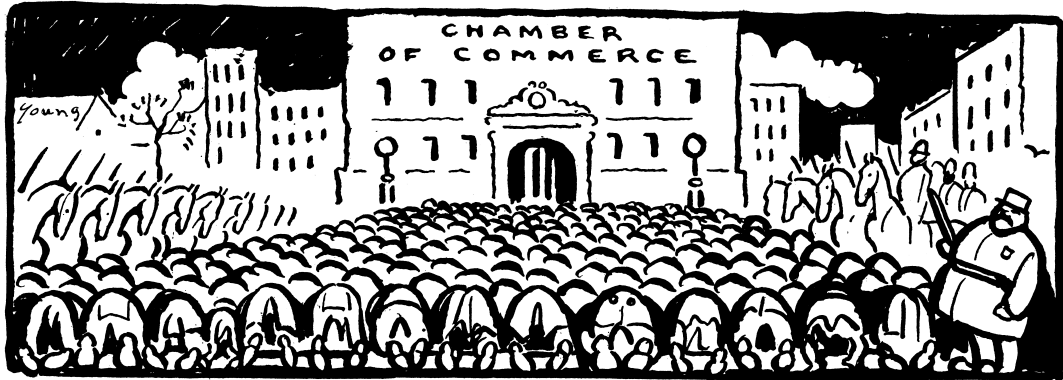


# Taking Stock of American Labor

By SCOTT NEARING



I. P. E. U. 624

**D**URING more than six weeks I have been traveling through the country—going as far west as Denver and as far south as Mexico—visiting a new city or town nearly every day, and during those weeks I had an excellent opportunity to come into first-hand contact with all kinds of people in all types of industrial districts. I met them, talked with them, listened to their stories and came away with some pretty clear impressions—superficial ones, of course, but none the less emphatic.

Business is bad throughout the country. With the exception of the southwest, where high-priced cotton and newly-discovered oil have helped to save the day. Business is very bad, and there is no indication that there will be an early resumption.

The present economic system is so organized that there must be a buyer with money or credit in his hands, before goods are produced or released from the warehouses. The streets of a city may be filled with barefooted children, but no shoes will be made until the children get money with which to buy them. It is purchasing power, therefore, that is the fuel of industry.

## Havoc in the Labor World

**P**URCHASING power in the United States, measured in money terms, has been cut nearly in half during the past fifteen months. The resulting devastation in the business world may be easily imagined.

The same catastrophe which has bowled over the prosperity of the world of business has played havoc with the world of labor. How could it be otherwise when the world of labor depends upon the world of business for the opportunity to earn its daily bread?

The farmers—a third of the workers of the country—must pay high prices for the things that they buy, while they are offered low prices for the goods that they have to sell. The result is that they are storing their grain, as far as they can, in anticipation of a rise in price, while, as one of them put it, “we do not go to town because we might see something that we would want to buy.” So the rural towns are dead, while the farmer, dismissing the hired man, goes out into the field to husk

his own corn—perhaps for the elevator; perhaps for the stove.

The industrial workers are equally hard hit. Unemployment is rife everywhere, but particularly in those regions which depend for their industrial activity upon the demand for some form of machinery—engines, automobiles, farm equipment and the like. At all points there have been wage cuts, and part-time work is quite general in all of the important industries. Rents have not decreased greatly. Prices are reduced on some articles, but for the most part the worker is facing the winter on a far lower income level than that of the past few years.

There was a characteristic situation in Cleveland when I went to speak for a church forum. The Sunday that I was there the Cleveland Plain Dealer contained two pages of ads, listing houses and apartments for rent. Men were taking jobs at two dollars a day, and there were advertisements for labor at fifteen cents an hour. “Are many of the men in your church out of work?” I asked the man in charge of the forum. “We have fifteen trustees,” he replied. “At the moment, eleven of them are looking for jobs.” In a neighboring town I talked with a mechanic who had had eleven weeks of work in the past ten months. He had invested his last six dollars in silk stockings which he proposed to sell “among the swells.”

