

Raiding Labor Records

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THE paper-collecting mania in the United States is almost as great in its proportions as a wartime waste-paper drive. Curators of manuscripts check obituary pages for the death notices of politicians, inventors, *littérateurs*, and others, and plant themselves on doorsteps as the last mourners depart. They junket across country and drink gallons of tea and make chitchat with old folks suspected of having treasure trove in their attics. In one area of manuscript collecting, however, the paper pickers have not been so alert, namely, in that of labor records. In the Library of Congress, our national manuscript depository, where logic would demand that the personal papers of national figures should find their resting place, there are only the papers of John P. Frey that might be put in the labor category.

In the case of labor organizations their records may perhaps be saved from going through that period of foster care in research libraries that has marked the history of the preservation of other American institutional papers. The files of business firms, many of them deposited after the firms failed, fortunately have found their way into the libraries of universities and historical societies. Records of various church groups in the United States gravitated until recent years toward centers of study rather than into their own archives. Temperance associations, peace groups, and many other types of societies, often on their demise, deposited their records under someone else's jurisdiction; and thus official archives have become historical manuscript collections. Educational institutions had no one to turn to; so their outdated records and the papers of their faculty members were either allowed to "evaporate" or were hidden away under stairs until recent years, when the colleges too have taken to setting up archives or at least to giving their own librarians the function of preserving historical materials pertaining to the schools.

What happened to labor union records? When organizational continuity was broken up (for example, in the case of the Knights of Labor) educational institutions sometimes inherited the papers. Many records of former labor leaders (such as those of T. V.

Powderly, which got to the Catholic University of America) were considered personal property to be stored in their cellars or attics on retirement and still remain to be found. One may at least surmise that the conservative and antiquarian leanings of some manuscript curators have not made them prize such fairly recent and at least relatively radical records in their paper pillaging. Hence the novelty of the Wisconsin Historical Society's program for gathering local labor records, begun a few years ago in the continuation of the Commons tradition, which brought labor materials of the nonmanuscript type into the library at Madison. Similar trade union materials, such as proceedings, constitutions, and rituals, have been assembled in about half a dozen other American libraries.

The interest in serious labor history has now pushed the search for documentation beyond the printed materials. The caucus of labor historians in Chicago during the meeting of the American Historical Association, December 1953, brought out their concern lest labor records become so much the target of institutional collectors as to end up in faraway places with scarcely-known names. The historians' interest was in ready and easy access to serviced materials; this meant that they would not be distressed if labor organization records went to some such place as the Library of Congress, since research in the field of labor history records leads inevitably to Washington. The objection can be made, however, that this apparent lack of concern for labor records except as they constitute sources of history can be a disservice to organized labor and even to the historian.

The professional archivists and records officers have made their voices heard in the United States. The Federal and State Governments have been persuaded in the last 20 years to take better care of their own records; and industrial firms and religious, educational, and other institutions have begun, with pride in the past and business sense in the present, to service their official noncurrent papers. Why should not organized labor begin at this point rather than go through the phase that American business is now pretty much out of — the phase of putting its records out for adoption? A labor organization with specialized personnel such as statisticians and librarians can certainly afford a trained archivist or records officer.

National headquarters of the A. F. of L. and the C. I. O. fortunately have preserved their records, but that they need professional archivists — or records officers, if you will — to handle their out-

dated materials seems obvious to an outsider. Wise administration — the first reason for archives — as well as the proper keeping of the story of labor's contributions to American life would demand such a step. The same might be said of the international unions. Some of them, such as the United Mine Workers, the United Steelworkers of America, and the International Ladies Garment Workers, are already doing something. The preserving of noncurrent records of locals as well as those of State and municipal federations or councils seems to be haphazardly regulated, if at all.

The Society of American Archivists has for some years shown its interest.¹ The time is ripe for historians too to realize that they also have an interest in showing organized labor the necessity of taking scientific care of its "old paper." It is true that at times even now a union may prefer to turn its records over to a research institution (thus widening research tours for scholars in the future!) or that papers of its former leaders may be considered purely personal and at their own disposition, but the fact remains that a union's noncurrent records should rightly be considered one of organized labor's most valuable possessions. Other social groups in our American society are not asked to part with their record treasures. Why should not unions too be urged and persuaded rather to assume their own responsibilities? In taking care of their own archives they will be showing that mark of maturity which consists of respect for the records of the past; and, incidentally, they will be doing a great service for the historian.

¹ See Paul Lewinson, "The Archives of Labor," in *American Archivist*, 17: 19-24, Jan. 1954.