Gondos Award

The Sources of Labor History: Problem and Promise

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THE recently evidenced interest in the documentary resources of American labor history presages a growing awareness of the need to preserve and to open labor union archives.[1] Historical and archival attention, presumably, will focus on the general-headquarters files of international (national) unions. Logically, this is sound. But suppose national-headquarters records should be unavailable, incomplete, or even nonexistent? The researcher either sullenly retires, perhaps never to return to this field, or he does as I did and turns to the uncommon sources of information on labor activity. My concern here is with these hidden or, if you prefer, less publicized sources. The incidents and persons mentioned in this article are drawn from my research experience among industrial unions conceived and organized during the depression era.

Union records have been lost, removed, misplaced, scattered about, and even purposely destroyed.[2] This is unfortunate, but it is a condition that has existed or does exist in almost every Amer-

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[1] See Leone W. Eckert, "The Anatomy of Industrial Records," in *American Archivist*, 26: 185-190 (Apr. 1963); Paul Lewinson and Morris Rieger, "Labor Union Records in the United States," in *American Archivist*, 25: 39-57 (Jan. 1962); O. L. Harvey, "Inventory of Department of Labor Archives," in *Labor History*, 4: 196-198 (Spring 1963); Francis Gates, "Labor Resources in the University of California Libraries," in *Labor History*, 1: 196-205 (Spring 1960); J. G. Miller, "Labor Resources in the Cornell University Libraries," in *Labor History*, 1: 319-326 (Fall 1960); Vaughn D. Bornet, "The New Labor History: A Challenge for American Historians," in *The Historian*, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 1-24 (Autumn 1955).

[2] D. F. Shaughnessy, "Labor in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University," in *Labor History*, 1: 177 (Spring 1960).

ican labor union. In recent years such actions have taken place most frequently among those unions that organized the mass production industries during the 1930's—the automobile, electrical, rubber, steel, and textile unions. The loss, removal, or destruction of labor records stems in part, I believe, from the inherently dynamic character of the labor movement itself. The abnormal activity usually concomitant with a union's growing period does not permit much concern or time for such ordinary tasks as record-keeping. Even when its ascendancy is guaranteed and it can enjoy a more leisurely existence, the union frequently will continue to neglect this responsibility. An international-union officer, in response to a question I asked him about the retention of records, revealed that during the five-year organizing drive of his union the staff members were required to preserve only financial data. If other types of records were retained during this period, it was obviously the result of individual effort, not of procedural policy. If there was or is no program of records control, then archives will almost certainly disappear.

Let me explain the difficulty of locating records never subject to any form of control. I once began a discussion with an administrative officer of one of the most powerful unions in the country by trying to make clear to him what I meant by "record," "document," and "archive." Some unionists have only a vague conception of the meanings of these terms. The word "archive" may convey absolutely nothing; "record" and "document" are accepted as references to trade journals, convention proceedings, the authorized union history, or other published material. After this struggle in semantics, we passed on to the reason for my visit—establishing the whereabouts of union records created between 1935 and the beginning of World War II. Before I reconstruct our conversation, let me say that the officer was genuinely interested in my search and went out of his way to be of assistance, giving me the better part of what might have been a busy afternoon. This is what transpired:

UNION OFFICER: Hmm, [*looking thoughtfully at me*] I wonder what did become of all that early stuff. Let me call around. [*Picks up the telephone and asks for an extension.*] . . . Ralph, I have a young man here who is interested in a historical study of our organizing days. He talked with Lou in New York and Lou told him to come and see me. [*Short pause.*] Yeah, [*in a softer voice*] he's okay. He wants to examine correspondence, memos, reports—you know, anything that's not published. Yes, anything before the war. Any idea where those things are now? [*Long pause.*] Uh huh, I see. Well, I'll call her. Thanks, Ralph. [*To me.*] He is fairly certain all our records for that period

were sent over to ———— University. But he thought I ought to check with the boss's secretary. Come to think of it, I remember seeing a lot of old cartons full of records in his office about a year or so ago. [*Picks up the telephone again.*] . . . Helen, whatever happened to the boss's early records, his personal correspondence, that sort of thing? [*Pause.*] I see. You're sure? Yes, thanks. [*To me again.*] She said everything went to ———— University the year before last.

I knew of this transfer: indeed, I had already examined the records but had found nothing dated before 1942. My examination had been especially careful because the university's press release issued at the time of accession had led me to believe that it included all the early records of the union.

When I told this union administrator that I believed that certain material had been excluded from the deposit, he agreeably questioned two other persons about the records. Both corroborated the belief that all early records were at the university. I was fairly convinced that this information was given me in good faith, but for my own satisfaction I made a subsequent inquiry by other methods. The answer was the same. A significant segment of this union's general files, I was forced to conclude, had to be put down as "whereabouts unknown." To the best of my knowledge, they are still missing. Naturally, their hoped-for discovery would fill a decided void; yet I no longer treat their absence as the calamity I initially supposed such a loss would be. The somber disclosure of missing records simply urged an alternative course. I describe this approach so that historians and archivists may find it useful and so that they may judge the value of the unusual sources of labor history.

