



April 2007

Vol. 24 No. 3

Newsletter

Wisconsin

Labor History Society

(Affiliated with the Wisconsin Historical Society)

There's still time to register!

“Wisconsin labor’s involvement in the ‘cold war’ and ‘war on terror’”

26th Annual Wisconsin Labor History Society Conference

April 28, 2007

Keynote speaker:

Greg Grandin, Ph.D.

NYU Dept. of History

Author of:

*Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the
United States, and the Rise of the New
Imperialism (2007)*

Conference Panels:

“Labor Meets Cold War Realities”

**“American Labor, Recent Foreign
Policy, and War”**

WLHS annual meeting on-site at 3 p.m.

Contact: info@wisconsinlaborhistory.org



Image courtesy of Working Class Movement Library, UK

Conference Location: Union South

Saturday, April 28, 2007

8:30 a.m. – 2:45 p.m.

227 North Randall Avenue

Madison, WI

From the WLHS President:

Worker Free Choice Law – 40 Years in the Making

by **Ken Germanson**

The Employee Free Choice Act on March passed the U.S. House of Representatives 241 to 185. All Democrats but two and 13 Republicans voted for it—about 40 years too late. The law allows union recognition by card check alone rather than mandatory elections, which employers use to harass and threaten workers.

For four decades, organized labor struggled to win some equity in dealing with the nation's employers. If the Act passes the Senate and the President signs (all doubtful) it would balance the nation's labor laws and restore some of the rights bestowed by the original National Labor Relations Act (or Wagner Act) which became law on July 5, 1935.

Called the "Workers' Magna Carta," the Wagner Act recognized workers' right to organize and, once organized, a right to collectively bargain for wages, hours and working conditions.

Tremendous organizing in American industry in the 1930s and 1940s created a great middle class by the 1950s.

It was the workers' power to bargain labor contracts that allowed them to live the "American dream." One wage-earner could pay family bills, buy a home and a car (or two), and pay the children's education with maybe some left for a nice summer vacation. White- and pink-collar workers benefited, as unions set the standards for wages and benefits for all.

Sadly, the dream was lost for those workers' children and grandchildren. Now working families require two incomes (or more) to support a modest standard of living.

You can bet there's a direct correlation between the levels of union membership and the status of today's middle class. In 1954, 34% of all workers belonged to unions.

Today it is about 8%. Union manufacturing jobs went overseas. Most remaining unionists are public workers; service and white collar workers are just now getting organized.

Labor's membership decline can be traced to the 1950s when national labor laws began to lose their bite in protecting workers' rights to organize. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 passed over Harry Truman's veto allowed state "right-to-work" laws.

Northern employers escaped to low-wage havens, mainly in the South, weakening labor's bargaining power. Labor's organizing tools, such as secondary boycotts, were banned.

The 1957 Landrum-Griffin Act, passed in the wake of overblown accounts of union corruption, further curbed labor unions' abilities to protect workers and organize the unorganized. By 1970, employers were learning how to thwart union organizers. Under Richard Nixon, National Labor Relations Board appointees to guard workers' rights under the law represented employers, not workers. Unions then pushed for and lost Labor Law Reform.

After the firing of the Air Traffic Controllers in August, 1981, the bosses knew the U.S. government would back them up in all but the most egregious antiunion actions.

Today, some 35,000 workers annually are fired for union activity. Few get their jobs back. On paper, the law still gives workers the right to organize, to talk "union" and to join in collective action. In reality, that right hardly exists at all.

The Employee Free Choice Act gives back to worker some (not all) of the rights they were promised in 1935. The act is aptly named since under the current system workers enjoy little "free choice" to form a union.

- *Kenneth Germanson*
advoken@sbcglobal.net

121st Bay View Massacre Commemoration

3 p.m. - May 6, 2007

Bay View Historical Marker Site

(South Superior Street & East Russell Ave.)

