

experience that labor historians continue to document in rich detail by integrating a more precise understanding of the interplay of corporate power, state intervention, and political reform with class forces in different periods. For the moment, at least, we have not moved very far down the paths of alternative syntheses. Yet the conference call, for all of its ambiguity, and the reappearance of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin as a center stage for labor historians to present their work, suggested the possibility for more.

## The Formation of Labor Movements, 1870–1914: Comparative Perspectives

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Few conferences have had foundations as well-laid as that held at Alkmaar, The Netherlands, May 31–June 2, 1990. The sponsor, the International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, had coordinated and distributed to delegates twenty-seven national case studies of developing labor movements<sup>1</sup> as a basis for discussion and for the formulation of comparative research proposals, which delegates submitted prior to the conference.

The conference opened by considering trends in labor history. Formal reports for the major nations were presented by John Saville and Richard Price, Britain; Shelton Stromquist and David Montgomery, United States; Yves Lequin and Jean-Paul Burdy, France; Bruno Naarden, Soviet Union; Klaus Tenfelde, Germany. These elicited a good deal of somber stocktaking, especially during informal discussions; a number of delegates joined Klaus Tenfelde in describing the “crisis” in labor history. Many concerns found expression: a steady decline in the proportion of workers in the population; the distaste associated with labor history in Eastern Europe; ebbing student interest elsewhere; a weakening infrastructure, with declining funding, few jobs, and a weak book market; the fragmentation of inquiry that artificially divides labor, gender, ethnic, and racial studies; the limitations of purely local studies; and the lack of new methodologies and uncertainties about new directions.

On the second day, the conference moved to issues of comparative history, with two examples of analysis and two of methodology. Friedrich Lenger (FRG) compared class formation in its artisanal phase (which ended between 1850 and 1880) in England, the United States, France, and Germany. Analyzing occupational traits (especially among tailors, shoemakers, and cabinetmakers) and the presence or absence of guild or other artisanal corporative influence, Lenger challenged the notion of a common development of labor movements. Viewing the

capitalist as an unproductive middleman, artisans saw producers' cooperatives as the chief remedy in the mid-nineteenth century. But uniformity of diagnosis does not imply uniformity of response. The subsequent development of organized labor reflected differing legacies. On the continent, for example, internal divisions within artisanal groups, organized mainly away from the work site, joined with state pressures to prevent the establishment of craft unions as viable as those in England and the United States. Wayne Thorpe (Canada) invoked a multifactor explanation for the international emergence of distinctively "syndicalist" or direct-actionist labor organizations prior to 1914.<sup>2</sup> Distrust of the state and of parliamentarism and reformist unionism, regional contradictions, and expanding international contacts among direct-actionists contributed to this intraclass strategic divergence. Above all, changes in the nature and organization of work influenced labor militancy and the concomitant spread of syndicalism. Thorpe's analysis of pre-1914 syndicalist movements linked the disproportionate representation of certain workers—in construction, for example—to occupational determinants.

Sociologist Peter Abell (UK) asked how the techniques of comparative methodology in the social sciences might be applied to historical inquiry, where the number of cases by comparison would be small, the data would be in natural language, and a narrative format might be preferred. He saw sequence analysis, Boolean extension, and event structure analysis as promising techniques for comparative history. Christiane Eisenberg (FRG) mounted a forceful criticism of John Stuart Mill's method of agreement as applied to comparative labor history. The generation of false similarities and the comparison of entities (such as "artisan") that designate different realities in different cultures are among the dangers of "many case" studies of agreement. For Eisenberg, practical problems of language, the complexity of data, and, above all, high levels of generalization, argue against "many case" studies of agreement. She advocated limiting analysis to two cases, based on the method of difference, as more reliable. She further recommended that Britain figure as a touchstone in such analyses, because wage labor originally developed there and because British sources are exceptionally rich, and that such bilateral analyses focus upon the trade unions as the most proletarian of workers' organizations. But the superior precision claimed for Eisenberg's procedures had to be weighed against the diverse challenges confronting historians. Two lines of dissent emerged. First, most delegates agreed with Marcel van der Linden that the methods of agreement and difference could each prove useful (as Mill noted), that they might profitably be employed together, and that different questions required different approaches and levels of generalization. Second, many delegates objected to the privileged role Eisenberg proposed for Britain in a series of bilateral analyses.

In introducing the final day—a workshop on proposals for comparative research—Richard Price noted the difficulty of generating genuinely innovative proposals wedded to appropriate methodologies and cautioned against the teleological assumptions that sometimes vitiated labor history. The two dozen written

research proposals—others were offered verbally—fell into five overlapping categories: factors uniting, dividing, or integrating the labor movement at the national level or beyond (national integration, nationalism and internationalism, immigration, ethnic and racial antagonisms); the cross-cultural comparison of specific institutions, or of the interaction of such institutions (mutual benefit societies, workers' parties, trade unions, cooperatives, etc.); the influence of various groups active within or alongside the movement (cadres of diverse background, intellectuals, artists, the young, labor journalists); the relationship between labor and other social groups (farmers) or forces (religion); and political activities and ramifications of the movement. In fact, the call to reconsider the multifaceted intersection of class activities and those of the state recurred throughout the conference. Without minimizing the complex theoretical and practical problems involved, the wide-ranging discussions disclosed the potential richness and promise of systematic, comparative labor history. As John Saville put it, the discourse of the conference shifted from that of crisis to that of challenge.

The assembly did not attempt to set an agenda for research. A few groups planned to pursue specific projects, and the IISH is prepared to lend moral and possibly material support to promising proposals, some of which may be taken up in a postgraduate research program that it plans to initiate. The Institute has put labor historians doubly in its debt, first, for the appearance of the *Formation* volumes, which will long serve as handbooks on national labor movements, and second, for its initiatives in comparative labor history, of which the Alkmaar conference is an impressive example.

#### NOTES

1. Marcel van der Linden and Jurgen Rohajn, eds., *The Formation of Labour Movements, 1870–1914: An International Perspective*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1990). Half of the forty delegates at Alkmaar, from twenty-one countries, contributed to the *Formation* volumes. Delegates also received the IISH's related bibliography, Karin Hofmeester, ed., *De ontwikkeling van arbeidersbewegingen in internationaal vergelijkend perspectief. En geannoteerde bibliografie* (Amsterdam, 1990).

2. This report drew on a wider study of syndicalist movements conducted with Marcel van der Linden of the IISH.

## Labor Law in America: Historical and Critical Perspectives

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On March 20–21, 1990, the University of Maryland Law School and The Johns Hopkins University History Department jointly hosted a conference organized to