Unexpectedly, it was my union conferee who encouraged, with a well-directed shove, my continuing the search. "Say! Why don't you go out and talk to some of our district men?" He was suggesting that a visit to the district directors, armed with his recommendation, might find their record holdings open for examination. Following this suggestion, I learned a rather surprising thing. Four district directors could boast uninterrupted control in their bailiwicks dating back to the day of organization. Their respective incumbencies from 1935 held out the promise of complete files, undisturbed by either change or time. Admittedly, the files of a district—jurisdiction ranges from one large industrial area to three or more States—only thinly substitute for the general-headquarters records of a national union. In evaluating them, the archivist merely begins to perceive the varieties and complexities of the overall condition. But if he studies the records of one district in each region

(the intermediate rung of the union hierarchy), he may come to comprehend the pattern and direction of national union policy. Obviously, then, the labor archivist charged with the accessioning of national-headquarters records should survey district holdings to determine their supplemental value.

In the district office one may expect to find correspondence with the national headquarters, the regional headquarters, other districts, and the district "locals," including directives and reports. The district records may also include the personal correspondence of the district director, copies of collective bargaining agreements with companies within the district, and copies of legal and research memoranda. Usually, district files will *not* be found to contain copies of the correspondence of national officers and their staffs with regional directors and their staffs, or of the correspondence of national officers with Federal or State governments, private corporations, and other labor unions. Similarly, the memoranda and reports emanating from the research director, general counsel, publicity officer, and staff economist of national headquarters are *not* usually present in district files. Yet, an exhaustive search of district records is the first step toward minimizing the adverse effect of missing or otherwise ravaged headquarters archives.

The gap can be filled in other ways. Some professional labor unionists are punctilious keepers of the papers they accumulate privately. Usually the files they preserve reflect their personal roles in dramatic or notable undertakings; for this reason, their holdings are likely to be small in size and narrow in scope. Occasionally, however, private archives effectively document the activity of a highly placed individual who, over a period of years, was immersed in nearly every kind of union activity. The researcher needs only to inquire about these sources—persistence and tact should produce the records.

One should not, of course, buttonhole union officers and staff men with blunt demands to examine their personal papers. Appear before your subject in the role of an honest interviewer. After establishing rapport—not so difficult in most cases, for the unionist is likely to be delighted by your interest in him—casually explore the matter of records. He may offer the information you need without your prodding him. One labor representative, suspicious until he satisfied himself of my serious intent, ended the discussion by thrusting three thick folders into my hands with only the mild admonition to return them in a few weeks. A study of these folders disclosed excellent background material on old National Labor

Relations Board cases, copies of early collective bargaining agreements, and notes on the labor practices of various corporations. As another example, a college graduate who had become a labor organizer in the mid-1930's lent me copies of his early correspondence with former classmates and professors—letters that take one puffing behind a fast-stepping organizer as he carries the gospel of solidarity to dreary, soot-stained towns of the Beaver Valley.

No possibility of filling the gaps in labor history by the use of private papers, then, should be overlooked. The finds can range from the collection of an amateur photographer whose work is known to have appeared occasionally in a union newspaper, to the papers of a former union official, to the records of a former staff lawyer—all typical of the possibilities I have explored. In short, the archivist who is invited to organize the records of a national union should make inquiries, with the union's concurrence, designed to ferret out personal archives that are closely related to those of the union.

I have discussed the hazard of missing records with the intention of prescribing a partial remedy. Another disconcerting void that will always beset the labor researcher might be described as "the record that was never created." The telephone call, the verbal order, the informal conference—these have conspired to rob the historian of his due.

The Reverend Charles Owen Rice, who has spent a lifetime championing the cause of unionism, ruefully remarked to me not long ago that he does not possess a single record relating to his early labor activities. If any researcher wishes to reconstruct and assess Father Rice's contribution to the founding of the Catholic Radical Alliance, his organizing odyssey through the iron and coal towns of Ohio and Pennsylvania, and his training of United Electrical Workers in hard-headed anti-Communist techniques, he must depend on other than documentary sources. For the labor researcher specializing in the modern period, therefore, the interview often stands as the main source of information. Though this is occasionally impracticable for the interviewer and often repetitious for the respondent, there are hundreds of men such as Father Rice who in some measure have helped to shape the course of modern unionism. We need their oral memoirs.

Here is an example of the possibilities of oral history in the labor field. John Brophy, who died this spring, probably left little in the way of written evidence of his more than sixty years as a coal digger, labor organizer, United Mine Worker vice president, and

C.I.O. official. A top echelon labor unionist, Brophy was never a headliner or a "personality." He might easily have passed off the stage into historical obscurity. Fortunately, the staff of the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University recognized Brophy's contribution and invited him to participate in their project. An interrogator skillfully drew from the old miner his reminiscences, impressions, and opinions of American labor and its leaders. The tape recording when transcribed filled four thick binders containing nearly a quarter of a million words. No study of the C.I.O. or its component unions made today can pretend to thoroughness if the Brophy oral memoir does not appear in its bibliography.