And a special recognition of former Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler

Followed by open-mike music at Club Garibaldi, 2601 S. Superior Street

Adapted and republished from South Central Federation of Labor website:

Union Yes! The more things change, the more they stay the same

"Their stories sound like something you would read about in the history books from 1906, certainly not like something that would exist here in 2006," said State Senator Jeff Plale (D-South Milwaukee), about conditions at Madison's Superior Health Linens company.

Unsanitary working conditions, firings, threats and intimidation of union supporters – all aired at a public hearing July 6 in Oak Creek, a Milwaukee suburb.

Plale said he moderated the hearing before a panel of elected officials, religious and community leaders, "To raise awareness and increase pressure, to be sure that the men and women who work in this community are treated fairly, are treated like human beings."



ELECTED OFFICIALS ALONG WITH RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS listened to disturbing testimony from workers at Superior Linens. Panelists included State Sen. Jeff Plale (at mic), Rep. Christine Sinicki (center) and Rep. Pedro Colón (far right).

Hearty thanks to WLHS Donors

Wisconsin Labor History Society appreciates every member and donation. We use all donations toward education, promoting labor arts, informing our members, and sharing Wisconsin's labor's legacy far and wide.

2007 Solidarity and Sustaining Members – Wisconsin Labor History Society

Sustaining Level (\$50-\$99)

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Solidarity Level (\$100 or more)

Sheila Cochran (Milwaukee)
Elizabeth Malone (Shorewood)

Sharon Mulak & Lloyd Velicer (Madison)

High school students win essay honors

Eight Wisconsin high school students won cash prizes in the 21st Annual Wisconsin Labor History Society Essay Contest - 2006-2007. They will receive honors and checks for their 750-word essays, "Unions Are Important to my Family and Community," at the annual conference, April 28, 2007. Committee Co-Chairs Harvey J. Kaye, professor of history and social change at UW- Green Bay, and Paul Cigler, Jr., a social studies teacher in the Appleton School District, judged the contest. We are grateful to them and to the many local unions and labor councils who fund this important event.

First Prize - \$500



Amber Cichy, 10th grade, Menomonee Falls High School, told how her father's union job as a nurse at the Milwaukee County Mental Health Complex surpassed her mother's nonunion work. Her father, James, is a member of the Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, Local 5001, AFT. Amber, 15, plays second trumpet in the school orchestra, studies classical piano, is a Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do, and works at the public library as a page. She plans to study science in college.

Amber Chichy

Second Prize - \$300



Maurice A. Sharpe, 11th grade, Marquette University High School – Milwaukee. His essay, "Elves and Their Union," recounts a story his mother told at Christmas time about the elves' fictional labor dispute with Santa Claus—a strike always settled in time for the Christmas Eve visit. Through that story, his mother and grandparents' histories as union members became part of family holiday tradition. Maurice's mother, Marie Britt-Sharpe, is a member of UAW Brewery Workers Local 9 in Milwaukee. Maurice plays baseball and basketball, volunteers at the Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, Habitat for Humanity, and plays the tenor saxophone in teen jazz groups. He plans to study pharmacy or computer technology.

Maurice A. Sharpe

Third Prize - \$200



John Ertl, a 12th grader at Park Falls High School, wrote about his parents' experiences working in union and nonunion jobs. His father, a member of United Steelworkers Local 2-0445, regained his job after the paper mill where he worked closed and then reopened under new ownership with continued union representation, protecting benefits and wage scales. His mother began in a nonunion job, but now enjoys benefits as a member of AFSCME Council 24, Local 1941. John was named "Defensive Player of the Year" in the Park Halls High School football team, and is also an Eagle Scout. He plans to study history at UW - Marshfield.

