and I have been asked to do it within the compass of fifty minutes. I do not intend to take up any of my time in quarreling with necessity.

But I want to point out to you that in the year 1741 the New York bakers went out on strike. Never once in the period since has this country been without a problem raised by the organized action of labor. This might give you some notion of the historical dimensions of the matter we are going to talk about.

I think it is of fundamental importance for anyone who is called upon to deal with or to be intelligent about labor problems in America to know something about the history of the American labor movement. Employers and government agencies spend a great deal of money and a great deal of effort in investigating the background of individuals who represent labor in some capacity or another. Such investigations make very good sense, indeed. They are undertaken, obviously, because in the background of these individuals will often be found the key to how they will behave in a given situation and what may be expected of them. Very little time and effort is spent, however, in undertakings designed to explore the background of the institutions which these men represent.

Yet, much more important in shaping the labor problem of today and the labor problems of tomorrow than these labor personalities, is the history, the traditions, and the time-tested habits of the union institution. To a large extent, the habits of organized labor are fixed beyond the power of any labor leader of the moment to alter. These habits and mores

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fundamental importance than whether these unions bracket together as AFL, CIO, or Independent. Thus, for example, within the AFL there are unions in the building-trades department and there is a union called the Brotherhood of Sleeping-Car Porters. The goal of the former is to maintain intact a technologically antiquated system of building construction. The goal of the latter is to achieve equality and economic opportunity for negroes. Both of these organizations put these goals above and beyond the next pay envelope.

If those goals seem to be the extreme in disparateness, there is within the same parent body both the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees, which probably represent even more widely separated poles of ultimate interests. Such contrasts are the rule rather than the exception.

We can find the same thing duplicated over and over again. Within the CIO there is the Auto Workers Union, for example, which is currently preparing to use its great strength to alter the marketing pattern in the automobile industry so that it can lay the basis for demanding an annual wage; and it has some other unique goals. Whereas its sister organization, the Steelworkers Union, presided over by Phil Murray, takes a very different course. Murray, for example, is on record with a resounding defense of the Pittsburgh-plus basing-point system to protect the marketing and pricing system by which the steel industry operates. Hence, while there is a frantic emulation among unions in short-run tactics aimed at improving the pay envelope, the broad lines of strategy, inevitably determined by the nature of the long-run goal, are different and continue to be different. This is one important factor giving American unions their individual and indigenous character. It is a factor which anyone concerned with labor problems cannot afford to overlook.

This brings me to the second of the general observations I want to make; that is, that the American unions are a peculiarly American institution. In every other industrialized country of the world, trade unionism has been built upon the ideology of class consciousness. Workers were recruited to union membership, made loyal to their organizations, and bound to their leadership, on the theory that they were engaged in a class war against the owning and ruling class. Despite repeated efforts through the years which have been made to indoctrinate him in this direction, the American worker has never become class conscious. He is opportunity conscious and will fight for opportunities to advance his welfare and position. But he believes that such advancement is possible within the framework of the political and economic system in which he lives.

He is also job conscious. He wants, above everything else, that his union secure for him a property right in his job. He wants to own his job. He does not want to own his employer's business, nor the industry, nor the state. This cast of mind which the American worker has, and upon which the labor movement had to be built, has been shaped in the matrix of the American environment.

Although the first American strike occurred in 1741, we do not date the beginning of the American labor movement much before the opening of the nineteenth century. While there are numerous instances of strikes during the period of our colonial history--and a strike is undoubtedly a symptom of labor discontent and action--one can hardly speak of the beginning of trade unionism until such discontent has become expressed in an organization that keeps alive after a strike or between strikes.

Such permanent organizations existed before 1820 in this country only in two trades, shoemaking and printing. The American labor movement, as we know it today, begins its continuous existence in 1827 when the several trades organized in Philadelphia got together in the Mechanics Union of Trade Associations, so-called. From that point on down to now, through many important changes and permutations, the American labor movement has had a continuous existence.

The early unions in our society were all local in character. If they had any association with other organizations, it was with other local groups in the same city, organized in some other trade. For a while, this form of organization was extremely effective. For example, the Philadelphia shoemakers could get together and decide how much, to their mind, would be a fair price for making a pair of shoes. They could police the Philadelphia shoemaking establishments to see that no one made shoes for less. Their big problem was the visiting journeymen who came into Philadelphia and who offered to undercut their prices. They could handle that problem in pretty good shape. But with the growth of the transportation system in this country, their form of organization was immediately antiquated. It was possible for the journeymen to come in from the outside. It was possible for the journeymen in Baltimore to make shoes in Baltimore and ship them into the Philadelphia market and into the Philadelphia shops, for example.

