

Labor movement - U.S.  
(1973 folder)


# anchor in the storm

by Edward J. Carlough

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An appraisal of American Labor  
in the turbulent 1970s

② **SHEET METAL WORKERS'**  
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*This is the text of the address by President Edward J. Carlough of the Sheet Metal Workers' International Association, AFL-CIO, at the annual Labor Day Mass in Washington, D.C. ...*

*The Mass is conducted at Sacred Heart Church in Washington, and is followed by the laying of a wreath at the statue of Cardinal Gibbons, in front of the church, and an address by a leading figure in the American trade unions.*

*Mr. Carlough's talk was delivered September 3, 1973.*

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We are here today because of Cardinal Gibbons, and Peter Maguire. Maguire conceived of the idea, and promoted the first Labor Day. Cardinal Gibbons was a great and dear friend of working people, and their unions.

Both were Irish!

I mention that only to illustrate that we Irish do more than drink in taverns . . . although we do a bit of that, and rather well, too.

There is a temptation, when speaking in this forum, on this day, to ascribe to ourselves virtues that we do not possess, spoken with a sanctity that does not befit us. It is a temptation I find easy to avoid.

Cardinal Gibbons believed in the dignity of labor—the dignity of the individual working man. The American labor movement is the enforcer of that dignity.

My personal view of the labor movement, and of the role we must play in our society, is an uncomplicated one.



*Labor Day scene at the statue of Cardinal Gibbons.*

We are not intellectuals—but we do not disdain those who are. And occasionally, to the surprise of some, we even have an innovative idea of our own.

We are not moralists—but our actions often contribute toward a better social order. Few of us today speak the phrase—social justice—yet nowhere is its cause better promoted than in our movement.

Some of the new leaders in our movement, myself included, are not altogether comfortable with the slogans of the 30's. But the mission hasn't changed.

The rhetoric is less flamboyant, not the zeal. Those who measure dedication by words—not deeds—will continue to be mystified by us.

Those who equate slogans with commitment will never understand us.

The Reader's Digest has a simple vision of us. We're whiskey-drinking, poker playing, cigar smoking, evil old men. (*Where have we heard that phrase before?*)

Some of our erstwhile friends have also expressed their disappointment in us. And the expression is always public.

They say we've become too complacent, too soft, too middle class, too successful, and too old. They say we've changed.

Of course we've changed.

We revere labor's old martyrs . . . we do not seek new ones. While we honor Joe Hill's memory, we do not forget that we were losers then.

## **A Matter of Preferences**

We ask no one's forgiveness for preferring new achievements to continued martyrdom. For we understand, if others do not, that ashes and sack cloth are not always a symbol of dedication. Rather, they may merely be a sign of unsuccessful dedication.

We believe, as did Vince Lombardi, that winning isn't everything—it's the only thing! Those who gave us their sympathy, when we were weak, cannot forgive us for becoming strong. We have grown up, but they have not.

Our erstwhile friends now reserve their admiration for the weakest of us, the farm workers, who are today as we were then. But they have great difficulty absorbing one simple fact; if the rest of us were today as we were then, the union birth in the California grape fields would have been still-born.



*President Carlough with family and distinguished guests: Cardinal O'Boyle, Archbishop Baum, AFL-CIO President Meany and others.*

Were it not for that too complacent, too soft, too middle class, too successful, and too old AFL-CIO—with our vulgar money and our unseemly muscle—the only task that would be left today for the Farm Workers Union would be to await the canonization of their leader.

Some have sought a new Joe Hill, with a Chicano surname. We have sought what Cardinal Gibbons would have called the dignity of the individual—enforced in the dirt fields of California: a more decent, a richer life—“MORE,” in the words of

Gompers, for the farm workers and their families.

### **We Need To Be More Successful**

The labor movement of the 1970's is not complacent, it is not soft. And it is not nearly as successful as we would like it to be.

Too middle class? If we have moved the American worker and his family up a notch, up a class—if you will—the same struggle continues, at a more elevated level. While that media symbol of middle class

man—Archie Bunker—does not wear a union button, the wiser among us recognizes that there is a little bit of Archie in all of us.

Too old? When the press mentions age, they generally mean the plumber from the Bronx. Adenauer ruled at 79, De Gaulle at 80, Chiang Kai Shek at 82, and Mao is older, and still going. President Meany will out-endure them all. And any who doubt that, do not know him, and do not know us.

1973 has been a bad year for our country. It has been a year of limitless economic irresponsibility, in virtually all sections of our economy. And the price hasn't yet been fully paid.

It's not merely the price at the super-market, or the housing market, although that's bad enough. It's the price a free society must pay when its people lose faith in the functioning of its institutions. That price is very high and not easily paid in a short time. And the problems have not solely been economic.

Even worse, it has been a year of revelation of unprecedented immorality in both our public and our private life, from the White House to the Soap Box Derby. The confidence of a people, in the integrity of their public and private institutions, is what holds a free and diverse society together and permits it to function. The process is a fragile one. Question that integrity, shake that confidence, and you severely undermine that process and affect the functioning of that society.

This year, that has happened in America.

## **A Responsible Labor Movement**

At this time of our country's most serious peace-time instability, the greatest of our free institutions, the American labor movement, has acted with total responsibility, in the face of economic chaos, and total restraint, in the face of moral abdication.

Had we chosen to shake the tree, it would have lost more than its leaves.

It is ironic that in a year when so many of the nation's institutions seem to have lost their moorings, the most volatile of those free institutions—the American labor movement—has been the anchor in the storm. We have done so much better than the lawyers!

It is not the role that history has assigned us, nor is it one that we are accustomed to playing. Given the dynamics, and politics, of a free and elective labor movement, I am not certain how much longer we will be permitted to continue. But it has been necessary. And we have always done what we had to do.

That unique pragmatism, that so many despise as our policy, has served our country well this year.

Perhaps we've been too responsible . . . too restrained. I think not!

We recognize, as elected leaders of our unions, and as citizens of our country, that whatever progress we make for our membership is largely dependent upon the health of our nation, economic and otherwise. We believe, as did the poet, that no man is an island, that unions cannot provide an island of refuge in a nation in trouble. And so, this year, we have not asked for whom the bell has tolled.



We have always been proud of our movement. We are most proud of her today. At this moment our country needs both her strength and her pragmatic sanity. I'm confident we'll continue to offer both.

Alexander the Great sat down and wept at the age of 32 because he had no new worlds to conquer. We, in labor, do not have Alexander's problem. With all of the accomplishments of the past, the journey ahead is longer than the road behind.

Our goal is a modest one: to try to leave our small planet a little better than the way we found it.

We are a movement of protest. Those among us who may have forgotten that, have forgotten all.

While we will always respect our traditions, and find advice and counsel in our past, we cannot cling to it.

Whatever challenges we face in the future, may we be guided by the words of the patron saint of navigators:

"To you who would discover, to you who would pioneer, to you who would sail the uncharted seas . . . you must first have the courage to lose sight of your own shore line."

May our American labor movement always have the courage to lose sight of its own shore line.

