

**The Shape of Things to Come  
“Wilsonian Laborism”: Work, War and International Trade, 1914-1920**

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On his grand tour to persuade the American people of the importance of US membership in the League of Nations in the early autumn of 1919, Woodrow Wilson spoke at various high society events in San Francisco, including several luncheons at the majestic Palace Hotel. The next day, he crossed the bay and appeared before audiences in Berkeley and Oakland. Following an afternoon speech given before a packed crowd at the outdoor Greek Theater in Berkeley, Wilson noted how privileged he felt to stand before his fellow citizens in Oakland and discuss “some serious aspects of the great turning point in the history of this Nation.”<sup>1</sup> As he explained the Covenant of the League of Nations in the Oakland Municipal Auditorium, Wilson also announced plans for “a great charter of liberty for the working man and women of the world.” The President described the International Labor Organization (ILO), a new labor-focused institution destined to be a part of the League of Nations, that was intended to help protect standards of labor for workers throughout the world. Wilson maintained that membership in this international body would make the United States part of a “great human endeavor to see that working men and women, and children everywhere in the world are regarded as human beings and taken care of as they ought to be taken care of.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Thousands of citizens, of all walks of life” welcomed Wilson. “All former crowds paled in significance.” *San Francisco Chronicle* (September 19, 1919), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> “At Auditorium, Oakland, Calif., September 18, 1919,” Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., *War and Peace; Presidential Messages, Addresses, and Public Papers 1917-1924; The Public Papers of*

By aiding in the formation of the ILO, the U.S would play its pre-destined role in world affairs, replacing old world injustices with a new form of compassionate, if by implication paternalistic, leadership able to furnish “guarantees such as were never given or even contemplated before for the fair treatment of all who labor at the daily tasks of the world.”<sup>3</sup> Wilson promised that on his watch the United States would “bring all the influence it can legitimately bear upon every nation upon with which it has any dealings to see to it that labor there is put upon as good a footing as labor in America.”<sup>4</sup> A week later, in Pueblo Colorado, Wilson followed with a warning: “Reject this treaty, impair it, and this is the consequence to the laboring men of the world, that there is no international tribunal which can bring the moral judgments of the world to bear upon the great labor question of the day.” He continued: “Just as soon as the calm judgment of the world is directed upon the question of justice to labor, labor is going to have a forum such as it never was supplied with before.”<sup>5</sup>

The concern that Wilson expressed in these speeches for the welfare of labor and the determination he showed to make the promise of US moral leadership in the ILO a prominent part of his crusade for ratification of the treaty creating the League of Nation begs important questions that economic and policy historians must find particularly intriguing at a time when a new phase in globalization has reignited discussions of

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*Woodrow Wilson*, , vol. 1 and 2 of (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), vol. 2, p. 270-1. Hereafter Baker and Dodd, *PPWW*.

<sup>3</sup> “The Treaty has been Signed, Cablegram to Mr. Tumulty to the American People, June 28, 1919,” Baker and Dodd, *War and Peace; PPWW*, vol. 1, p. 524.

<sup>4</sup> “At Auditorium, Oakland, Calif.,” Baker and Dodd, *War and Peace; PPWW*, vol. 2, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> “At Pueblo, Colo., September 25, 1919,” Baker and Dodd, *War and Peace; PPWW*, vol. 2, p. 399, 401. Between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Wilson made two San Diego appearances, one before a large crowd at the San Diego Stadium, quickly followed by several speeches in Los Angeles. He made public addresses in Sacramento, Reno, Ogden and Salt Lake City, Utah, Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Denver, before speaking in Pueblo. For a somewhat superficial summary of the tour see John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of Nations* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.179-89. See also, *The San Francisco Chronicle* (September 17 and 18, 1919) and *San Diego Evening Tribune* (Saturday September 20, 1919).

international labor standards. There is significant scholarly work on Wilsonian attitudes toward labor and antitrust, on his handling of domestic industrial disputes during the war effort, and on the general outlines of Wilsonian internationalism. But the aspects of his internationalism that had to do with specifically the labor question in its domestic and international dimensions, as an element in his vision of a new world order, have been relatively overlooked.