Columbia University—the trailblazer in this field—the University of California (Berkeley), and Wayne State University are three institutions whose oral history programs have recorded the memoirs of a large number of men involved in and conversant with the labor movement. One major international union, evidently prompted by the success of these universities, has set up its own oral history project. Yet it remains for unions, archives, and other universities in all sections of the country to establish such programs. Historians and archivists who profess an interest in labor history should help shoulder the burden of organization. What can historians and archivists do? They certainly can serve as propagandists—and "agitation," as the unionist would remind you, can be a powerful instrument. Once a program is underway, the labor historian and the archivist can perform the necessary research and interview chores. For the archivist, participation in such a program could be a unique experience; he would help to create records he might be called upon someday to preserve.

For those who contemplate establishing an oral history program, a few words of advice. Do not restrict the list of candidates to the national officer or the labor "personality." Emphasize, if you wish, the candidate who has influenced demonstratively the development of American unionism, but do not exclude the lesser, even the insignificant, figures. Their admittance should give depth and perspective to our knowledge and evoke a spirit of our times.

Labor archivists and historians should record the experiences of the employees who stubbornly "sat down" in Flint and in Akron. We ought to interview the organizers who propagated the faith in the sprawling shops at Dearborn and River Rouge, then hear the men charged with keeping them out of the shops. We might persuade the workers to discuss job conditions, union impact, in-

dustrial democracy, and a host of related topics. The professional unionist is another infrequently tapped spring. His knowledge and experience in a particular function mark him as an expert. In this category would be the administrative assistant, the district director, the legal advisor, the local business agent, the legislative representative, the staff economist, the publicity officer, and the research director. From these specialists we can learn strike strategy, union response to automation, the value of economic sanctions, the subtleties of contract negotiation, and the problems of industrial democracy. Interest in their oral history candidacy, I predict, will strike a responsive note. In the hands of a deft, pleasant interrogator, the initial apprehension of the respondent will give way gradually to easy discussion. His responses will become less studied, more opinionated, as candor replaces caution.

The reaction of the employer to unionism is important, too. Invite the corporation officer, industrial relations manager, works superintendent, and shop foreman to voice their experiences and opinions. Their agreement to talk may be won only through persistence. Management's spokesmen are often disinclined to dredge up what they believe to be the unhappy past. Finally, this list should include the individuals who speak of labor but not for labor: social workers, newspapermen, economists, clergymen, lawyers, and mediators.

Any essay on sources of labor history must consider the mass of documentation created by the Federal Government in its official response to unionism. This response—as law enforcer, mediator, conciliator, and mindful observer—is reflected in the records of the Department of Labor, the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, the National Labor Relations Board, the Office of Production Management, the Maritime Labor Board, and the National War Labor Board. That such records supplement union holdings is generally known. What may not be fully understood is that the records of the Federal Government can represent the most thorough and authoritative source of information on union activity. That is to say, labor's past sometimes is best reconstructed from nonlabor sources.

The value of Federal labor relations records is shown, for example, by the case of the strike at the Lackawanna (New York) Works of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation. In the early winter of 1941 this plant was in the throes of a bitter union recognition strike. As it turned out, the strike was a success, and within a few days all of the Bethlehem empire recognized the Steel Workers

Organizing Committee. Bethlehem's capitulation touched off a chain reaction that swept into the union camp the remaining steel company holdouts. Lackawanna, then, had become a milestone on the road to industrial unionism. Historical milestones demand interpretation, but my examination of the usual sources—in this case union files, participants, and newspapers—left too many unanswered questions. Some of the answers were found somewhat unexpectedly in the files of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. The Service, in the person of Commissioner of Conciliation Thomas Finn, had been at Lackawanna some weeks before the strike actually broke out. Commissioner Finn did not stop the strike, but he did leave a detailed report of what he tried to do and the reaction evoked by his efforts. His "at the scene" account, frequently punctuated with the verbatim responses of both parties, has an authentic ring.[3] Finn appears to have been one of those rare witnesses—the credible observer who carefully records what he hears and sees.

The most reliable written evidence of labor activity in this instance was located in a nonunion source. The records of the Federal Government are one such source. Union or labor activity may be revealed in certain records created by State and municipal governments, political organizations, humanitarian and church groups, business corporations, and unaffiliated individuals.

The labor archivist should discover whether any of these sources complement his own holdings. His knowledge of nonunion archival collections that reflect labor activity will permit him to point out the road to the less experienced among his researchers.

[3] Case files 190-17C, 199-5824, and 199-5824-1, records of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, National Archives, Record Group 280.