This was a new kind of competition which the local union could not deal with. It was necessary, therefore, to dispatch some representative to Baltimore to discuss with the Baltimore shoemakers the question of associating themselves with their Philadelphia brethren in a common organization to protect their standards.

Such broad changes in the evolving American economy effected the change in labor unionism from the local to the national organization. In the fourth decade of the nineteenth century several attempts were made to band some of the national unions together into a single association. The first of these important forerunners of the American Federation of Labor was formed in 1866. It was called the National Labor Union. This organization at that time enunciated a number of demands which have since become part of the accepted program of organized labor. This consistent thread runs through the entire history of American trade unionism. Among these demands, formulated during the Civil War, were demands for such matters as arbitration instead of strikes, the eight-hour day, regulation

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In surveying this period of organized labor's infancy, there are also some lessons which can be learned more easily because of the perspective which history gives us. We can see pretty clearly some of the basic patterns which reoccur but which, in their contemporary manifestations, are obscured because of their closeness to us and because they impinge too directly upon us individually.

The most important of these lessons I suggest to you is the fact of organized labor's great adaptability in this country. I have noted for you how this changing structure of unionism and its transition from a local to national organization was really an accommodational response to new environmental factors. Similarly, the triumph of the craft union, pursuing purely economic objectives as represented by the survival and growth of the American Federation of Labor and the desuetude of its rivals, represents a kind of institutinal Darwinism, if you please; the operating process of natural selection. All through its history we will see the high adaptability and flexibility of organized labor.

Today the unions are in the process of accommodating themselves to living under the drastically new rules and regulations which are written into the Taft-Hartley Act. Less elastic social institutions might have faced dissolution when confronted with such a radical change in the ground rules by which they had to operate. Not so the unions. As you can well remember, I am sure, while this bill was being debated they screamed to high heaven about how the new law would enslave wage earners and destroy their organizations. Then, when it became law, they adjusted themselves and are now in the process of adjusting themselves further to its provisions, flourishing pretty much as they have flourished before.

You can see this adaptability operating most clearly as you look at the early material with the advantage which historical perspective gives you. And there has gone on since the inception of the American union movement, an unremitting ideological competition as proponents of one or another economic theory or political philosophy sought to persuade the working man to his particular point of view. Radicals, utopians, social reformers, and political opportunists of all types and descriptions were drawn to the labor movement as steel filings to a magnet. They saw it as a mass of tremendous potential power which might be shaped either into an instrument for effecting basic social change or as a possible vehicle for personal advancement. Increasing the attraction of the radical to the labor movement is the inescapable, empirical evidence that unionism, per se, by its very nature -- even the most conservative kind of broad-and-butter unionism -- is essentially anticapitalistic. Its very existence challenges the absolutism of private property. It does this, of course, by seeking to curb the right of ownership to offer employment on its own terms. I want to emphasize that its very being is the institutional representation of the refusal to accept the unilateral decisions of employers about wages, working conditions, and such matters which, in an earlier

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By the time they caught up with him and threw him in jail, the building service worker in New York was working a forty-hour week and was making \$37.50 a week as his average wage. Now Scalise did that and they will never forget it. They don't care how much he helped himself to the money in the union treasury. He got in there and did a job for them. It is pretty hard for them to believe that if he were an honest man he might have done a better job, or if he were an honest man he would have done the same kind of a job. He went in there and fought for them.

That is the standard of the rank and file union member. That is why the United Mine Workers of America, the coal miners, are so thoroughly loyal to John L. Lewis. Don't for one minute let anyone tell you that they are intimidated into that loyalty or coerced into it. They do not hire John L. Lewis, the President of the United Mine Workers union, to be a great statesman, to think of the public interest. They hire John L. Lewis because it is dark and dirty down in those coal mines; because they think it is a helluva life; because they know from experience over the years that their employers have had little regard for them as human beings. So they want someone like Lewis. They will follow him up hill, down hill, and around the mulberry bush.