This paper will attempt to characterize and locate the sources of key aspects of Wilson's attitudes toward labor—his “laborism”—by reflecting on the rapprochement between liberal labor and the Democratic Party, and by moving forward through the war years toward the role accorded organized labor in constructing the 1919 postwar settlement, with an eye to both domestic and international repercussions. What was the content of Wilsonian laborism? Was his expressed determination to achieve safety and justice for all workers through international agreement more than simply a bid for support for the League from a domestic working class constituency? Did it reflect an evolution in his understanding of the problems and goals of labor towards the realization that progress toward freer trade, would hinge to a large extent both on providing a measure of fairness in terms of wages, hours, working conditions, things that also affected the cost and productivity of labor, and also on the ability of liberal-capitalist nations in the world trading community to blunt the appeal of socialism by showing that class relations in capitalism could be meaningfully reformed?

This paper will not attempt to address all aspects of Wilsonian internationalism. In fact, I plan to offer only a very tentative analysis from early research for a dissertation project still in the process of formulation on which I will appreciate your feedback. As

my title suggests, I will offer a discussion on the content of Wilson's liberal *labor* internationalism, as one aspect of the larger liberal internationalist program and ideology. I am interested in locating and assessing some of the key influences that shaped Wilson's position on labor's role, in identifying the voices of kindred and influential thinkers who spoke for labor in the postwar settlement, and in recapturing the discourses that found their way into the framing of the ILO. In this paper I will be looking at the versions of postwar labor internationalism offered by three different groups of labor advocates who constructed the laborist discourse around Wilson as he moved into the peace-treaty phase. These included labor leaders, academic writers and critical journalists who functioned as public intellectuals, and social justice activists. They commanded the President's attention by articulating their visions of a postwar order grounded in internationalism and committed to workers' welfare and workers' rights as essential cornerstones of a U.S.-led peace.

To what extent did the labor movement, represented in this paper primarily by Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor, but also by Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, influence Wilson? Secretary Wilson, a former United Mine Workers officer, managed the Department Of Labor's Division of Conciliation, through which he contributed to the mobilization of labor for war production. He later chaired the first ILO conference in Washington DC in October 1919. Gompers and Wilson, labor bureaucrats in the best sense of the term, each represented an important aspect of the labor lobby, and both functioned as intermediaries between the president and the public. Along with these influences, and representing my second group, various types of intellectuals—academics, critical journalists, social investigators, and progressive lawyers—functioned as policy

theorists. I will consider John Andrews of the American Association of Labor Legislation (AALL), economist and Inquiry member Allyn A. Young, and Harvard law professor, legal expert, and public policy activist Felix Frankfurter.

Finally, I will turn briefly to social justice activists who sought an international focus for US labor policy that would reflect their commitment to universalism in pursuing the welfare for the common people of the world. Included here are feminist activists such as Florence Kelley of the National Consumer's League (also the AALL); Jane Addams sitting on the International Association of Labor Legislation (IALL) who also helped form the AALL, social reformer with an avid interest in international civil rights. Addams was a member of the International Alliance for Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship, an organization that sent representatives to Paris in order to lobby for workers' rights; and James Shotwell, a Columbia historian who headed the Documentation Section of the Inquiry, "technical advisor in the Paris negotiations on labor standards, who sat on the sub-committee to draft the "Labor Charter, the statement of ideals that described the actions of the ILO as, first and foremost, a form on international economic and social justice."<sup>6</sup>

I will argue that these eight individuals, and the longer list that they may be taken to represent during the war years, contributed to the construction of a labor internationalist discourse. Their efforts provided the context for Wilson's personal commitment to labor issues exemplified through his attempt to commit the country to an international-standards perspective. This would, Wilson thought, accorded not only protection but also a right of self-determination to workers throughout a world, through

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<sup>6</sup> James T. Shotwell, "Negotiating the Labor Clauses," *At the Paris Peace Conference*, (New York: MacMillan Co., 1937) p. 211.

increased and freer trade, in order to aid in recovery from industrial devastation caused by the war and its drastic financial and policy repercussions. I intend to review briefly Wilson's prewar posture toward issues involving business, labor, and trade, and then to follow the trail of participation and advice coming directly or indirectly from these eight advisers during the Versailles peace process and the formation of ILO. It is important to remember that Wilson was incapacitated by a stroke after late September 1919. Wilson's inability to participate during the crucial period of the initial enactment of American participation in labor internationalism is significant. Without Wilson, labor lost its most powerful spokesman in this regard, one who had perhaps only recently begun to grapple with the important interlocking importance of war, international labor legislation, and trade to the future of the United States.

