

## **In America, Labor Has an Unusually Long Fuse**

By Steven Greenhouse The New York Times April 5, 2009

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/weekinreview/05greenhouse.html?scp=1&sq=steve%20greenhouse%20france&st=cse>

The workers and other protesters who gathered en masse at the Group of 20 summit meeting last week in London were continuing a time-honored European tradition of taking their grievances into the streets.

Two weeks earlier, more than a million workers in France demonstrated against layoffs and the government's handling of the economic crisis, and in the last month alone, French workers took their bosses hostage four times in various labor disputes. When General Motors recently announced huge job cuts worldwide, 15,000 workers demonstrated at the company's German headquarters.

But in the United States, where G.M. plans its biggest layoffs, union members have seemed passive in comparison. They may yell at the television news, but that's about all. Unlike their European counterparts, American workers have largely stayed off the streets, even as unemployment soars and companies cut wages and benefits.

The country of Mother Jones, John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther certainly has had a rich and sometimes militant history of labor protest - from the Homestead Steel Works strike against Andrew Carnegie in 1892 to the auto workers' sit-down strikes of the 1930s and the 67-day walkout by 400,000 G.M. workers in 1970.

But in recent decades, American workers have increasingly steered clear of such militancy, for reasons that range from fear of having their jobs shipped overseas to their self-image as full-fledged members of the middle class, with all its trappings and aspirations.

David Kennedy, a Stanford historian and author of "Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945," says that America's individualist streak is a major reason for this reluctance to take to the streets. Citing a 1940 study by the social psychologist Mirra Komarovsky, he said her interviews of the Depression-era unemployed found "the psychological reaction was to feel guilty and ashamed, that they had failed personally."

Taken together, guilt, shame and individualism undercut any impulse to collective action, then as now, Professor Kennedy said. Noting that Americans felt stunned and desperately insecure during the Depression's early years, he wrote: "What struck most observers, and mystified them, was the eerie docility of the American people, their stoic passivity as the Depression grindstone rolled over them."

By the mid-1930s, though, worker protests increased in number and militancy. They were fueled by the then-powerful Communist and Socialist Parties and frustrations over continuing deprivation. Workers also felt that they had President Roosevelt's blessing for

collective action because he signed the Wagner Act in 1935, giving workers the right to unionize.

"Remember, at that time, you had Hooverilles and 25 percent unemployment," said Daniel Bell, a professor emeritus of sociology at Harvard. "Many people felt that capitalism was finished."

General strikes paralyzed San Francisco and Minneapolis, and a six-week sit-down strike at a G.M.

plant in Flint, Mich., pressured the company into recognizing the United Automobile Workers. In the decade's ugliest showdown, a 1937 strike against Republic Steel in Chicago, 10 protesters were shot to death. That militancy helped build a powerful labor movement, which represented 35 percent of the nation's workers by the 1950s and helped create the world's largest and richest middle class.

Today, American workers, even those earning \$20,000 a year, tend to view themselves as part of an upwardly mobile middle class. In contrast, European workers often still see themselves as proletarians in an enduring class struggle.

And American labor leaders, once up-from-the-street rabble-rousers, now often work hand-in-hand with C.E.O.'s to improve corporate competitiveness to protect jobs and pensions, and try to sideline activists who support a hard line.

"You have a general diminution of union leadership that was focused on defending workers by any means necessary," said Jerry Tucker, a longtime U.A.W.

militant. "The message from the union leadership nowadays often is, 'We don't have any choice, we have to go down this concessionary road to see if we can do damage control,' " he said.

In the case of the Detroit automakers, a strike might not only hasten their demise but infuriate many Americans who already view auto workers as overpaid. It might also make Washington less receptive to a bailout.

Labor's aggressiveness has also been sapped by its declining numbers. Unions represent just 7.4 percent of private-sector workers today.

Unions have also grown more cautious as management has become more aggressive. A watershed came in 1981 when the nation's air traffic controllers engaged in an illegal strike. President Reagan quickly fired the 11,500 striking traffic controllers, hired replacements and soon got the airports running. After that confrontation, labor's willingness to strike shrank markedly.

American workers still occasionally vent their anger in protests and strikes. There were demonstrations against the A.I.G. bonuses, for instance, and workers staged a sit-down strike in December when their factory in Chicago was closed. But the numbers tell the story:

Last year, American unions engaged in 159 work stoppages, down from 1,352 in 1981, according to the Bureau of National Affairs, a publisher of legal and regulatory news.

Michael Kazin, a historian at Georgetown University, said that while demonstrations remain a vital outlet for the European left, for Americans "the Internet now somehow serves as the main outlet" with angry blogs and mass e-mailing.

Left-leaning workers and unions that might be most prone to stage protests during today's economic crisis are often the ones most enthusiastic about President Obama and his efforts to revive the economy, help unions and enact universal health coverage. Instead of taking to the streets last fall to protest the gathering economic crisis under President Bush, many workers and unions campaigned for Mr. Obama.

Leo Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers, said there were smarter things to do than demonstrating against layoffs - for instance, pushing Congress and the states to make sure the stimulus plan creates the maximum number of jobs in the United States.

"I actually believe that Americans believe in their political system more than workers do in other parts of the world," Mr. Gerard said. He said large labor demonstrations are often warranted in Canada and European countries to pressure parliamentary leaders.

Demonstrations are less needed in the United States, he said, because often all that is needed is some expert lobbying in Washington to line up the support of a half-dozen senators.

Professor Kennedy saw another reason that today's young workers and young people were protesting less than in decades past. "This generation," he said, has "found more effective ways to change the world. It's signed up for political campaigns, and it's not waiting for things to get so desperate that they feel forced to take to the streets."