

Jews and the American Labor Movement: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

September 2, 2016

Rabbi Barry Block

This summer, the cabins at Henry S. Jacobs Camp were known by the names of Jews who have made significant contributions to American life, among them Cabin Samuel Gompers. Gompers, a Jewish immigrant from England, founded the American Federation of Labor, served as its President from 1886 until his death in 1924.

Today, few would disagree that labor unions were much needed in Gompers' America. In the Gilded Age and through the "roaring 20s," as American industry rapidly expanded, workers rarely benefited from our nation's growing prosperity. Instead, American wealth was generated on the broken backs of immigrant workers, among them countless Jews.

Gompers was not the only Jew among the founders of the American labor movement. We should not be surprised. Our Jewish tradition has always insisted that service to God begins with how we treat the most vulnerable among us. The Holiness Code in Leviticus admonishes us to pay our workers on time. The prophet Isaiah excoriates the wealthy of ancient Israel. They were punctilious in their ritual observance, such as fasting, but the prophet tells them they will not find God's favor: "Because on your fast day you think only of your business and oppress all your workers!"

Labor leaders weren't the only Jews involved in the fight a century ago. Instead, Jews were on both sides. While America's largest corporations were neither owned nor led by Jews in that era, Jewish employers were not necessarily more generous to their workers than their non-Jewish counterparts.

Rabbis, too, engaged the battle. A predecessor of mine in San Antonio, Rabbi Ephraim Frisch, was both beloved and notorious for his outspoken labor advocacy. Frisch, who served in Pine Bluff before going to Texas, cried out for workers' rights in the 1920s and 1930s. Rabbi Frisch was particularly courageous during a notorious pecan shellers' strike in 1938. The workers were primarily Hispanic women. The labor leader was not a Jewish man, but a Latina, and a Communist at that, by the name of Emma Tenayeuca. The target of the strike was Southern Pecan Shelling Company, owned by members of the San Antonio congregation who had been key donors for the construction of the magnificent pulpit from which Rabbi Frisch preached.

Richard Croxdale has written about working conditions for the pecan shellers: “The pecan-shelling industry was one of the lowest-paid industries in the United States, with a typical wage ranging between two and three dollars a week. . . . [T]he large firms controlled the supply of nuts as well as the prices for shelling. Working conditions were abysmal – illumination was poor, inside toilets and washbowls were nonexistent, and ventilation was inadequate. Fine brown dust from the pecans permeated the air, and the high tuberculosis rate of . . . 148 deaths for each 100,000 persons, compared to the national average of fifty-four—was blamed at least partially on the dust.”

Rabbi Frisch, of blessed memory, spoke out against his own congregants’ moral failings with the courage of the prophets of old. We should not be surprised that he left the pulpit of that congregation a few years after the strike, under circumstances that continued to be debated for decades.

Thank God, and no small thanks to labor organizers, Jewish and otherwise, conditions such as those at Southern Pecan Factory no longer exist in this country. Sweatshops and slave wages are things of America’s past.

But we must not kid ourselves. The labor laws that govern safety and some degree of fairness in the American workplace today were won only after hard-fought battles. Suffering was long and harsh. To a large degree, working conditions did not change until New Deal reforms responded to the Great Depression.

Today, we often hear that labor unions might have been important in a previous age, but have now become a menace. Some claim that labor union fat-cats simply seek to get rich by picking the pockets of those who create jobs. We are told that labor unions seek political power at the expense of excellence in industry, in schools, and everywhere in between.

Note well: These same arguments were made by the employers who oppressed the workers of this country a century ago. Then, as now, business leaders insisted that American working conditions were satisfactory. Then, as now, the captains of industry maintained that labor unions would destroy the jobs they sought to improve.

The truth is complicated. Sticking with my pecan shelling example, no such business thrives in America today. The shellers might have won the battle with their strike, but they ultimately lost their jobs. Just three years after the strike was over, machines had replaced some 10,000 workers in the pecan industry in

San Antonio alone. Perhaps those jobs were replaced, over time, with better employment, humane working conditions, and more livable wages. For the pecan shellers themselves, though – during the Depression, mind you – the dislocation must have been severe.

Labor unions have been much in the news in recent years. In an infamous government showdown in Wisconsin, the Governor and legislative majorities took away teachers' and other civil servants' legally guaranteed collective bargaining rights. We in Arkansas might have looked bemused: Teachers never had such protections here.

Moreover, as America has shifted to a service economy, labor unions have sought to organize in areas where they were previously absent. Difficult working conditions at Amazon's warehouses are the stuff of legend. Uber and Lyft drivers have sought to organize in order to gain some negotiating power with the ride sharing companies.

"The more things change," the saying goes, "the more they remain the same." Yes, labor conditions are better than they were 100 years ago, but that standard should not make us proud. After decades in the post-World War II era, when the middle class grew in America and the gap between rich and poor narrowed, the last 35 years have seen vast wealth increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small percentage of our fellow citizens. After we all helped Wall Street recover from its self-inflicted catastrophe, and from the disaster that Wall Street inflicted upon America, banking fat-cats are going home with multi-million dollar paydays, the stock market keeps going up, and taxes on the wealthy remain at historically low levels. Even as unemployment dips to historically low levels, millions of Americans have never returned to their pre-2008 earning levels. Many more have left the work force. Years after the end of the Great Recession, America's poor continue to be its victims.

Many see the poor as slothful, as if unemployed and underemployed Americans were to blame for their own poverty. Doubtless, some poor people, like plenty of the rest of us, are lazy. But millions of working Americans are poor. You don't have to go farther than Our House, where volunteers from our congregation provide dinner monthly, to see the faces of the working poor and their children. Too many of our fellow citizens who bring home full-time paychecks also require government assistance to feed their families.

And poor working conditions continue to be a problem. I was once privileged to meet a group of hotel employees who were trying to organize with a national labor union. I learned that hotel workers often don't get the tips that patrons believe they are providing, particularly on banquet catering. I was deeply saddened as I learned of injuries sustained in the back-breaking labor of the hotel housekeeper, often subjected to inhumane work-loads, with unimaginable quotas of the numbers of rooms each is required to clean each day.

Now, as in the days of Isaiah, the Torah teaches, "You shall not abuse a needy laborer."

Now, as in the days of Samuel Gompers, labor unions may be the only place poor workers can turn for decent pay and safe working conditions.

Now, as in the days of Rabbi Frisch, we Jews have an obligation to speak out for those whose voices are too little heard. We remember the heart of the slave, for we were slaves in the land of Egypt. We are mindful of the struggles of the abused laborer, for we were abused laborers in the sweatshops of Industrial Revolution America.

Now, as in the darkest days of the Great Depression, we can look to a brighter future. Isaiah promises that when we do "unlock the shackles of injustice, . . . then shall your light shine in the darkness . . . You shall be called 'Repairer of the breach.' I will cause you to ride upon the high places of the earth, and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob," of Leah, and of Rachel.

May that be God's will.

Amen.