

THE UNIONS LOSE SAN FRANCISCO

BY DAVID WARREN RYDER

ALTHOUGH trades unions existed in America long before 1876, it was not until that year, and in the city of San Francisco, that unionism as an active, go-getting, bellicose force really got on its legs. In September, 1876, the immortal Dennis Kearney organized his Workingmen's Party, and although the chief battle cry of the organization was "The Chinese Must Go or They'll Ruin Frisco!" it quickly served, by the brilliant effectiveness of its operations, to show what could be accomplished, politically and otherwise, by the working man, once he was organized and given a cause. Under the direction or inspiration of Kearney and his Pick-Handle Brigade, branches of the Workingmen's Party were formed in many other California towns, and when the triumphant campaign of 1876 was over they continued in existence and sought for other profitable activity. It was the influence of their example, sweeping back across the Rocky Mountains to Middle Western and Eastern centers, that gave unionism the encouragement which it then so desperately needed. In the past it had been feeble, but now, at one stroke, it became a sound and lusty movement. In the years immediately following were laid the foundations of that gigantic organization, the American Federation of Labor, which, after a decade of bitter strife, finally swallowed its chief rival, the Knights of Labor.

In California, particularly, labor organizations sprung up here, there and everywhere, and proceeded at once to battle for higher wages and shorter hours. In San Francisco unionism grew like a weed, and the decade after the organization of Kear-

ney's party saw almost every skilled trade unionized. From that time onward, for nearly forty years, San Francisco was the prize union labor city of America. Not a hammer was lifted, or a brick laid, or a pipe fitted, or a wall plastered or painted or papered without the sanction of the unions. Let an employer, large or small, discharge a drunken, insubordinate or incompetent workman without the union's consent, and he found himself the next day facing a strike, and compelled to reinstate the discharged workman and pay him and his fellows for the time they were out. The walking delegate roved the town in state, issuing orders and imposing penalties. The power of the unions was absolute and for years they were able to exact the utmost obedience to their complex and extravagant rules and regulations. Here are some that were rigidly enforced in the building industry alone:

The roofers' union would not allow an asphalt heater to commence work before eight o'clock, with the result that the rest of the roofing crew loafed for a half hour or so while the asphalt was heating. This union prohibited all apprentices.

The electrical workers' union restricted the number of outlets a member could install in a day. If a member installed more he was called on the carpet, and for repeating the offense fined.

The painters' union restricted the size of the brush which its members could use. This union also prohibited the use of paint guns and white-wash sprayers and virtually prohibited apprentices.

The bricklayers' union limited the number of bricks a member was allowed to lay in a day. It, too, prohibited apprentices for many years.

The plumbers' union enforced rules that were even worse. As for example:

No apprentices save journeymen plumbers' sons were allowed in the trade from 1905 onward, and even master plumbers' sons were not allowed

from 1907 to 1921, with the result that not more than twenty or twenty-five apprentices learned the trade in San Francisco during this fourteen-year period.

No plumber was allowed to bend a pipe to fit into an offset, but was required to use fittings instead, to cause more work.

No laborer or carpenter was permitted to cut a hole in concrete to permit the passage of a pipe, no matter how competent the workman nor how small or simple the work might be.

No union plumber would work with non-union material.

Union men could not work overtime on Saturday without the permission of the union, no matter what the emergency.

Detailed reports had to be made daily by union men to headquarters, showing how many fixtures were set each day. Men who did more work than the standard set by the union were disciplined for their efficiency.

No employer was allowed to stay on a job more than two hours a day.

And here are some of the rules the plasterers' union enforced:

Only one apprentice was allowed in each shop, regardless of the size of the shop and the number of men there employed, and no additional apprentice was admitted until the first one had served two years.

Double time was demanded for Saturday morning.

The use of labor-saving devices was strictly prohibited.

