

VILLAGE VIEW

ANDREA LEONARD

As we wind up the summer and swing into Labor Day weekend, we may pause in our revelries to examine the reason for this national holiday. It is proclaimed to give special recognition to working people, a purpose deserving of more consideration than it usually receives.

In 1894 when the first Monday of September initially was designated a holiday to honor Labor, fewer than 500,000 of our countrymen were union members; by 1970 membership exceeded 20,000,000 people.

As early as 1792, shoemakers in Philadelphia organized a local labor union; seven years later, after a ten-week strike, America's first union contract was signed with the shoemakers. A quarter-century passed before the first women's labor union was formed in New York City by clothing workers. From such small beginnings, the movement had grown powerful enough by 1834 to organize the first national labor federation, called the National Trades Union. Not until 1886 was the American Federation of Labor formed at a Columbus, Ohio, convention. Samuel Gompers was its first president.

Gompers, born in London, England in 1850, came to this country as a small boy. At the age of 13, young Sam was a journeyman cigarmaker; while still in his early twenties, he was active in the reorganization of the Cigarmakers' Union, and became president of his local in 1877.

A fierce and fearless proponent of trade unions, he chaired the Committee on Constitution, a newly-created Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions in 1881; this was a group that reorganized in 1886 and became the A.F. of L.

With the exception of one year, 1895, Gompers served as president of the A.F. of L. from 1886 to the time of his death in 1924 at the age of 74 years; he was chiefly responsible for determining the nature and development of the nation's most powerful unions. His stature brought him national and international recognition.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Samuel Gompers to membership on the Council of National Defense, and in 1919 he represented our country at the Peace Conference as a member of the Committee on International Labor Legislation.

It was during the early years of the present century that an increasing class consciousness of factory workers resulted in the remarkable growth in labor unions. The A.F. of L. originally consisted of only twelve separate labor organizations; but in less than 2 decades its membership grew to 1,676,000; many trades were strongly enough organized to enforce the closed shop rule in plants of industrialized cities. Still, in the textile and steel industries, there were no unions at all; wages paid in those industries were too low to permit their employees to live decently.

A curious feature of our country's labor union policy is the reluctance of workers and their leaders to form a political party of their own. While he lived, Gompers' belief that labor could be more effective by sticking to one or the other major parties was a strong deterrent to the development of a Labor Party; perhaps his influence is still being felt.

The pros and cons of unions, and the battles between labor and management are complex in the extreme; their intricacies have been debated and fought, for and against, since the beginning of the industrial revolution. As early as 1861 then-President Abraham Lincoln addressed Congress with the following message:

"It is assumed that labor is available only in connection with capital; that nobody labors unless somebody else owning capital, somehow by the use of it induces him to labor. Labor is prior to and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor and could not have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital and deserves much the higher consideration. I bid the laboring people beware of surrendering the power which they possess, and which, if surrendered, will surely be used to shut off the door of advancement for such as they, and fix new disabilities and burdens upon them until all of liberty shall be lost."

American union leaders have long fought to preserve those powers of labor and to prevent industry from forcing the surrender of that power; unions have heeded well Lincoln's words. For the most part, industry has attempted to turn a deaf ear to the Republican Lincoln who held labor in high esteem.

On the other hand, the costs of preserving labor's power have been high. In the two decades, 1950 to 1970, for example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor recorded a total of 89,000 work stoppages. This includes all known strikes or lockouts in the United States involving six or more workers and lasting a full day or a full shift, or longer. Figures do not include secondary effects on other businesses with employees idled as a result of material or service shortages.

The number of work stoppages has no impact until viewed in terms of individuals and how they are affected. This can best be seen in the number of workers idled in that 20-year period and the number of man-days lost: the first figure-47,976,000 idled; the second figure- 591,430,000 man-days of non-productivity. That's over half-a-billion lost days in a twenty-year period. Recall Lincoln's words: Capital is the fruit of labor and could not exist had labor not first existed.

As we celebrate Labor Day, we might ponder the relationship between our present inflation problem and those man-days lost, the capital lost, through strikes. In 1960, a dollar would purchase nearly three times what it can today.

We might ponder, as well, a quotation from Samuel Gompers, the father of the organized labor movement in the United States:

"Doing for people what they can and ought to do for themselves is a dangerous experiment. In the last analysis, the welfare of the workers depends upon their own initiative.

"Whatever is done under the guise of philanthropy or social morality which in any way lessens initiative is the greatest crime that can be committed against the toilers.

"Let so-called busybodies and professional 'public morals experts', in their fads, reflect upon the perils they rashly invited under the pretense of social welfare."

Gompers, the immigrant boy who rose to become one of the country's most powerful labor leaders, was despised and feared by leaders of industry, loved and revered by the working classes; perhaps he was thoroughly understood by neither group, and perhaps his goals, purposes and philosophies warrant deeper study by industries' leaders and labor groups alike.

While enjoying Labor Day weekend, give passing thought to the meaning of the holiday we celebrate at summer's end and the ways every American is affected by the results of actions taken when united groups of people exercise their power and influence to achieve defined goals, no matter what the cost.