They have only one standard, just like the stockholders of the General Motors Corporation, if you please: How is this management doing? What is the return on our investment here? Is it bringing us a good return? That is what we are interested in. That is why we have invested our money in this business. The same standard applies to the labor union member. He joins the union not because he wants to contribute to the support of some figure who will be universally loved. He joins the union and contributes to it, is loyal to it, because he hopes it will do a practical, hardboiled kind of job of improving his material standards.

There are other kinds of unions in this country, of course, but I am not going to touch on them. Those are the revolutionary unions. Those unions, just to characterize them quickly and then dismiss them, are only unions by name. They are operated by people who see trade unionism, in all of its implications, as only a tactic taken up for the purpose of speeding the day, and being a weapon for the day, when a revolutionary overturn of the social and economic system can be achieved.

Today there is only one kind of unionism of this kind in America and that is the kind which is really Russian unionism. Communist unions today are, of course, not American unions. By that I mean to say they operate in response to the needs and requirements of Soviet Russia. At an earlier period in our history, however, we had genuine American revolutionary unions. The IWW, which some of you may recall--the Industrial Workers of the World--which scared the pants off many people in this country before World War I, was a radical-revolutionary labor organization but it was a native American radicalism. Sure, it wanted to change the American social system but it did not want to deliver it to the Russian Foreign Office or anybody else's foreign office.

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CIO was launched for very practical reasons. Here the Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Men's Clothing Workers Union have their industries so well organized that they have pushed wages up in their industry to the point beyond which they can no longer be pushed without directly raising the price of the product to the consumer. If you push the price up any, it means you are going to sell less. It means unemployment. So here is a union which has gone as far as it can go. It must look for some new ways of improving the material welfare of its members. How do you do it? Raise the purchasing power of the people. Put more money into the pay envelopes of other people so they can buy the clothing you manufacture even though it sells for a dollar more.

The needle trades unions made great financial contributions to getting the CIO established. It was very important for them to organize the mass-production industries and to increase the purchasing power of American wage earners.

If the great financial interests which control both the steel and coal industries were free to devote their attention completely to fighting the coal miners' union, the mine workers would be worse off than if there was a steel workers' union too and they could operate in some kind of a joint way. So the miners had practical reasons for helping establish the C.I.O.

Let me conclude by telling you briefly about some of the issues which are still unresolved.

There has been built up in this country within the last ten or fifteen years not a new (except in quantitative terms) but a strange, hitherto nonexistent power of great social and economic force. It has had to try to beat out for itself a place in the community and there was no new place for it to occupy. All positions of power in any society are already occupied. You must displace someone else if you are going to take over. I do not mean take over in terms of control. I mean for this great power-- which is bespoken by the fact that there are fifteen million workers in labor organizations today--to have a place somewhere in our society commensurate with its numbers and strength so someone else has to give ground, and people do not give ground graciously.

We are still fighting over what is the appropriate area in which collective bargaining is to go on. A new contentious issue has just been developed by a National Labor Relations Board decision, relative to bargaining, on the question of pensions. This bespeaks a still undefined area in which our society and our legal system acknowledges that labor has a legitimate functioning place. But it has to be fought for. It does not necessarily have to be fought for in terms of strikes, but in some way there must be an equilibrium established.

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This is a thorough communist-controlled organization. The FBI people can tell you, if they are prepared to talk about it to you, that there existed for a long time on some of the important cables running to Europe what was, in effect, a Russian monitoring system. The communists in those jobs were monitoring those cables and taking information back through party channels, through the diplomatic pouches, and other channels of communication going to Russia. They have done a good job. By "good job" I mean they have done an effective job. The communists have done an effective job of being the most important factor in the communications industry.

They have done a terrific job, with the assistance of Harry Bridges on the west coast, on shipping.

Only a little under communications, in terms of priority, has been the transportation industry. They have done very badly on the railroads. In connection with the railroads, the labor organizations--there, again, we are talking about going through the period of fighting in establishing these things--are established institutions. The railroad worker is a pretty sophisticated trade unionist and he does not want any truck with a commie. When I say he does not want any truck with a commie, you must remember that the commie never represents himself as a communist. It is very rare and only for reasons of tactics of the moment that someone will get up and say, "I'm a communist!" He does not say that. They take on a guise, and pose as this, that, and the other thing. But, as I say, the railway workers are a pretty sophisticated crowd. They have not wanted any truck with this kind of thing.