The steamfitters' union required radiators and steam pipes to be carried from the street into the building by steamfitters—work which common laborers could have done more expeditiously and at much less cost. In one celebrated instance a truckman unloaded a large quantity of radiators and steam pipes in front of a building under construction, around noon on Saturday. He piled them closer to the street car tracks than was allowed by ordinance, but by the time the contractor noticed it, both the truckman and the crew of union steamfitters were gone for the day. To avoid arrest for violating the law he had his common laborers carry the stuff into the building. The next Monday morning when the union steamfitters came on the job the first thing they did was notify their walking delegate. In ten minutes he was there; and, threatening to call all his men out on strike, compelled the contractor to have the union steamfitters carry the material

out of the building to the side-walk and then carry it back into the building again.

That such preposterous regulations could have been enforced to the letter over a long period of years—even while the city was rebuilding after the fire of 1906—is almost unbelievable. Yet it was done. For that was the Golden Age of the unions, and their power in industry was matched by their power in politics. The Ruef-Schmitz régime, which for several years ruled (and almost ruined) San Francisco, was unionist clear through, from the mayor down to the lowliest job-holder. And even after Schmitz and his board of thieving supervisors had been kicked out, the unions were still strong enough to come back three years later, and again elect the mayor and a majority of the supervisors. Not until 1912 was their political power finally shattered.

II

But when their downfall came at last, it was a débâcle indeed. They made a single dizzy plunge from the loftiest heights to the lowest and darkest depths. Unable, at length, to stand their bullying and blackmailing any longer, the town rose against them and curbed them. Today, though they still exist on paper, and even claim to be gaining members, they are wholly impotent. At the last Labor Day celebration the unions of the whole San Francisco Bay region were unable to get more than 11,000 marchers into their parade. In the palmy days, they turned out vast hordes, but the palmy days were over. The local newspapers, cheerful optimists always, put the number in line at forty, fifty and even sixty thousand, but checkers employed by the Industrial Association of San Francisco (an organization which supplies industrial data to the United States Department of Labor) counted the marchers and found the total to be exactly 10,958. Preparations for the parade had begun in January—with prizes, essay and oratorical contests, threats of fines and every other conceivable device to insure a

big turnout. But they all failed. In the Bay region there are approximately 75,000 alleged union members. After nine months of preparation and propaganda, less than 15% of this number turned out.

What had happened? I answer that it was the old, old story of what happened to the calf when it got too much rope. The unions as they grew in size and strength seized more and more power, and once they had it they used it so unintelligently, so autocratically, so dishonestly, and to the so obvious injury of the community at large, that all persons outside their ranks were forced into combination, and rose against them, and destroyed them. For years they had been having their own way. During the war there was not even a show of opposition to them. What they asked for they got, and they asked for a plenty. Moreover, they kept on asking long after the war had ended. No doubt some of their demands for wage increases were justified by current conditions, but many others were plainly not. Finally in December, 1920, there came the show-down—naturally enough, in the building trades. By this time the moneyed public—to which the contractors had, of course, passed on the burden of the ever increasing cost of labor—was showing by an increasing reluctance to build at all that it was tired of being made the goat. The contractors consequently not only refused to acquiesce in the new wage demand, but countered with a proposal for decreases in certain crafts. Then followed several weeks of bickering, and then both the contractors and unions agreed in writing to submit the entire dispute to a wage arbitration board and to abide by its findings. The board was composed of the Catholic archbishop of San Francisco, a former justice of the State Supreme Court, and a prominent industrial expert, each of whom had been passed as satisfactory to both sides. It held public hearings through several months, calling as witnesses representatives of all the parties in interest. Finally, in March, 1921, it made its award, effective for six

months. That award reduced wages in seventeen of the fifty-two building trades crafts by 7½%.

The contractors expressed disappointment that the cut was not greater, but announced at once that they had no alternative save to abide by the award. Not so the unions. They announced that they would not accept the award, but would strike when it became effective. This they did. Every union in the whole building trades group struck on May 9, completely tying up the whole city. New negotiations ensued. The industrial relations committee of the local Chamber of Commerce intervened, and day after day for several weeks held meetings with officials of the building trades unions, endeavoring to induce them to keep their agreement. But the effort failed, for the unions would not budge.