John Ertl

Honorable Mentions - \$100 each:

Peter Gilbert, 10th grade, Northland Pines High School - Eagle River

Hillary Singer, 9th grade, Whitnall High School - Greenfield

Bethany Rose Glasson, Potosi, home schooled

John Backman, 12th grade, Prairie School - Racine

Julie Evans, 12th grade, Thomas More High School – Milwaukee

The three top essays appear in full on the next pages of this issue

First place 2007 Essay Contest Winning Essay:

Sophomore contrasts union/non-union healthcare jobs

by Amber Cichy

Unions are an important part of our society as they provide rewards for dedication in the workplace. Workers who belong to unions earn an average of 25% more than workers who do not. When unions are established they also help against discrimination. Unions make sure that all workers are treated fairly when working. Most of all unions help to give workers a voice in their workplace. Workers can help to establish different policies on working conditions, the amount of hours one must work, health care benefits and other important issues that pertain to their profession. Studies show that states where many of the workers have a union are also states with lower poverty rates, better schools and less crime. Many people like to view unions as negative forces, trying to corrupt America and its workers. The facts prove differently, as unions only help workers and look out for their wellbeing in the workplace.

Growing up, I have had the privilege of experiencing two different types of working environments. One of my parents works at a hospital that is unionized, while the other does not. My mother, who works at a major health company as an occupational therapist, does not have the benefit of working with a union. In this case, the emphasis of her job is productivity. Therefore, she must strive to see a certain number of patients everyday. At each years end, she must submit a performance review that reveals if she has met the productivity required. Based on this information, her employer will then raise her salary as seen fit. This situation would not occur in a union. In a union, a contract is established and salary is based upon that. This being said, workers in a unionized workplace do not have to worry about just meeting their productivity, and can focus on giving the best care possible to their patients.

Establishing a union requires a great amount of patience along with a drive to create better working conditions. The benefits of a union greatly outweigh the effort that is put into creating one. In order to get the benefits, people must stay informed and active in the union that they belong to. This is a small price to pay in order to have improved working conditions. All in all, unions help all people involved. Whether it is increasing wages, fighting for a better health care policy, or working on big ticket issues such as mandatory overtime, unions help to make working conditions better. Therefore, unions are a positive force not only on my family, but also on all of my community.

My father works at a hospital that is unionized. When questioned about unions he expressed that working as part of a union has given him a sense of job security. He also knows that if he has a problem within the workplace that a union steward will be able to help resolve the problem. Although he pointed out the many positives to having a union, he also recognized that the union itself is only as strong as the nurses that support it. If nurses do not attend meetings and show support to union leaders, the union can not remain strong. He knows that occasionally going to meetings is a small price to pay for the benefits of being part of a union. Although unions do not always have the answer to every conflict within a work place, they help people in my family and community to have a voice regarding their livelihood at work.

Nurses have been addressing important issues through their unions. At this time, mandatory overtime is a big issue being addressed by health care professionals. Mandatory overtime is legal for all health care workers. Health care workers can be made to work another shift, at any time without warning. At first, mandatory overtime was only used in emergencies. Since 1990, hospitals have used mandatory overtime as a cost cutting solution. Only now is the government taking a step forward to end mandatory overtime, but in the meantime, unions must be created to protect all health-care workers. According to a national survey, nurses work 8 ½ weeks of overtime a year. This is a shocking statistic as you must wonder how much of this overtime the nurses surveyed actually received pay for. If working conditions become too unbearable, many nurses may leave the profession. Unions can help to protect against mandatory overtime, helping nurses to stay in their current jobs. Unions are especially important for nurses because, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, "an additional 450,000 nurses will be needed by 2008".

Establishing a union requires a great amount of patience along with a drive to create better working conditions. The benefits of a union greatly outweigh the effort that is put into creating one. In order to get the benefits, people must stay informed and active in the union that they belong to. This is a small price to pay in order to have improved working conditions. All in all, unions help all people involved. Whether it is increasing wages, fighting for a better health care policy, or working on big ticket issues such as mandatory overtime, unions help to make working conditions better. Therefore, unions are a positive force not only on my family, but also on all of my community.

**Amber's father, James Cichy, is a member of
Wisconsin Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, Local 5001**

Second place 2007 Essay Contest:

The union shaped Christmas tradition in the Sharpe home

by Maurice Sharpe

In our community, there is a song that plays on the radio during the Christmas holidays entitled "Santa Claus Go Straight to the Ghetto" sung by vocalist James Brown. In the song he sings about filling all the stockings that Santa can find because the kids all love Santa. This is my memory of how unions and Christmas are inseparable in our community.