### **The Story; Labor and Commerce**

N. Gordon Levin, in his 1968 study, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics*, noted that there were "other forces at work" besides Wilson and his grand scheme, described in his Fourteen Points, at the Paris Peace Conference. Levin of course had in mind the Bolsheviks and other groups advocating socialist insurrection, which he argues Wilson sought to counter. Expanding on this, the voices of liberal-capitalist labor leaders can be considered additional "other forces at work." Wilson was looking for a way to incorporate the working people throughout the world in his notion of global leadership through which he sought to overcome America's tradition of isolation, at least regarding world affairs beyond the hemisphere.

Labor and Wilson needed each other for a version of internationalism that promised a new world order based on (in his words) a “free commercial intercourse of the world” achieved through international cooperation that would “cleanse the life of the world and facilitate its common action in beneficent service.”<sup>7</sup> Wilson sold his internationalism to labor, and labor attempted to sell it to the world.

Wilson interacted frequently with labor leaders, labor economists, and social justice activists during his years as president. The US needed the cooperation of the American labor force to build the ships, process the food, and manufacture other products for war. Though Wilson began his first term as a president with the reputation as a pro-business and pro-trade but at least mildly anti-labor politician, he managed to gain significant labor support by the war years. Before the US entered the conflict, Wilson focused on business and financial issues that many reform minded individuals thought chronically destabilized the domestic economy. He maneuvered through Congress major legislation that impacted international trade and commerce. These measures included the Federal Reserve Act, which reorganized the American banking system and allowed for the creation of foreign branch banking to facilitate U.S. participation in international commerce.

There was also tariff reform; the Underwood Act lowered the traditionally high Republican tariff known for its protectionist defense of Northeastern manufacturing. The Tariff Commission Act created an executive agency to approach the tariff scientifically, thus distancing it from pork-barrel and interest group politics. Organized during the war, the U.S. Tariff Commission (USTC) attracted experts who convinced the President of the

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<sup>7</sup> Speech on “Tariff,” (April 8, 1913) reprinted in *The New Democracy; The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926), vol. 2, p. 34.

danger of postwar dumping, particularly of products backlogged in German factories during the fighting. Wilson intended to equip the US with the means of providing itself with the “fundamental instrumentalities” for playing a large part in the “peaceful conquest of the world” through trade.<sup>8</sup> As Martin Sklar has shown, pro-corporate economists and legal writers had been pushing for some time for amendments to the Sherman Act that would recognize and permit full exploitation of economies of scale, and Wilson’s corporations policy had acknowledged the legitimacy of this goal. Now, with the war underway, pressure built in these quarters for allowing combinations, along the lines of German cartels, that would make U.S. exports more competitive efficiency of trade. These efforts succeeded in the Webb-Pomerene Act of 1918, legalizing export combinations. During the early years of World War One, both public (such as through the US Shipping Board) and private organizations focused on shipbuilding and other sorts of construction in order to bolster trade.<sup>9</sup>

When Woodrow Wilson came to the presidency federal policies could certainly not be described as sympathetic toward labor. Federal courts often used the Sherman Act prohibition on restraints of trade against union strikes and boycotts. Wilson himself noted his disapproval of “class legislation,” which meant for him giving special treatment to either capitalists or workers, such as the exemption for labor from the Sherman Act that Gompers had so ardently sought during the writing of the Clayton Act. Denied by

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<sup>8</sup> In “Address in Detroit to Businessmen,” Wilson urged the business world to “go out and sell goods that will make the world more comfortable and more happy, and convert them to the principles of America.” Link, *PWW*, vol. 37, pp. 383-7. Quote on p. 384.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Wolman, *Most Favored Nation: The Republican Reservationists and U.S. Tariff Policy, 1897-1912* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1992), pp. 195-213. Here it must be noted that a case can also be made that Webb-Pomerene provisions were actually of more assistance to smaller businesses that lacked sufficient capital than to major corporations.