Up to this time the community at large had taken no more than a perfunctory interest in the matter. Why should it? Wasn't the dispute only another row between the contractors and the unions? But after a week or so of the strike, the general public began to take notice. It was not, after all, merely a private quarrel between private parties; it was a community catastrophe. Something had to be done. Something *was* done. A group of business and professional men met and decided to try the open shop—in other words, to tackle the unions head on, and try to dispose of them. This obviously meant a bitter fight, and money was necessary. The group called in the financial leaders of the city and in less than two hours had pledges of nearly two million dollars. Then they sent for the contractors, who were weeping and moaning and tearing their hair, and mindful of what had occurred so often in the past, got their promise that if the open shop scheme was adopted, they—the contractors—would abide by it and not switch back to the closed shop as soon as the immediate emergency was over or the unions came around and offered to call off the strike.

With these preparations made, the open shop was announced to take effect in the

building trades on July 1, 1921, and an organization known as the Industrial Association of San Francisco was formed to take charge of enforcing it. This organization immediately began recruiting workers throughout the country to replace those on strike. At the same time the head of the association made a public announcement declaring that there was no desire and would be no attempt to destroy the unions, promising that as soon as possible an impartial wage board would be created to determine wages in all the crafts, and inviting the strikers to return to work with the assurance that there would be no discrimination against them, but with the proviso that they must not refuse to work with non-union men. In response to this invitation many union men returned. To replace those who did not, men were brought in rapidly from outside, and by the middle of August the building industry was operating at 60% or 70% of its normal strength. Then the strikers, seeing their old jobs going to outsiders and getting into a sudden panic, voted in defiance of their leaders to return to work as individuals under the open shop. The abolition of all the old idiotic union rules and regulations had already done much to restore confidence and encourage building. Consequently, many new building plans were launched, and there was soon plenty of work for all the new men who had been brought in, as well as for all the former strikers. The latter were not compelled to forswear allegiance to their unions, but were required to work in open shops; *i.e.*, to permit non-union men to work too.

By the end of the year, the fight was over and the unions were in collapse. Virtually every union mechanic was back at work, and complete industrial peace reigned. In the meantime, an impartial wage board had, after extensive public hearings, fixed a wage scale in which there were no decreases, and which all but two or three of the fifty-two crafts accepted as fair. But peace reigned for only a few months. In March, 1922, the union plumb-

ers, believing that the time had come to attempt to recover what they had lost, delivered an ultimatum to their employers that unless the fifteen or twenty non-union plumbers working in San Francisco were discharged immediately they would strike. These non-union plumbers were men who had been brought in while the strike was on, and to them work had been guaranteed as long as they wished to remain in San Francisco. Their employers, in consequence, refused to discharge them; whereupon the 500 union plumbers made good their threat and struck. The employers, through the Industrial Association, met the situation by sending out a number of master plumbers as scouts, and presently they had sufficient non-union plumbers to carry on the work of the community.

It was soon discovered, however, that some of the plumbing contractors were backsliding on their agreement to support the open shop. The emergency which had induced their agreement had passed, and they claimed that to organize and break in non-union crews would cause them to lose money. The Industrial Association, knowing that if the union plumbers won it would be only a few months until every other craft was back in the saddle, and all the old union rules and regulations restored, decided instantly on a plan to hold the wobbling contractors in line. There was established the permit system, under which no plumbing contractor who would not agree to conduct his job as an open shop could get a permit to buy plumbing materials. The dealers in these materials agreed to require such permits before making sales. The contractor was not compelled to employ all non-union men, or even a majority, or even 50%. A crew of ten union men and two non-union men was satisfactory. Moreover the permit system was not applied to materials involved in interstate commerce. Only materials of intrastate character, or which, coming from other States, had been divested of their interstate character through warehousing, were subject to the permit system.

III

The unions at once attacked it in the courts. They first caused arrests of building material dealers and officials of the Builders' Exchange, charging them with violating the State Anti-Trust Act. The defendants were promptly acquitted. Then the unions induced the federal government to file a bill in the local Federal Court charging the Industrial Association, the Builders' Exchange and about fifty other organizations or individuals with violation of the Sherman Act, and praying for an injunction against the permit system and a dissolution of the defendant organizations. Upon trial, the Federal Court refused to dissolve the defendant organizations, but, holding that materials did not lose their interstate character through warehousing, enjoined the permit system as an interference with interstate commerce under the terms of the Sherman and its amendatory acts. From this decision the various defendants took an appeal to the United States Supreme Court. That tribunal, in March, 1925, by unanimous decision reversed the District Court and dissolved the injunction against the permit system.

