The Anatomy of Industrial Records

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THE TITLE of this paper is adapted from the radio program of similar name because it clearly points up the problem of how to define labor or industrial records.

Ours is an industrial society, and whatever labor does or does not do affects the entire economy. The same thing could be said of many of the large industrial corporations. Thus, true historians of labor and industry must, as Maurice F. Neufeld has so aptly said, "interrupt their detailed chronicles and design their findings as part of the economic, social, political, intellectual and cultural development of the nation."

The need for a broader view of the entire problem of industrial records and industrial history is pointed up in an article by Thomas L. Berg[1] discussing the inadvertent effects of some union policies on marketing problems. One of Mr. Berg's many illustrations describes the shift from steel to other material that occurred during the long steel strike and resulted in the permanent use of the substitute material. Most meaningful for our purposes, however, is the question his article answers: *Can unions seriously harm our competitive system without actually meaning to?*

The logical corollary of all this is that the archivist must be one step ahead of the historian. I hope I can persuade some of you to look at your records in terms of their value to the labor or industrial historian, who may help us achieve a better understanding of what it was that made us the most prosperous nation in the world, and thereby enable us to aid the underdeveloped countries more intelligently.

In order to illustrate what kinds of records are useful and what some of the problems are in collecting industrial records, I should like to tell you about the Industrial and Labor Relations School's

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[1] "Union Inroads in Marketing Decisions," in *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 40, no. 4, p. 67-73 (July-Aug. 1962).

Labor-Management Documentation Center at Cornell. Then I shall talk of how our records there have been used by faculty and students and suggest some of the things we are doing to encourage the preservation of industrial records.

The late Senator Irving M. Ives, when he was chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Industrial and Labor Conditions in the New York State Legislature, was impressed by the misunderstanding and ignorance about each other that labor and management revealed when the committee was investigating conditions in New York State. He believed that many of our industrial problems could be solved if labor and management had the facts. To provide the facts, he proposed to establish a school patterned after the agricultural schools and offering a three-point program of resident teaching, research, and extension work. Edmund Ezra Day, then president of Cornell University, agreed with him. The legislature was persuaded, and the N. Y. State School of Industrial and Labor Relations was established at Cornell in the fall of 1945. Senator Ives became the school's first dean, and the building recently dedicated bears his name.

The school is unique in that it has a four-year undergraduate program in addition to offering masters' and doctoral degrees. At the present time it has 400 undergraduate and 80 graduate students. In 1945, when the school started, there were required courses in eight fields: personnel administration, human relations, collective bargaining, labor law, labor economics, labor history, social security, and industrial training.

In the spring of 1949 the librarian and two members of the faculty proposed that the library be expanded to cover research materials for classwork. A pilot study proved the proposal practical, and in 1952 the Labor-Management Documentation Center was formally established. The collecting policy of the center was based on the need for research material in each of the eight fields mentioned above.

Cooperation from labor and management, however, was not easy to get. Labor suspected us of being management-oriented, while management believed we were too much of a labor school. One of my first interviews was with a personnel man from whom I hoped to get documentation of a personnel program. He gave me a rough half hour. Why did we think labor and management could be taught in one school? Wouldn't the business school be a better place for management? He'd heard about the liberal professors on our staff—weren't some of our students communist? This went on until I was convinced he would never give us any-thing. Then suddenly he said, "I'm a Cornell man myself. I need someone for my wage and salary administration department. Any suggestions?" Fortunately we had a graduate who met his standards, and we eventually got his records.

Collecting labor records was equally difficult. Thinking that the unions would have no objection to releasing printed materials, we began by asking just for them, but only about ten percent were willing to donate even these. One day I had an appointment with a research director of a large international union, but when I arrived he was busy and I was sent to his assistant. I started to introduce myself, saying, "I'm Lee Eckert, from Cornell University—" when he interrupted me. "Young lady, I have no intention of writing your term paper for you," he said, glaring at me. I was able to persuade him that by putting his material in the library he could eliminate these burdensome requests. Then we were on solid ground, and he became most cooperative. He still is.

One more story about collecting, before I tell you about the use to which the records are put. The railroad unions, considering themselves fraternal organizations and their records to be confidential, asked to be excused. We were, however, collecting transcripts and exhibits from the emergency boards appointed by the President under the Railway Labor Act, for a course in governmental intervention in labor disputes, and we found that the exhibits contained a wealth of historical material on the industry and the unions.

Then, one year, our extension staff arranged an educational conference for the top officers, including the presidents, of the five railroad brotherhoods. One night at dinner they were discussing Eugene Debs, who helped to found the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen. The discussion ended with a bet that James Whitcomb Riley had written a poem on Debs. To prove it, the fireman who made the bet had to produce the poem. When he asked me to find it for him he said it was called "Dem Roses" and had something to do with hay fever. Well, we finally found the poem, but it was called "Dem Flowers" and had been attached to a bouquet Riley had taken to Debs when he was in the hospital. The firemen were so impressed with our ability (and with the extension program, of course) that they soon sent us a huge packing case of their very early constitutions, proceedings, and other records, with the promise of more to come.

These stories emphasize the importance of personal contacts in collecting labor and industrial records. Such contacts are much more important than in some other types of collecting. Union people are suspicious of anyone interested in their activities because of the long period of antagonism through which many of them have lived. Their leaders are so involved with today's problems that they have no time for history. But once they are convinced that their records are useful and will in the long run serve the labor movement, they are very cooperative.

