

State Labor Agencies: Where Are Their Records?

By PAUL LEWINSON¹

National Archives

THERE is a chance for State archivists to do some missionary work on the records of State labor agencies.

When, in January 1953, the Society of American Archivists reactivated its Committee on Labor Records, the committee began to query possible holders of appropriate collections. Among those queried, in this case about holdings of State labor agency records, were all State archivists and their historical-society equivalents who were listed in the Society's directory published in the *American Archivist* of July 1954. Positive replies came in from only eight institutions; negative replies from seven; the rest either did not reply or replied noncommittally.

The Committee therefore assumed that in all but eight States, Territories, and possessions, the local labor agencies (Departments, Commissions, Bureaus, and the like) had retained all of their records (except for those disposed of or lost) — an assumption all the more reasonable since for the most part labor agencies are among the newer appendages of local government. With the help of Federal experts in Washington, the Committee then designed a questionnaire, tailored on the one hand to fit the kinds of records to be expected in such agencies, on the other to get the most information possible without demanding too much of busy officials. This questionnaire was circulated once to 97 agencies (some jurisdictions have more than one agency concerned with labor), and again, as a followup, to 36 that did not reply promptly.

Replies have now been received from 60 agencies (plus one covering a survey made by a State archives), representing 43 States, Territories, and possessions. On the basis of experience thus far, it is possible that a dozen or so more may still be heard from. But some conclusions are permissible from the returns thus far in hand.

The returns are summarized, in part, in Table I of this article. The questionnaire is reprinted as Table II.

¹ The writer is Chief of the Industrial Records Branch of the National Archives and chairman of the Committee on Labor Records of the Society of American Archivists.

Most striking to archivists will be the results from question 6, on records of particular historical interest. In only 15 cases was there any recognition of historical interest in the records covered. In 10 cases it was flatly stated that the records had no historical value, and in 3 others respondents referred to their agencies' published annual (or biennial) reports in an apparent faith that these would meet all needs.

Only 7 agencies, in 5 States, indicated that they had turned records over to an archival institution or historical society. And yet 32 agencies, perhaps including the 7 just mentioned, indicated that they had records in dead storage. Quantities of records reported ran from 1,024 file cabinets plus transfer boxes down to 1 file cabinet; a quick scanning of Table I would seem to make 50 cabinets the median. Some more or less regular disposal is indicated in 18 agencies; one had a destructive fire in 1921. In 7 cases, records are described as substantially incomplete without the assignment of any reason. Twenty-three agencies claim retention of complete or virtually complete documentation; but the dates of the earliest records in agency custody are in some cases later than the founding dates of the agencies or of predecessors. It should be noted, too, that in the case of 6 agencies the earliest records in custody range back to the years from 1884 to 1921 and in 10 more cases to the span 1928-1940.

All this suggests that much early documentation of State labor agencies has evaporated and that more records are being retained in agency custody than are needed for current purposes, save perhaps in some of the largest industrial States. There are obviously many more State labor agency records in dead storage than in archival institutions — not that all of these should be preserved, of course.

The indications of this survey will be distressing to archivists for general professional reasons. There are, however, special reasons for distress in the case of records relating to labor and labor relations.

Other investigations pursued by the SAA labor records committee indicate that archival or manuscript source material in this field is either scarce or well tucked away and not known about. General and special libraries and manuscript depositories have reported much less than might be expected, considering the many years of our history during which labor organizations have existed, labor leaders have operated, and both individual reformers and welfare movements have been active in labor matters. On the employers' side, few business concerns have set up records programs and even

fewer are willing to say anything about their labor records. The labor movement, taken as a whole, probably has a considerable body of documentation — how much and of what nature the committee still has to discover — but with few exceptions will probably be found to be little mindful of it. From a study of the literature of the labor movement being made by the committee, it is already quite apparent that most union histories, labor leaders' biographies, studies of special labor problems, and the like, have been written without reference to (probably without access to) archival and manuscript primary sources.

Meanwhile, in the past two decades government intervention in labor matters, at local as well as at Federal levels, has greatly increased, suggesting the possibility of administrative use of well-ordered labor agency archives. And during the same period, there has been an upsurge of scholarly interest in labor matters, as evidenced by the founding of a number of university-level institutes of labor relations, as at California, Cornell, Illinois, Princeton, and elsewhere.