Long before this decision came down, however, the plumbers' strike had collapsed. It was actually over in the Fall of 1922, and had been officially called off in the Spring of 1923. While it was in progress there had also been a short strike of union plasterers. They struck against the open shop, but three weeks later voted to return to work. The vote brought their international vice-president to the scene, and he ordered them to strike again. This they decided to do by a vote of 175 to 165, with about 70 not voting. But many of the 165 remained at work, and when three weeks later a third vote was taken, the decision was almost unanimous to return to work under the open shop. This action cost them their international charter, but they kept their jobs. The union plumbers, on the other hand, kept their international charter but lost their jobs.

Since the termination of the plumbers' and plasterers' strikes (early in 1923) there has not been a job or jurisdictional strike in the building industry of San Francisco. (There were twenty-two the last year of the closed shop, and more than forty in the three years immediately prior to the adoption of the open shop). And although in certain trades, such as those of the carpenters and bricklayers, the union men outnumber the non-union men five or six to one, the open shop still prevails. Union and non-union men work side by side on the same job, none of the old oppressive union rules and regulations has been revived, and there have been no agreements entered into between the unions and the contractors. Wages have been fixed by wage boards created by the Industrial Association, and the three or four small controversies that have arisen over wages or hours have been peaceably and promptly adjusted through the instrumentality of that organization.

Among the regulations abolished with the adoption of the open shop were those forbidding or rigidly restricting apprentices. Every building trades craft is now open to apprentices, as is the foundry trade. The old shortage of apprentices has already been alluded to. It was once so serious that the Industrial Association felt that something had to be done about it. Accordingly, in May, 1922, the association opened its first apprentice trade school—a school for plasterers. The idea of teaching a trade like this in a school was derided quite generally, especially by the contractors, but it worked. Twenty-five young men, selected from a group of 100 by the Army intelligence test, attended the school eight hours a day six days a week for three months under the direction of a master plasterer who put them, as soon as they were familiar with the use of the tools, at work which simulated as closely as possible that which they would have to do on an actual job. At the end of three months they were able to do rough plastering— to put on what is called the brown coat—

as well and almost as rapidly as regular journeymen. They were then sent to actual jobs, as apprentices, for three months, and then returned to the school for advanced training and instruction. This plan was followed for a year, at the end of which time virtually all in the class were able to do journeymen's work and earn journeymen's pay. Those who desired to go still farther in the trade were accommodated by the opening of a night school for training in ornamental plastering.

During the last three years, under the general plan thus outlined, schools have been maintained for the training of plumbers, bricklayers, painters, paperhangers, tile-setters, housesmiths and moulders, and one has just been opened for electricians. Altogether, according to the published figures, 1,100 boys and young men have graduated from these schools. Most of them are now working in San Francisco and many have already advanced to the status and pay of journeymen. The training is free to the apprentice, and through agreements with employers he is guaranteed a job on its completion. In fact, under the present arrangement, an applicant is not admitted to a class until a job is assured for him at the completion of his preliminary training, and both he and his employer have to agree that he will return to night school three evenings a week until, through a series of examinations, he has shown himself entitled to be ranked as a journeyman. This plan guards against an over-supply of apprentices and insures the completion of an apprentice's training. The schools have all worked excellently, cutting down by at least a year and in many cases two years the old union period of training, and allowing each apprentice to advance as rapidly as he shows himself individually capable. Trade schools copied after these in San Francisco are now being operated in a dozen or more other large cities throughout the United States.

