American Labor Struggles and Law Histories
American Labor Struggles and Law Histories

Edited by

Kenneth M. Casebeer

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To the mentors who have given me so much,

James J. Unger, Roberto Mangabiera Unger, Soia Mentschikoff,
Morton J. Horwitz, and Laurence H. Tribe,

To the hero of my lifetime, and one before,

Rev. Martin Luther King and Eugene V. Debs,

And to all people who continue to engage in collective action fighting oppression.
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Editor’s Preface

Historians, like the rest of us, tend to “find what we see,” rather than the more aspirational claim to “see what we find.”

As the editor of this book, what I personally “see” over the course of post-revolution American History is: the importance of the labor question—the place of all those who directly produce the wealth of the society by the expenditure of their time and energy (lives) in relation to the social use of their products, and their welfare; the importance of struggle by workers in collective actions contesting power exercised to reduce their social and economic position and security in society; and the involvement of law and legal institutions in constructing the context of those struggles. This Preface is therefore written from my point of view, and should be distinguished by readers from the Introduction, which will be written from the point of view of the book as a collection of authors. Many “points of view” are represented in approaching the past and in the histories of labor they partially tell.

The shared premise of all the contributors, however, is that the History of labor in the United States cannot be captured without acknowledging the ubiquity and centrality of the struggle of workers to gain power otherwise denied to them to achieve the independence allowed by an adequate and just standard of living, and often as importantly, to create the kind of democratic society that included their equal voice and dignity. These struggles have not been uniform, or continuous, or isolated from the aspirations of others for similar aims. But these worker struggles were constant and quite self-conscious. These struggles also met with organized opposition as vicious any other conflicts in America. Finally, it is striking, that workers’ ideas, interests, goals, and achievements almost always took the form of “collective actions.” Collective actions did not always involve unions, or unions of a particular type, or involve politics toward parties, independent or not, or toward the State. This book is about how this range of collective actions intersected with law and legal practices. It therefore addresses power as exercised in American society.

Much can be learned from studying labor struggles—not least is their relevance to workers today as they confront tremendous membership declines in unions, and receding identification with a labor movement. Paradoxically, at the same time, workers experience increasing labor class consciousness of the insecurity of globalized markets, and unprecedented inequalities of income and wealth in America. For the labor movement, experience gained should not be lost. Both lessons of militancy and avoidance of self-defeat can be learned. Based on what did not occur, the generation of new strategies becomes possible, and these lessons expose remarkable continuing, repetitive repressions of labor in the name of capital and the undermining of democracy by capitalism. Collective actions are more necessary for workers than ever before. Workers do win. The losses, while painful, are not lost.

Recovering and investigating labor struggles form all the justification needed for this book. I should stop here. At the risk of becoming too academic, however, I want to put
the book’s focus in an ongoing intellectual literature. Why this book now? I believe that what was actually experienced by American workers has increasingly been overshadowed in contemporary academic disputes more concerned with privileging particular narratives and historiography. I personally hope this book will provide something of a corrective balance.

First, as a labor law professor, too much legal writing, including labor law histories, proceed from an unexamined assumption of the legitimacy and State protection of “business unionism” within a social organization reflecting “industrial pluralism.”

I would view Labor Law more broadly. First, American workers have been and are less than unanimous about business unions and their usually top-down and only semi-democratic organization, and their institutional distance from the rank-and-file. Second, unions or not, American workers have engaged continuously in other forms of collective actions than simply collective bargaining, including less tamed struggles for power: rebellions, politics, boycotts, picketing, labor and social movements, and especially strikes. Third, Labor Law as Collective Bargaining regulation thus shortchanges not only the range of collective activities of workers, but recognition of the wide range of legal rules and practices brought to bear on labor struggles — criminal law, antitrust, property law, legislation, court injunctions, petty arrests, murder and treason prosecutions, police and military suppression, vigilantes, and more. Labor Law is much more than the law of collective bargaining.

Second, as a legal history academic, there has been increasing call for a New “New Legal History,” rejecting the “Law & Society” distinction, the basis of the academic cocoon of the Law & Society Association, which had promulgated the “social science” rejection of progressive or whiggish histories prevailing in legal histories before 1970. Law & Society sought in empirical and ideological study of consciousness and conditions of society a critical purchase on the study of law. The more sophisticated studies acknowledged the reciprocal interdependencies of these two spheres of action, law and society, but critical rationality still depended on at least conventional separation. The New New histories deny separation, “seeing” law as just another, although often central, discourse in constructing the “meaning” of society through which all persons understand their acts. The conceptual non-distinction, following post-modernism, is text/context. Power is lodged and deployed in the specialized discourse of legal practices from which in part social, and more specifically cultural, relations emerge. The historiographical problem is still one of “critical purchase,” but the historical problem now is that of “imaginings of alternative practices.” The former battleground of agency is backgrounded within the dominance of cultures contested between subalterns and empires. Among many problems with this lens on Law, an exclusive study of legal texts (most often court opinions) and the contexts of their deployment, is in a sense, while sometimes shifting, always a “winners” history. Where are the losers accounted? Particularly in labor law history, where are the workers and their consciousness?