How are the records used? We have been fortunate in obtaining transcripts and exhibits of the emergency boards that have been appointed to resolve the dispute between the airline pilots and the flight engineers. This dispute, because it is concerned with the need for a flight engineer on a jet plane, is similar to an earlier one of the railroads over the question of the need for firemen on diesel engines. One of our students became so interested in the problem that he read all the transcripts and exhibits for the five or six boards to date. This was no mean undertaking: the transcripts for each board run from 500 to 2,500 pages. He also talked to the pilots and flight engineers on the job and to some of the designers of jet planes, and eventually he suggested that certain changes in the arrangement of the panel board would reduce some of the human relations problems in the cockpit.

So that undergraduates may have an opportunity to learn what industry is like, we have a course in production processes, which the students have nicknamed "Bus Riding 1 and 2." Each week the class members take a trip to a factory, mine, or office. For example, they visit the coal mines in Pennsylvania, the railroad yards in Buffalo, and a rope company in Auburn. Each time they are expected to learn something about the plant and industry before they go and to summarize in writing afterward what they have learned. In preparation for this they use the company and union documents we have collected. The students use them also to prepare for interviews for jobs for summer vacation and after graduation.

One of our graduate students became interested in the problem of work rules on the railroads a few years ago as a topic for his Ph.D. thesis. We searched for union proceedings, old agreements, newspaper articles, arbitration awards, and the legislative history of laws that apply to the railroad industry—to mention a few of the items he needed. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers also opened its files to him. When the recent presidential commission began hearings on the dispute over work rules, his thesis was borrowed by one of the unions involved. It was returned this spring with a note from the commissioners telling us how valuable they had found it for their discussions and recommendations on the current controversy. The thesis will be published this spring.

Some labor and industrial records are not so plentiful as, for instance, governmental records. When I went to one of our advisers—a man in the clothing industry—he told me, "Lee, I don't have the kind of records you want. We had a good teacher. Mr. Hillman taught us that if you want to call a man an s. o. b. you don't write a letter, you call him up!" The telephone takes an even greater toll of labor records than it does in other fields.

Unions and companies, it seems to me, are like the Government in classifying as top secret the very information that is leaking out all over the lot. If a company has a personnel policy it must be implemented by management and explained to employees. How secret is a policy that is known to 10,000 employees? Yet all too often we are told that material, potentially useful to students and faculty members interested in personnel administration, is confidential.

Not to mention damage by fire and carelessness, the preservation of union records is made more haphazard by the lack of continuity in administrative officers. The relatively rapid turnover in local union officials means that union records may still be found in the cellars and attics of onetime officers, just as they were when John R. Commons wrote his documentary history of labor.

When we talk about labor records we usually mean the records of organized labor, but organized labor represents only a quarter of the work force. A union leader once told me that he had no intention of trying to organize the International Business Machines Corp. What could a union offer I.B.M. employees? And, conversely, would not organization create problems with the rest of the union membership? How then, can you document the impact of the progressive but unorganized companies on organized labor's policies and procedures, or even on other companies, be they large or small?

In preparation for this paper we did a very unscientific sampling of the kinds of documentary material used by labor historians. We found that the early historians used newspapers more than any other source and that they made many references to other histories. At present greater numbers of historians are using more documentary sources and are creating a demand for documentary material. This brings me to the question of what is being done to provide it.

In 1952 the Council of the Society of American Archivists was asked to appoint a Committee on Labor Records, and it did so under the chairmanship of Paul Lewinson. The purpose of the committee was to discover the existence, location, and nature of labor records in the United States. An article in the *American Archivist* summarizes the work of the committee.[2] As you can see from the table prepared by the committee, labor records have not been well preserved, but the table does provide a useful summary of the areas that need to be cultivated.

In the fall of 1958 Tamiment Institute in New York City held a one-day conference for labor historians, archivists, and librarians interested in labor history. There was formed, as a result of the discussion, the Ad Hoc Committee for the Preservation of Labor Records, under the chairmanship of Robert Hill, keeper of the manuscripts at the New York Public Library; and Tamiment Institute assumed the responsibility for publishing *Labor History*. It was through their joint efforts that the AFL-CIO was persuaded to adopt a resolution encouraging the member unions to deposit their records in universities and archives. The story of the resolution is told in the Winter 1960 issue of *Labor History*.

The ad hoc committee began by asking university libraries in the various geographical regions of the United States if they would be willing to collect and preserve the labor and industrial records in their areas. As Paul Buck observed in his address at the dedication of the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, the concept that only one library (or archives) can cover all records is outmoded and coordinated decentralization is necessary. This we are trying to promote, so that industrial records may be preserved not only for the historian but for the practitioner as well.

Much remains to be done. The ad hoc committee is now working on the preparation and distribution of a leaflet that can be given to unions, listing the cooperating institutions and the steps to be taken in preserving or depositing union records in an institution.

George Brooks, in his paper before the Industrial Relations Research Association in December 1961, emphasizes the need for tapping new sources of information if the labor historian is to explain the fundamental changes going on within industrial relations and the labor movement. Essential decisions are being made that by their very nature cannot be a matter of record. One of those untapped sources may well be State and local records that reflect the results of those unrecorded decisions. Won't you take a second look at your records to see whether they could be of use, and won't you help to make them available?

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[2] Paul Lewinson and Morris Rieger, "Labor Union Records in the United States," in *American Archivist*, 25: 39-57 (Jan. 1962).