The unions, of course, continue to exist in San Francisco. Their more optimistic leaders even claim a greater union member-

ship than ever before. Union men are not discriminated against in the town, nor are they forbidden to use peaceable means to attempt to persuade non-union men to take out cards. But the unions have been deprived of their old despotic control over industry. The open shop obtains in virtually all the principal industries of the community, including, beside the building industry, the shipping, lithographic, leather, glass, foundry, street railways, warehouse, garment manufacturing, candy, and hotel and restaurant industries. From 80% to 90% of the manual labor of San Francisco is now done under open shop conditions.

What has been the effect of all this? The statistics of trade and industry, particularly of building construction, show the community to be thriving. During the first year of the open shop, building construction jumped nearly 100% and it has been increasing constantly since. The value of building permits during each of the last two years exceeded the total for 1907, which was the greatest previous year in the city's history on account of the enforced building following the earthquake and fire of 1906. On the employer's side, through the abolition of all the old union restrictions on output and efficiency, costs have been cut appreciably—in some instances as much as 25%. As for the employes, union and non-union: work has never been more plentiful, wages are good (there have been no decreases and several increases in the various scales since the adoption of the open shop), and working conditions elicit no complaint. With a steady job and good pay the average union man is not disposed to complain. Academic discussions of the respective merits of the closed and the open shops interest him much less than the cost of gasoline and tires. He has ceased being a two-fisted battler, ready to strike at the drop of a hat, and has become a property-owning, tax-paying, respectable citizen—a Babbitt in embryo. The old gaudy days are gone. The walking delegate—now called a business agent—walks softly, and his old roar is heard no more.

EDITORIAL

MUCH of the murmuring that now goes on in the colleges of the United States, particularly among the more intelligent students thereof, is caused, it seems to me, by a misunderstanding of the aims and limitations of formal education. The boys complain, in substance, that their time is wasted listening to lectures by jackasses, and that they seldom encounter, among their professors, a man of genuinely sound and adventurous mind. All this, they argue, is not only fatiguing to them, but also damaging to them. Instead of being exposed to a free play of ideas, and so taught to think, they are belabored with formulæ, and so prepared for Rotary. In every college that I am aware of, even in the Bible Belt, the ensuing discontent grows formidable. The college papers are full of saucy flings at the reigning pedagogues, sometimes amounting to formal demands that the worst of them be thrown out, and men of livelier intelligence put in their places. In more than one college—for instance, the State University of Indiana—the thing has reached the stage of open war, with the rebels breathing brimstone, and the trustees and faculty bathed in cold sweat.

My sympathies go to the boys, as they go to all forthright foes of buncombe, but not infrequently, in the clammy watches of the night, I am haunted by a suspicion that they are guilty of something not very far from buncombe themselves. The word, perhaps, is too strong; error would be better. This error consists in assuming that the fundamental purpose of a college education is to prick and blister the young mind, and so set it to functioning freely, and even recklessly. Nothing could be more false. The fundamental purpose of education, in college as in the

high-school and so on down to the kindergarten, is to set the young mind upon a track, and keep it running there in all decorum. The task of a pedagogue, in other words, is not to turn out anarchists, but to turn out correct and respectable citizens. Obviously, he must take his definition of what a correct and respectable citizen is from men who are themselves correct and respectable citizens. That is to say, he must take it from the fathers of the boys under his rattan.

Has anyone heard any complaint from these fathers about what is being taught in the seminaries of the Republic—that is, any complaint that it is too correct and respectable? I think not. When they complain at all it is against some innocent young professor who sympathizes with his pupils, and so proceeds to feed them heresy and stir up their minds. This invariably causes painful scenes at home, and quite naturally, for the home, as everyone knows, is the very altar of correctness and respectability. Young John comes back from college with Nietzsche's "The Antichrist" and the Life of Robert Marion LaFollette under his arm, and sniffs theatrically at the lime and cement business. For Kiwanis he has only an unseemly cackle; even the Y. M. C. A. gets a sneer. Is it any wonder that his father takes alarm, and writes forthwith to the board of trustees? For it is surely not in the nature of fathers to rejoice when their offspring flout them; it is in the nature of fathers to wish their offspring to admire and imitate them. The process of formal education, as they see it, is a process of discovering philosophical supports for that admiration. The fact is not lost upon MM. the college presidents of America. Does one hear of them lecturing on Aristotle, like their colleagues of