The implicit response of the New “New Legal” Historians is the necessity of abolishing reductionist, instrumentalist, functionalist, institutionalist, or any other form of determinist explanation of law or any other discourse, or of thought. Historiography must now be indeterminate, discontinuous, contingent, contextual, multi-dimensional, and meaningfully discursive. I don’t believe it. History, what actually “happened,” is actions. Actions are not imaginings. Actions depend on conditions prevailing in some sense at a


given point in time, of course including discourse. Workers who have been crushed and live in dismal conditions have not just lost an argument. Sticks and stones do break and have often broken their bones. Gravestones and funeral processions of more than 30,000 marchers, while symbolic, are still marking acts.

Third, as a labor historian, the broadest intellectual context is post-modernism in its increasing prominence in labor histories. Labor history in its classical period almost exclusively focused on the institutional and political history of labor unions, and trade unions at that. The new labor history, under the clear influence of E. P. Thompson, turned to discovery of the working class, and thus the forces of culture, politics, and ideology in shaping working class experience and opportunities. This led in two sub-disciplinary directions, incorporation of the new social histories of largely local studies, and the relation of class to social relations at the point of production. Most recently, labor historians have taken their social histories toward the independence of culture by emphasizing worker consciousness and discursively inscribed limitations of alternative opportunities.

The intellectual and strategic problem posed to the relevance of historical work for labor by this turn by historians is an old one—the priority of structure and agency—do conditions determine social relations necessary to production, or does choice determine what social relations are permitted and thus the provisioning conditions required by them? Marxian reductionism, the priority of the material base generating its ideational superstructure, has been completely marginalized as vulgar within historiography.

To my mind, the content of law (and histories) is of course historically contingent, and relatively indeterminate; the production of ideas is in principle no different than the production of goods, services, technologies, knowledge, indeed social relations, a continuum rather than categories. Following Thompson, law is both an arena and form of social struggle. But this does not mean that the ideational realm and/or the discursive context has no particularized dependence whatsoever on material conditions at any given moment.


8. The vulgar reductionist is a straw Marx. E. P. Thompson replies: “In *Capital ...* Marx repeatedly uses the concept of the circuit of capital to characterize the structure of the capitalist economy—and, more than that, of capitalist society more generally. But historical materialism (as assumed as hypothesis by Marx, and as subsequently developed in our practice) must be concerned with other “circuits” also: the circuits of power, of the reproduction of ideology etc., and these belong to a different logic and to other categories. Moreover, historical analysis does not allow for static contemplation of “circuits,” but is immersed in moments when all systems go and every circuit sparks across the other.” E. P. Thompson, “Marxism and History,” *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).
What the post-modern, or linguistic turn, has somewhat dictatorially done is in some sense simply flip Marx. Instead of structure determining discourse, discourse now determines what can be known of the material structure. In its vulgar form this is reverse reductionism — even if the content of discourse at any given moment is perceived as indeterminate, contingent, and afunctional. As Leon Fink observes, “The yellow-dog contract, criminalization of the boycott, the antistrike injunction, and the gleam of militia bayonets … were not the tools of consent.”10 Recovering as histories the deeds to which these legal enactments responded is emphatically not sentimentality as charged by newer critics of labor histories.

This book aspires to offer a corrective to all three academic limitations. The book serves to provide law professors a supplemental reader to provide the contexts of collective actions to decisions in labor law texts, to also provide historians a chronology of case studies to illustrate a trajectory of legal history that can accompany thematic American History courses, and finally, above all, to reassert the interconnectedness of the material world and law and consciousness in relation to the possibility of agency (once again foregrounded) in histories. This book re-centers struggles undertaken in collective actions of workers, and experienced in some ways also as legal actions.

The history of actual people is not that of the hegemony of individualism, the taxonomy of Paternalism, or the discourse of the bayonet. That is not the way we live our lives. To my knowledge, workers in American history have not yet given their consent to domination, or accepted their share of the value of what they produce as just, and workers continue to fight to enact alternative social relations in reproducing their society. They have often lost. They have often been beaten, many literally. Many have died. Triumph and Anguish are words but they do not represent discourse, and the past carries memory in deeds that are much more than words. Both old and new labor law histories have a lot to learn.

I want to express particular appreciation to Jim Pope, who has offered important and sage advice throughout, and encouraged the participation of many in this project; and to my assistant, Shannon Maharajh who cheerfully makes appear all I need; and to my partner, Marnie Mahoney, who tired of hearing my complaints about the literature, and challenged me to stop talking and write a book about it, and has been a constant consultant. Marnie has always in her writing and ideas reminded us of the twin couplets — Power and Control, Oppression and Resistance …

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Asheville, North Carolina
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9. “The history of meaning has successfully asserted the reality and autonomy of its object. At the same time, however, a new form of reductionism has become evident, the reduction of experience to the meanings that shape it. Along with this possibility, a new form of intellectual hubris has emerged, the hubris of word-makers who claim to be makers of reality,” John E. Toews, “Intellectual History After the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience,” 92 American Historical Review 879, 906 (1987).

10. Leon Fink, supra note 8, at 103.
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