There were some of the smaller industrial cities in which there was no factory or shop running on full time, and in some of which there were none of the important plants running at all. In these places the outlook was as dark as it had been at any time in their history, and yet the attitude of the men was the same everywhere.

## Air Full of Promises

**Y**ES,” said the machinist in a town on the Mississippi, “all three of the shops here are closed at the moment, but they are going to open up again in a couple of months. Wages must come down, I suppose. They are already cut nearly in half.”

The air was full of promises of resumption. In many instances, the resumption was scheduled to take place as

## LABOR AGE

soon as the men were willing to accept the posted reductions in wages and the open shop. There were no strikes in progress—just a tacit agreement to try it out and see who could stand it the longest.

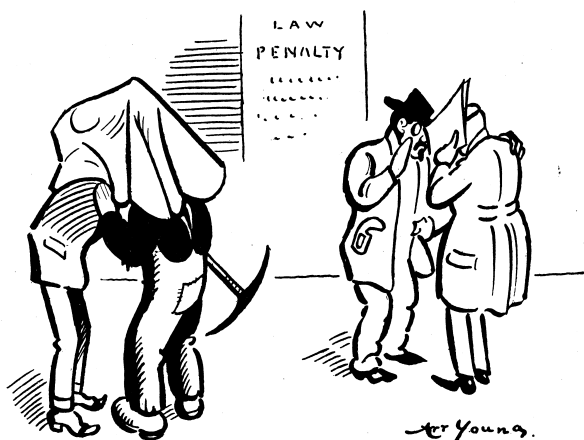
"No, I don't look for any wage cut," said a conductor on the Santa Fe.

"Yes, we are running light tonight," he replied, in answer to a question. If this is all the business we do on these through trains, what must it be like on the smaller roads. Things will pick up, though."

The same tone of optimism pervades the labor world that is to be found in the business world. "This thing will hardly last over the spring," they say.

### Unions Hard Hit

**M**EANWHILE, there is a heavy loss in the union membership. In one city where the industries were fairly stable, the membership in the machinists' union had dropped from 1,300 to 600. In some of the Ohio automobile towns the membership in the same union had fallen to a fifth of its 1920 proportions. The opinion among the union officials seemed



Discussing "Radical" Ideas in America, 1922

to be that the unions were losing their war-time gains.

The unions are still thinking in terms of craft organization and internal politics. Their loudest utterance is a hunger cry, and their watchword, in a pinch, "I won't play!"

The Santa Fe conductor was discussing the rail strike then under consideration in Washington. "I never could see what interest we have in their affairs, anyway," he said, referring to the trainmen. "Let them fight their own battles." A few days later his elected representatives in Washington and Chicago conferences echoed practically the same words.

The war has come and the war has gone, but the labor organizations of the United States are still the labor organizations of the United States—the same yesterday, today, and, so some of them seem to believe, forever.

Of course, there are the radical members and the radical officials, who, like Howat, of the Miners, are willing to go to the mat on what they believe to be their rights. But they are very few and far between, at least in the

realm of officialdom. That was pretty clearly demonstrated in the case of Howat—voted down in the Miners' Convention; later deposed by Lewis as President of the Kansas District, all the time that he was under sentence, and after the convention, actually in prison for the crime of calling a strike.

The living standards of the workers are being steadily beaten down through unemployment, wage cuts and short time. Union membership is dwindling. The open shop campaign, carried on in all parts of the country has resulted in the disruption of more than one organization. What the chambers of commerce did not do through their publicity and the activity of their industrial spies, the State and Federal governments have done through the use of the constabulary and the injunction. The workers still cling to their craft organizations, and hope that things will pick up after the wage cuts are all made. The world of labor is organized less than 20 per cent; the world of business is organized about 90 per cent, and the members of the rival organizations think and act accordingly.

### "A Rubber Tree in the Dakotas"

**R**ADICALISM is about as much at home in the Middle West as a rubber tree is at home on the Dakota prairies—not because of the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan. It simply isn't there.

Of course, there are exceptions in this general rule, but the attitude of the people is summed up in the one word, "acquiescence."