Under these circumstances, State archivists and their historical-society counterparts would do well to make as much effort as they can to survey the records of State labor agencies and to make provision for their disposition — including both archival preservation of the portion of enduring value and the indispensable disposal of the cluttering remainder. At least this much labor-historical documentation could then be assuredly nailed down, and it is one of the most important parts of the record. While archivists and manuscript curators must deplore the loss of any part of the record, they can still ameliorate a bad situation. This is so because the records of government labor agencies could serve research purposes in place of many other types of primary source materials that — because they are privately created and controlled — are not protected by an official status.

In Table I, 37 State labor agencies are missing. Ten States and one island possession do not appear at all, and among the missing are a number of our most highly industrialized States. The SAA Committee on Labor Records would be especially glad to hear from the archival institutions in the jurisdictions where these gaps exist, about the holdings of the missing agencies.

TABLE I
SUMMARY RETURNS ON RECORDS OF STATE LABOR AGENCIES

<i>State</i> ¹	<i>Agency</i>	<i>Earliest Record</i>	<i>Quantity</i> ²	<i>Disposition</i> ³
Ala.	Dept. Industr. Rel.	1936	1024 c.; bx.	D; T; d. s.
	Dept. Lab.	1951	10 c.	Inc., unkn. cause; d. s.
Alaska	Dept. Lab. & Ind. Bd.	1946	23 c.	V. compl.; D.
Ariz.	Lab. Dept. & Industr. Commr.	1939	10 c., 17 bx.	Compl.; d. s.
Ark.	Wkm. Comp. Cmsn.	1939	277 c.	V. compl.
	Dept. Lab.	1913	20 c.	Inc.; d. s.
Colo.	Industr. Cmsn.	1915	—	V. compl.; d. s.
Conn.	Wkm. Comp. Cmsn.	1913	75 c. + cards	V. compl.
Del.	Industr. Accdt. Bd.	1940	81 cu. ft.; some microf.	Case papers compl.; T; d. s.
	Lab. Cmsn.	1915	10 c., 4 v.	V. compl.
D. C.	Wkm. Comp. Off.	1928	175 c., 1326 bx.	Compl.; d. s.
Fla.	Fed. Medn. Cmsn.	1913	22 c., 1500 cu. ft.	Case papers compl.
Ga.	Wkm. Comp. Div.	1935	106 c., 1288 cu. ft.	D; d. s.
Hawaii	Dept. Lab.	1938	9 c., 7 bx.	D after 7 yr.; d. s.
Idaho	Dept. Lab. & Ind. Rel.	1940	2 c.	Compl.
	Ind. Accdt. Bd.	1949	6 c., 50 v.	V. compl.
Ind.	Div. Lab.	1918	75 c., 676 bx.	Compl.; d. s.
Kans.	Dept. Lab.	—	34 c.	Inc., D and unkn. cause
	Wkm. Comp. Cmsn.	1920	10 c., 12 bx.	Inc., unkn. cause; T.
Ky.	Dept. Ind. Rel.	1947	80 c.	D; T.
Maine	Ind. Accdt. Cmsn.	1916	200 c., 150 bx.	V. compl.; d. s.
	Dept. Lab. & Ind.	—	—	"not historically valuable"
Mass.	Div. Ind. Accdts.	1900	75 c., 30 bx.	V. compl.; D.
Minn.	Ind. Cmsn.	—	—	"have case files"
	Div. Lab. Concl.	—	—	D after 18 and 6 yrs.
Miss.	St. Bd. Health	1939	12 c., 37 bx., 2 v.	Compl.
Mo.	Bd. Medn.	—	—	no labor laws
	Ind. Insptn. Div.	1947	6 c.	Compl.; d. s.
	Dept. Lab. & Ind.	1884	16 c., 25 bx., 27 v.	d. s.
Mont.	Ind. Accdt. Bd.	1939	7 c.	Compl.
	Wkmns. Comp. Ct.	1915	74 c., 990 bx.	D after 10 yrs.
Nebr.	Ind. Rel. Ct.	1917	300 c., 150 bx., 200 v.	D.
		1947	1 c.	Compl.