Wilson, Gompers was forced to read a “Magna Carta for labor” into the toothless dictum that labor should not be considered a commodity.

Significant legislation that directly impacted the middlemen and managers of US and global commerce had already offered benefits to certain classes of workers. The LaFollette Seamen’s Act of 1915 provided for minimum levels of protection for seamen. To head off a strike, Wilson backed the 1916 Adamson Act that limited railroad workers to an eight-hour workday and granted overtime pay. In addition to these laws that targeted the transportation trades, a new federal law, the Keating-Owens Act, which had received important support in a major Department of Labor report on the subject, prohibited child labor in manufacture of goods for interstate commerce. The pro-labor discourse went a good deal further than this, reflecting a range of reform proposals that the Commission on Industrial Relations staff had offered in a report issued in 1915 that denounced judicial interference with strikes, detailed the enormous power over the U.S. workforce held by a few giant corporations, and recommended a full system of social insurance to guard against the economic insecurities faced by workers in modern capitalism.

Progressive policies such as these found supporters in left-liberal papers, as in a piece titled “Labor is not a Commodity” that appeared late in 1916 in the *New Republic*. There was a concerted campaign led by the AALL once the US entered the war for health national insurance. The AALL also backed measures extending the working hour restrictions, and pay raises to counter the rampant inflation. In addition, an improbable duo, Frank Walsh and former president Taft, heading the National War Labor Board

actually mandated the eight hour day and collective bargaining (though not the closed shop) in war-related industries.<sup>10</sup>

### **Labor Leaders**

By 1916 Wilson realized the importance of gaining the support of organized labor. He understood the benefit of capturing the progressive labor constituency (many of whom voted for Roosevelt in 1912). In his campaign for a second term, the President began to reach out to the AFL, incorporating aspects of Gompers' proposals into the Democratic Party platform. In return, Gompers endorsed Wilson for President. Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson met regularly with the AFL Executive Council and Gompers exchanged frequent correspondence with the President. As noted above, Secretary Wilson was himself a union man out of the United Mine Workers of America. Reaching out to show the workers his appreciation following his reelection, President Wilson spoke both at the dedication of the AFL labor building and at the 1917 AFL annual convention.<sup>11</sup>

Samuel Gompers, often portrayed as a US protectionist and anti-socialist leader of the American Federation of Labor, had a strong interest in international labor issues. In addition to speaking out in support of Wilson in his 1916 bid for president, Gompers

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<sup>10</sup> Contemporaries explained the importance of national policies to readers of the labor press. Hugh Frayne, "The War Industries Board," and Frank Hayes, "National War Labor Board," *American Federationist*, September 1918, vol. XXV, no. 9. p.785-7 and 787-8.

<sup>11</sup> "Address at the Dedication of the American Federation of Labor Building" dated July 4, 1916, Link, *PWW*, vol. 37, p. 353. Link notes that the address was "delivered on an open air platform at the Federation's new headquarters building" in Washington "before an audience estimated at 10,000 persons." He goes on to mention that William B. Wilson and Samuel Gompers also spoke. In the address President Wilson said he was there to express his deep interest in and to "show how near it lies to my own heart that the legitimate objects of the great labor movement should be achieved." Wilson also addressed the AFL Annual Convention in Buffalo on November 12, 1917. There he noted the importance of government and labor standing firm together. "I am with you if you are with me," the President proclaimed. "An Address in Buffalo to the American Federation of Labor," Link, *PWW*, vol. 46, p. 11-17.

stood behind the president in the war effort, depicting the war as one fought to defend democracy, on both a national and international scale. This for Gompers meant a greater voice for the workers of the world. Most important for our purposes, Gompers took part in international labor standards debates, serving as negotiator in both Latin America and Europe. Both Gompers and Wilson served as vice presidents of the AALL. Through cooperation with this organization, Gompers had urged international labor union leaders to attend the AFL Executive Council meeting in order to facilitate the discussion of international labor issues.