I began understanding unions as a child at Christmas. Everyone wanted the "hot toy" of the season and I was no exception. It was just a few weeks before the "big day" and I had begun my mantra about why I needed that one special gift from Santa. I remember my mom, a member of Brewery Worker's Union Local 9 UAW, saying "I hear the Elves and Santa are in strained negotiations this year. If they do not come to an agreement soon for more candy breaks and better playtime equipment at the toy factory some toys may not be made in time for Christmas."

I wondered what the elves had against Santa. I had several adults I could talk to when I needed help understanding things mom said. The word "negotiations" sounded like a word that I needed explained. During our Sunday meal at my grandparent's home I asked for someone to define the word "negotiations." Grandmother responded that the word's meaning was for employees and employers to talk together honestly and about decisions that benefit both parties. As a member of the Chicago Teacher's Union she is valued as a professional because of the union. Grandfather, who is retired production worker from Libby Corporation, added that without the union he would not have made the wages and benefits others at the factory made. He said that the contributions made by many minorities in factories were not always compensated equally until they became union members. Great-Grandmother Walker added she will always be a member of the International Garment Workers and sang a few bars of her union's song. She sang about pride in buying clothing made with the union label. Her face was mindful, I think, of the times she shared with other women making the clothing purchased by people who bought upscale clothing in Chicago that she made in the 1940s through 1970s.

After talking with my family, I understood unions level the playing field for workers and employers, but what did that have to do with Santa and the Elves? On another day, we went to lunch where my uncle is a waiter. He said it was good the agriculture workers have union representation because when they do not they are not paid fairly for their work on corporate farms. He said he

had been a member of the negotiating team for the waiters that demonstrated the need for better working conditions so employee turnover would be lessened. "Constant quality is what people want in a good restaurant This restaurant is always great and it will always be this way if the workers feel good about their work and the restaurant owner responds to their needs."

As mom and dad tucked me into bed that evening I asked "How are the negotiations with Elves and Santa?" Dad reported the negotiations for cookie breaks and play equipment were still on-going. Mom added Santa offered the elves rubber mats in the current play area to cushion falls from the slides but no new equipment. "Labor disputes are not always about money in the pockets of workers" she continued. "The elves like working for Santa but he was not always in-tune to what elves need to make their toy-making beneficial for Santa, the elves, and kids all over the world. The talks have been respectful and honest and the elf's union is strong. " She reassured me that Santa did not want to disappoint anyone and valued elves as employees and people.

Maurice's mother, Marie Britt-Sharpe is a member of UAW Brewery Workers Local 9

2006-2007 Cash Prize Sponsors

We thank these donors to the high school essay contest fund:

United Steelworkers of America Local 2-213

Communication Workers of America Local 4603

Painters District Council Number 7

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 24

Professional Library Employees Local 1901B – AFSCME (Brown County)

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Wisconsin Rapids and Vicinity Labor Council

American Federation of State, County & Municipal

Employees Local 1800 Local 1800

Kenosha AFL-CIO Central Labor Council

Third prize winner:

Union Mom carries the load when paper mill closes

by John W. Ertl

Labor unions have had a profound impact on my family and my community. Truly unions saved my family and community from losing everything when the company my father worked for closed. Living through the experience of this past year made me realize the tremendous importance of unions in today's economy. I have a newfound respect for labor unions for what they've done for my community and my family.

When my mother worked for an insurance agency, she never received a raise or payment for overtime. Often times she would work longer than eight hours but would only be paid for eight. She never had health or retirement benefits. When she changed jobs and became a union member in 1997, she received retirement benefits and health insurance for the first time. The day she joined her union, her fellow union members took her out to eat and they had a party. They became more than just coworkers; they were family. For the first time, my mother felt secure and happy in her job.