I picked the word up in Texas, on the last train that ran over the International and Great Western before the strike of the trainmen took place. The situation was rather tense, and I was trying to get a correct view of the motives that lay back of the strike, so I spent a great deal of time talking to the railroad men that I met. All were guarded. In fact, no one in Texas discusses public questions above a stage whisper. Finally, I found the brakeman of our train sitting in the smoking car, so I sat down beside him and asked him why the trainmen were going out before the rest of the crafts.



Capital 90%, Labor 20% Organized

The trainman turned to me and said: "Friend, there is a law on the books of Texas called the Open Port Law. It was passed during the big dock strike last year. Under that law, if we talk over the strike in a public place, we are both liable to be sent to jail for conspiracy."

The man was about thirty. His face was keen, and he spoke with a precision that showed a grasp of the thing that he was talking about, so I decided to go on with the conversation.

"I am a newspaper man," I told him. "So I want to get a straight story on the strike." I showed him my press card.

### "T. N. T."

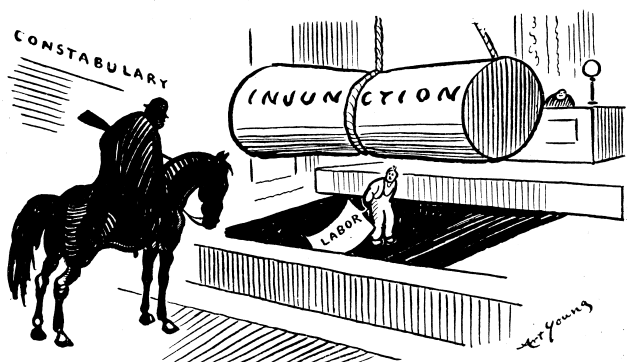
HE read the card carefully, and examined it to see whether it were authentic. Then he asked: "Do you write for the New York Call?" I told him that I did. "That is where I have seen your name," he said. "Well, I am glad to meet you," and we shook hands. A revolutionist, carrying T. N. T. could scarcely have proceeded more cautiously in an identification than did these two Americans before they could talk about the one subject that was the common topic of conversation in that community.

Having satisfied himself that I was neither a government agent nor a company spy, the trainman talked freely about the causes of the strike, which he understood very well. He was a little ill at ease while we were talking. Although we were sitting at one end of an almost empty car, he kept turning to see that no one was coming up from behind. After giving an excellent picture of the strike situation, and scoring the railroad men for their failure to develop a feeling of solidarity higher than their feelings of craft, he described his personal life. He had been a Socialist for many years, and had taken an active part in an effort to start a radical paper in San Antonio. Then the war struck the country, playing havoc with his plans. At about the same time his wife was taken sick, and she had since remained in delicate health.

### "I Acquiesce"

I HAVE learned that acquiescence is a great word," he said. "I acquiesce. Of course I don't believe in what is going on, but what can one man or a handful do against the whole town, backed by the power of the state and the business interests? If you have ideas, and express them, you're just bound to get into trouble, and in my present position, with a sick wife on my hands, I can't afford trouble, so I acquiesce."

This does not mean that people are not thinking radically. The country is full of men and women who see what is going on, and who are bitterly against it, but



Trapped

when it comes to joining a radical organization, subscribing to a radical paper, or even going to a radical meeting, they think twice, and then usually acquiesce.

The sanest spirit that I found was that of the men with whom I spoke in Leavenworth. They have not abated their zeal; their visions are as keen as ever, but they realize that the tactics of 1912 will not win points in 1921. They face five, ten, twenty years in the penitentiary, but they are bright, hopeful, and in dead earnest.

The radicalism in the Middle West is under men's hats. How much is there of it? No one can say. When chance gives an opening, one finds it on all sides, but to date it remains acquiescent. Meanwhile, the business interests and their representatives are doing everything in their power to throttle it.

Radicalism does not find a congenial atmosphere in the valley of the Mississippi. Labor is being broken by the ferocious attacks of the business interests. There is a tacit understanding, almost everywhere, that the Chambers of Commerce and the Boards of Trade are, for the time being at least, the guardians of private as well as of public morality. These facts stand out against the background of hard times that one meets on the farm as well as in the town.