The AFL president participated as a negotiator in the Pan American Federation of Labor, where labor leaders gained representation at international conferences “at which questions of commerce, industry, and finance [would be] discussed.”<sup>12</sup> This was part of the US attempt to reach a common agenda with the post-revolutionary Mexican government. Gompers pushed the issue, that of labor’s essential involvement, on Wilson through continued correspondence.<sup>13</sup> One author noted the call for “public diplomacy to take the place of secret diplomacy” making reference to Wilson’s claim to create open

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<sup>12</sup> Gompers to Wilson, July 22, 1916, urging the president to consider the fundamental importance labor issues played in the relations with Mexico. Gompers wrote: “The retarded development, the low standards of life and work that exist among the fifteen millions of Mexican to the south of our country is one of the most serious problems that confront the workers of the United States in promoting their economic and social welfare.” Link, *PWW*, vol. 37, p. 465. Also of note is correspondence from Secretary of the Treasury Carter Glass to Gompers, October 15, 1919. The letter mentions an unofficial Pan American Financial Conference Gompers was pushing to be included in, which began as far back as 1915. *Gompers Letterbooks*, reel 259, p. 64-65.

<sup>13</sup> By July 1918 Gompers was communicating with Wilson about a confidential report made by an AFL Commission to Mexico that was also presented to Secretary of Labor Wilson and Felix Frankfurter. “AFL Commission to Mexico,” Link *PWW*, vol. 49, p. 25-26. For Gompers’ relation to Mexican labor leaders see Gregg Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder?: The American Federation of Labor, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1924* (Berkeley, Calif., 1991). Also Charles Toth, “Samuel Gompers, Communism, and the Pan American Federation of Labor,” *The Americas* 23:3 (January 1967), p. 273-278.

covenants for peace, openly arrived at, at the International Labor Conference in Laredo, Texas on November 3, 1918.<sup>14</sup>

Gompers, who conveniently spoke four languages, spent several months in 1918 and 1919 abroad, where he functioned in both unofficial and state-sponsored capacities. He was one of the main US labor negotiators, first with the August through September 1918 Labor Mission. Gompers chose not to attend a February 1918 Inter-Allied Labor Conference, making the excuse that he did not have the time to prepare, but later explaining that he preferred to stay out of events that would not offer tangible results.<sup>15</sup> He remained an advocate for vigorous interaction with international labor issues and played an important role in outlining the goals for postwar labor, making sure that a labor union voice was included in the peace process. The December 1918 issue of the *American Federationist* was dedicated as “The Nation’s Tribute to American Labor’s Service Abroad.” Frank Walsh presided over a grand reception held on November 11, 1918 (coincidentally marking the end of the war), to welcome home the American Federation of Labor Mission from Europe. Gompers took the floor and described the meaningful task entrusted to the AFL mission to convey fraternity and good will and to spread the message “that America had arisen to the stature of her greatness.” He pounded

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<sup>14</sup> John Murray, “Mexico the Day After the War; What the coming international conference may mean to the life of nations,” *American Federationist*, November 1918, vol. XXV, no. 11, pp. 985-988.

<sup>15</sup> The *American Federationist* April 1918 issue printed a series of exchanges that took place between Gompers and British labor leader Arthur Henderson that outlined this. Gompers blamed “insufficient time” to make the trip to London. Yet later in the issue he admits his hesitancy in dealing with certain labor organizations. His concern, it seems, was that the German socialists would dominate the February conference. Meanwhile, he invited British labor union delegates and French officials through the *Confederation Generale du Travail* to Washington. *American Federationist*, April 1918, vol. XXV, no. 4, p. 293-297.

home his resolve for “the ideal of America,” and what the country could do for the war-torn continent in a “united spirit for the freedom and justice of all people of the world.”<sup>16</sup>