It was a good thing that my mother belonged to a union, because my father lost his job. In February 2005, a new company purchased the paper mill where my father worked. The new company that bought the mill hated unions. They refused to recognize the existing union, and all employees were forced to reapply for their jobs, regardless of seniority. My father belonged to a union at this mill for over 30 years and was a highly skilled employee, but that meant nothing to the new company.

My father was rehired, but conditions at the paper mill were bleak. My father and his fellow union members were treated very badly. The union members took severe pay cuts, lost vacation time, and eventually lost their pensions. Even my grandfather, who was retired from the paper mill, lost his health insurance. My grandfather was forced to purchase an expensive private policy that severely cut into his fixed income. Within a year, the new company declared bankruptcy and closed the paper mill without giving the required 60 day plant closure notice. My father and I were both moved to tears as I went with him to clean out his locker for the last time.

It was a stark fact that the mill workers were well paid and jobs just didn't exist in the local economy that could readily absorb them. The few jobs that did exist were nonunion, and paid less than half of what the mill workers were accustomed to making. My community suffered greatly as a result of the paper mill closing and the loss of good union jobs. Many small businesses that

depended on revenue generated by the mill ended up closing. I watched with great sadness as I witnessed my friends' families lose their houses and have to move.

For the first time in my life, my family had to rely solely on my mother's job. My family was very fortunate, because my mother, as a dues-paying union member, was paid a fair wage with health insurance and retirement benefits. My parents had a lot of financial demands, because in addition to our own household bills, they were helping two of my siblings in college. We were able to keep our home and get by during the loss of my dad's job by cutting back our expenses and living on a strict budget. I was able to stay in my hometown of Park Falls and finish my senior year of High School with my class, all thanks to unions. That's why I can confidently say labor unions made a huge difference in my life.

There is a happy ending to the story of my father's job, however. Eventually the paper mill in my town was purchased by a new owner that recognized the union. Working conditions and morale greatly improved when the mill workers' former benefits were restored and a new pension plan was developed. My father's new union is aggressively pursuing financial reparation from the former owner for their failure to comply with the law.

I feel indebted to labor unions because I have personally experienced what happens when there is no union. I plan to attain a degree that enables me to promote the values of labor unions. I want to fight for the rights of organized labor, because I believe labor unions make America great. In this age of globalization, too many jobs have been outsourced, and this genuine threat to American families and their way of life must be dealt with.

John's father, John W. Ertl, is a member of United Steelworkers Local 2-0445 since 2003; was a member of Paperworkers Local 445 from 1974 to 1996, and PACE International Union from 1996 to 2003. His mother, Mary E. Ertl, was a member of AFSCME Council 40, Local 2656 from 1997 to 2001 and since then a member of AFSCME Council 24, Local 1941.

ACLU honors Art Heitzer

Art Heitzer, a long-time member and sponsor of the Wisconsin Labor History Society received in March a 2007 Bill of Rights Award from the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin Foundation. The award, Civil Libertarian of the year, recognized dedication to civil rights and civil liberties in Wisconsin.

Co-awardees were Michael Cohn and Peter Earle.

New DVD facilitates labor history discussion

Support the Madison Labor History Mural Project with a contribution of at least \$25 and receive a new video, *Madison Labor: Building a City, Building a Movement*.

This DVD, just released by the South Central Federation of Labor, was compiled to facilitate group discussions of scenes in the new labor history mural at the Madison Labor Temple.

The DVD includes "The Early Years" (30 minutes), first produced in 1985, and "Madison: A Union City, 1985-2005" (15 minutes plus a three-minute slide show), bringing Madison's labor history to date.

Contributions are tax deductible. Make checks payable to the Labor Education and Training Center and mail to: Labor History Mural Project c/o South Central Federation of Labor, 1602 S. Park St. #228, Madison WI 53715.

A photo gallery with pictures of notable labor activities and events from Madison's past, and four downloadable chapters of Dexter Arnold's *Madison Labor: Building a Movement* are also available at <http://scfl.freedmind.org> (select "Our History") The book came from 1993 writings of Dexter Arnold, managing editor of SCFL's *Union Labor News* and assistant to its president.

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