Nev.	St. Lab. Cmr.	1944	7 c., bxs.	Compl.; d. s.
N. H.	Dept. Lab.	—	—	D after 10 yrs.
N. J.	St. Bd. Medn.	1941	12 c.	D.
N. Mex.	Lab. & Ind. Cmsn.	1931	14 c., 12 bx.	Compl.; d. s.
N. Y.	St. Bd. Medn.	1937	30 c., 100 bx.	D.
	St. Lab. Rel. Bd.	1937	60 c., 40 bx.	D after 6 yrs.
	Wkm. Comp. Bd.	1914	—	D.
N. C.	Dept. Lab.	1923	590 cu. ft. + 15 v.	Estbd. 1887; D & T in preparatn.
N. Dak.	Lab. Div.	1922	9 c.	V. compl.; d. s.
Okla.	Dept. Lab.	1907	—	d. s.
Oreg.	Ind. Acctd. Cmsn.	1914	528 c., 150 bx.	D; d. s.
Pa.	Bur. Medn.	1950	12 c.	Compl.; d. s.
P. R.	Concil. & Arb. Bur.	—	12 c., 48 bx.	Compl.
	St. Insur. Fund	1935	294 c., 250 v.	Compl.; d. s.
R. I.	Dept. Lab.	1952	—	Compl.; "live file"
S. Dak.	Ind. Cmr.	1949	1 c.	Inc.; d. s.
Tenn.	Dept. Lab.	—	—	Inc.; d. s.
Vt.	Dept. Ind. Rel.	1935	200 c.	Compl.; d. s.
Va.	Dept. Lab & Ind.	1952	—	D after 3 yrs.; T.
Vg. Is.	Wkm. Comp. & Wage Adm. Div.	—	—	—
	St. Cr.	1947	4 c.	Compl.; d. s.
	St. Thos.	1942	2 c.	Inc.; d. s.
Wash.	Dept. Lab. & Ind.	—	—	Inc.; d. s.
W. Va.	Wkm. Comp. Fd.	1913	600 c., 3500 v.	Inc.-fire in 1921; d. s.
	Lab. Dept.	1901	40 v.	"Biennial Reports"
Wis.	Ind. Cmsn.	1932	—	Inc.; turned over to ERB.
	Empl. Rel. Bd.	1939	19 c., 8 bx.	Inc.; D.
Wyo.	Wkm. Comp. Dept.	1915	20 c.	Inc.
	Dept. Lab. & Stats.	1917	7 c.	Inc.; T; d. s.

¹ Jurisdictions not reporting: Calif., Guam, Ill., Iowa, La., Md., Mich., Ohio, S. C., Tex., Utah.

² Abbreviations in this column:

bx. = transfer or other box

c. = filing cabinet

v. = bound volume

Compl. = complete

D = disposal(s) (presumably authorized) made

d. s. = some records in dead storage

Inc. = incomplete

T = transfer(s) to archives or historical society made

unkn. = unknown

V. compl. = virtually complete (principal series present in full)

TABLE II
QUESTIONNAIRE: SAA SURVEY OF LABOR RECORDS

1. Agency Name:
- City: State:
2. All our records are IN OUR OWN FILES: ☐ { CHECK ONE ONLY
- Some of our records are IN DEAD STORAGE: ☐ { CHECK ONE ONLY
- Included are records of earlier offices having similar functions: YES ☐ NO ☐ { CHECK ONE ONLY
- Our earliest records are for the year: { GIVE YEAR
3. The kinds of records included are: COMPLETE INCOMPLETE
- | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Correspondence files: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | { CHECK ONE ONLY
<u>SQUARE ONLY</u>
FOR EACH KIND OF RECORD YOU HAVE |
| Office-routine papers (personnel, vouchers, requisitions, etc.): | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Studies, research materials, investigations: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Case papers ("docket files," complaints or charges followed by hearings or other procedures, decisions, rulings): | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Other program papers (placement, apprenticeship, inspection reports, etc.): | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Orders and instructions to staff, policy memoranda, etc.: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Program and work reports (annual, quarterly, etc.; workload, accomplishment, etc.): | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Press releases, speeches of officials, etc.: | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
4. Among the incomplete records, the missing ones are as follows: (Kind as above, period missing, cause)
- { Fire? Given to State Historical Society?
 { Disposed of as useless? Unknown cause?
5. The quantity of records is:
- | | | |
|--|-------|---|
| No. of filing cabinets: | | { Fill in the best or most convenient figures |
| No. of bound papers (letterbooks, etc.; <u>not published material</u>): | | |
| Running feet of shelves: | | |
| No. of boxes, transfer cases, etc.: | | |
- Does this include records in DEAD STORAGE? YES ☐ NO ☐ { CHECK ONE ONLY
6. What records does your agency have that are considered to have SPECIAL HISTORICAL VALUE OR INTEREST? (Examples: Papers of a notable Commissioner, Secretary, labor leader, industrialist, etc.; papers dealing with an important event, as a strike, organizing campaign, law-enforcement drive, passage of legislation, educational campaign, and the like.)

Please describe such groups of records in two or three sentences each: