

Labor's Future Foreshadowed in Labor's Past
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Thank you, Hermann Nehls. We are all in your debt for the important work you have done here in Washington and this gives us an opportunity to express our thanks before your return to Germany. It is also an honor to be with you this evening, President Stephenson, and with you former Senator Tom Harkin, so long a great friend to workers and the labor movement. It is a privilege to be here in such an auspicious place to mark such an important moment.

As we gather here on this rooftop, with the spectacular vista of a capital city before us, our eyes are naturally drawn to the horizon – and we are thus more acutely conscious of exactly where we stand. The setting is fitting, for in a very real way we stand at such a vantage point in the history of our movement. From this vantage point, if we choose, we are able to look back over the long history of struggle that has brought us to this point, and, having done so, we are able to gather our bearings for the road that lies ahead.

As we do this, it is important that we remember that the story that brings us together in this place this night began more than a century ago. On May 1, 1886, 131 years ago today, something happened that would have been unimaginable only six months earlier. A labor movement that had been totally wiped out not once but twice over the previous half century, experienced a sudden and unexpected revival. Unions sprang up in a host of trades, a national union called the Knight of Labor suddenly grew to be the largest organization American workers had produced in the entire 19th century, and workers began agitating for an 8-hour workday. Their demand was *for more* than simply time off from work. It symbolized something much deeper: a demand for full citizenship and a democratic voice in shaping an economy that was creating enormous gains in productivity, disrupting traditional economic structures, and creating vast fortunes for some, misery and exclusion for others. When those strikers raised the famous cry of “8 hours for work, 8 hours for rest, 8 hours for what we will,” they were asserting something crucial about the place of work in a good society: the economy was meant to serve people, people were not made to serve the economy. In demanding “8 hours for what we will,” they were demanding space for life, for family, for leisure, for reading, for self-improvement, and, most of all, time to be full, participatory citizens. The workers of 1886 knew that as long as they remained tethered to jobs that occupied them 10 or 12 hours a day, they would never have the time to be politically informed and active. They knew their victory then was not only good for their health and for their families’ welfare, it was also essential to the health and welfare of a democratic society.

Their vision was deemed radical by their employers, who fought to break their strikes. In some places their resistance to those 1886 strikes was fierce, as at the McCormick Reaper Works in Chicago, where police fired on strikers, killing two, on May 3, and leading to a massive rally the next day in Chicago’s Haymarket Square, a rally that precipitated conflict between workers and the police and triggered a massive crackdown which left the labor movement reeling and on the defensive across the United States. In the chaos that followed the “Haymarket Affair,” the United States experienced its first “red scare.” The Knights of Labor collapsed, amid the

backlash but labor as a whole survived. Within months the tottering Knights of Labor was replaced by the new American Federation of Labor, which in turn helped give birth to organizations like this one, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (which was founded 5 years later). It would take many years, though, before the vision born in 1886 – of the 8-hour work day, of workers empowered as citizens would take root. Not until the New Deal of the 1930s would workers win what was fought for in the strikes of 1886.

Over the intervening years, U.S. labor lost touch with the story of 1886. Ironically, it was better remembered outside the United States than within. At its founding meeting in Paris in July 1889, the International Socialist Congress – the Second International – designated May 1 as the international worker’s day, explicitly recognizing the US strikes of 1886, the Haymarket martyrs, and the ongoing struggle for the 8-hour day. But what the rest of the world remembered, the U.S. movement chose to forget. Over time, it shied away from recognizing May 1, fearful of associating itself too closely with the “radical immigrant terrorists” who were blamed for the Haymarket Riot. Instead, the American movement lobbied to have the first Monday in September recognized as a US workers’ holiday, and in 1894 America’s Labor Day was created.

If the American roots of May 1 as a workers’ holiday were forgotten over the years, in recent years there have been efforts to recover that lost past here in the United States. Massive protests by U.S. immigrants on May 1, 2006, began that recovery process. That process continues today. Today here in DC and elsewhere around the country workers and their unions have joined hands with immigrants who are seeking their rights in marches and protests. Today’s actions remind us that the problems facing the labor movement today in fact closely eerily resemble those that labor faced 131 years ago when the 8 hour strikers first took to the streets: an economy undergoing rapid change; globalization moving goods and people around as never before; courts utterly unresponsive to the needs of working people and their efforts to organize, seemingly determined to block any significant effort to empower workers collectively; fear of immigrant radicalism on the rise, whipped up in many cases by irresponsible scare mongers; growing inequality – vast fortunes for the few on the one hand and growing indebtedness of the many on the other hand – both major political parties lacking clear national policies that would ensure that the productivity gains generated by new technologies would be shared between capital and labor.

Indeed, what we face today is not all that different from what workers confronted in 1886: whereas their economy was being transformed by electricity, steam engines, and the beginnings of mass production, ours is being transformed by the computer, the container ship, and artificial intelligence; whereas their era of globalization saw the birth of the first transnational corporations and attracted immigrants for southern and eastern Europe to the US, our era of globalization has seen people, goods, and capital flow across borders as never before; whereas their era saw government lag in its response to the needs of workers; so does ours. And whereas their era precipitated a crisis within the labor movement, so too is that true of our era.

There is no doubt that the labor movement today faces a deeper threat than it has seen since the very depths of the Great Depression. Unions are under assault everywhere. The Wagner Act, which helped to revive labor in the 1930s and provided the foundation for a prosperous working class in the post-WWII era, is now one of the oldest labor relations laws in the world and no longer able to effectively protect workers’ rights in an economy that has changed radically since it was enacted in 1935. Public sector workers who gained collective bargaining rights in the 1960s and 1970s are beginning to see them stripped away. Indications are that the

current administration cares little for the future of organized labor; reports are that the administration is considering a union-busting attorney – Minneapolis attorney Doug Seaton – for a seat on the National Labor Relations Board. Rules adopted by the previous administration – such as the overtime rule – are being reversed or held up in court.

Although the IBEW has held its own amid this brewing crisis, the larger labor movement has been less successful in doing so. Only 6 percent of private sector workers in the US are now in unions. For the first time, the question of the survival of this movement as a significant force in American life is truly in question. There is no denying the depth of the crisis.

It is a serious crisis, and yet it is not unprecedented. In that, I would argue, there is significant reason for hope. Workers and their movement have faced similar moments of crisis and reconstitution before. Indeed, one such moment arrived 131 years ago today.

Therefore, it is fitting that the reconstruction of today's movement draws energy and encouragement from a re-consecration of this day. The reconstruction of the movement today must be rooted in the values and the expansive vision of the workers whose struggles began this story more than a century ago. It must give rise to efforts of workers, native born and immigrant, to reach out to each other and build solidarity, as we have seen today. It must give rise to efforts by workers of many nations to reach out to each other in encouragement and solidarity as well. That is why it is so appropriate that this event tonight is cosponsored by the German embassy and why it is so good to see so many of you who work on international labor issues here tonight. Let us not forget that Germans and other immigrants played a key role in the struggles of 1886 in the United States. And let us remember that German workers and the organized workers of other nations must again play a key role today in the struggle against right wing populism and nihilistic nationalism that now threatens Europe. It important to acknowledge the transnational nature of workers' struggles as they unfolded in 1886 and as they continue to unfold today. In the world of the 21st century, we will not see labor movements revived in the United States without a parallel revival in Europe and across the world. Our fates are truly tied together now, and the recovery of May 1 as a workers' day in the United States, as we are doing through this event, is an important way of honoring that reality.

And so, on this special evening, with the panorama of this capital city before us, it is important that we remember the history of the long struggle that brought us to this point and those whose sacrifices made our unions possible. And as we remember them, let us rededicate ourselves to the cause of 1886, a cause that will serve as our beacon in the 21st century: an economy that serves people and gives workers time “for what they will,” time to build a world of democracy, equality, and solidarity.