In shipping, however, you have another kind of story. And, again, a part of the reason for it is that you only have had shipping organized--in any real sense organized (by unions)--fairly recently. There has been a period of turbulence and great opposition by employers in which the most militant operators, the people most willing to become martyrs, and so on, have come to the leadership of those organizations.

Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union are currently undergoing a great fight, a fight to the death, between the communists and the anti-communist groups. The results of that issue we will know by the end of June because by that time the national elections will be over in this union and they will know which group is in control. Joe Curran, who is the president of this union, for many years was indistinguishable from the communists; he went along with them completely. Finally, it came to the point where he had to make a choice between the communists and the interests of the seamen. He chose to go along with the seamen and he broke with the party.

On the Pacific Coast waterfront you have Bridges supreme. The opposition in Bridges' union is not worth talking about. It is practically

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transferring funds from an uptown to a downtown bank in New York and having \$25,000 disappear. He was later murdered. I had nothing to do with that murder.

MR. PITZELE: So you haven't any enemies any more.

COMMENT FROM THE QUESTIONER: Even though you have given us an insight into the activities of some of the leaders, I have not changed my opinion. Now would you like to say something about your outstanding leaders today?

MR. PITZELE: No. I would like to say something about you. I would like to say that if you had an experience with one Army officer, as you had with one union leader, and it came out later that he was secretly in the employ of an enemy power, would your position on the officership of the American Army be that they are all corrupt and disloyal and no good? In other words, I suggest that you go very far astray by trying to generalize on the basis of one experience.

Now I do not know this man you are talking about--may his soul rest in peace--I mean not to defend this guy or to say that other people are virtuous--but all I can say to you is that you should examine the process by which you arrived at this opinion. I do not think it has any logic.

QUESTION: What do you think the prospects are for a CIO-AFL fusion?

MR. PITZELE: I think the prospect is better now. By "better" I mean it is more likely that this may occur now than at any time since the division in the labor movement. The reason for it is the isolation of the commies. The acerbating factor in all attempts of the AFL and the CIO to go together, which has made them all come out a cropper, has been the existence of this important group of communist-controlled unions in the CIO which had great bargaining power. They could threaten to kick over the traces and not to go along with CIO policy, and so on.

I would like to bring out one other point. Continuance with the CIO of the commie organizations is a source of great embarrassment. I do not mean only personal embarrassment for people like Phil Murray. But what they contribute in terms of giving you greater representation, in terms of increasing your strength, is pretty much canceled out by the fact that it is now clear they are commies. They are potentially traitorous. I say "potentially" as deference to existing public opinion. Therefore, the whole CIO suffers severely because of this thing.

I think there cannot be any AFL-CIO unity until twelve or fifteen unions in the CIO are cast out. The AFL will never take them in. They will never go in the AFL. As long as the CIO has to negotiate with the AFL for some kind of a joint alliance, having these twelve or fifteen unions in the group, they will get nowhere.

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Take the stockholders of General Motors--again a part of the cross section of America--from all walks of life. There is no reason for your believing for a moment they are any less attached to the American tradition and the interests of this country than anybody in this room. When they see their quarterly statement from General Motors, they are not thinking in terms of whether or not this helps or hurts democracy. They are saying, "For the hundred bucks I have invested in General Motors stock, will I get a sufficient return or should I sell my stock and put it some place where I can get more dough?"

The president of General Motors is hired to show more profit. The president of the United Mine Workers is hired to put more money in the pay envelope. Now why should we have a double standard? I mean, here is the banker in the community. We expect him to be a banker. We do not expect him to be motivated by charitable considerations when he forecloses a mortgage. He functions as a banker; that is what he is for. Well, why should we expect labor leaders to operate any differently? If you answer me that the labor leader is more important because he deals with people and their minds, I will agree with you. We should hope that some day he will come to see the broader implications of what he does because the implications of what he does are more important to the community than the implications of what the banker does. But we can only hope.

We have no right to demand that the mine workers elect a man to office who is going to think of anything except the interests of the coal miners. That is what they elect him for. Until you change their view, until you make them see that pursuing their interest as coal miners may be dangerous for the general interest, until you get them to come to that conclusion, we have no right to say, "Don't elect John L. Lewis any more because he's a nasty, mischievous fellow. Elect someone else whom we can be a little more fond of."

COLONEL BAISH: Mr. Pitzelo, I regret to say that our time has elapsed. Thank you very much for a fine talk.

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