Gompers took a second trip to Paris in early January 1919 as head of the official American labor delegation at the peace conference. In Paris, Gompers, along with Edward N. Hurley of the United States Shipping Board, took their places on the Commission for International Labor Legislation. To the surprise of some of the Europeans, who assumed the position would be held by the British, delegates elected in Gompers as their president.<sup>17</sup> As he had done earlier for US workers, Gompers set about drafting an international “Bill of Rights” for labor. A subcommittee convened in order to write a Labor Charter, a statement of the ideals of labor, to be included in the main peace Treaty. Gompers and others considered this charter, technically part of the League of Nations, of utmost importance. According to Shotwell, Gompers felt this was the opportunity to emphasize certain central points, on an international scale, that were of prime importance to American labor.<sup>18</sup>

The main task of the Labor Commission was to frame an International Labor Memorandum to be submitted to Wilson and the other state leaders for inclusion in the Versailles Peace Treaty. As with other negotiations, countries differed in their opinion on what an international labor body should look like. The main contest was between a

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<sup>16</sup> “The Nation’s Tribute to American Labor Services Abroad,” *American Federationist*, December 1918, vol. XXV, no. 12, pp. 1081-88.

<sup>17</sup> European labor leaders voiced hesitation whether an American could lead the delegation, yet, it seems there was enough support for Gompers to earn him sufficient votes. In a memo from Bernard Baruch to Wilson, dated January 20, 1919, Baruch urges the President to include Gompers in the peace process, claiming the need to get Gompers to Paris quickly, since “the working men here have great confidence in two people—Wilson himself, and Gompers. Link, *PWW*, vol. 54, p 173.

<sup>18</sup> The domestic version of the Labor Charter contained seven articles, including the rights of association, payment of just wages, and equal payment regardless of sex for equal valued work. The international practically echoed these same fundamental principles, with two additions, dealing with specific national economies and systems of inspection. Number one in each case, declared, “first and foremost,” that “labor should not be regarded as a commodity or article of commerce.” See “Labor Clauses in Peace Treaty,” *New York Times*, April 30, 1919, p.3.

“British Plan,” which according to Shotwell, consisted of a labor parliament that could actually draft international labor laws, and an American version that included only management and labor with no official government representation at all and thus no direct legislative leverage. Gompers and other US delegates objected to the British model straight away, noting the American constitutional system would not allow such a “super-state.” The institutional structure finally adopted was a compromise between this British version, including government officials, and Gompers’ idea of a non-governmental body consisting of only labor and management. This compromise set up a dual procedure wherein ILO members, including two government representatives and one each from labor and employers groups, would vote on recommendations for labor legislation and then formally submit them to their governments.<sup>19</sup>

Back in the US, Gompers campaigned for the ratification of the peace treaty. He was convinced that lower standards abroad would diminish the chance that workers in the US could maintain the advantages gained during the war. At issue most importantly was labor’s rights to organize, and following this, to engage in collective bargaining. Yet this also included the fight for an adequate standard of living and an eight hour work day, limitations on night work for women, and regulations against child labor in industry. All of these, Gompers concluded, if not regulated abroad, would bring down domestic labor standards, based on the need for US business to make a profit.

Within the government itself, Secretary of Labor Wilson played a major role in the reorganization of American labor, setting production on a war footing. The 1917 industrial unrest (strikes and protests blamed mainly on the rising cost of living without

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<sup>19</sup> Shotwell, *At the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 203-5; Edward J. Phelan, “The Commission on International Labor Legislation,” in *The Origins of the International Labor Organization*, James T. Shotwell, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), p. 127-131.

adequate wage increases) led to the creation of the Council of National Defense (CND) that sought to reach agreement between industry, government, and labor. Gompers acted as chair of the Advisory Commission.<sup>20</sup> The scope of this commission reached as far as the US Navy. Gompers and others provided oversight for wages, hours, and overall working conditions for naval personnel.<sup>21</sup> Secretary Wilson understood the need to shift labor both geographically and between industries in order to keep production up and reach greater levels of efficiency. Still, in an article published in 1918, the Secretary argued that the highest efficiency could only be obtained through proper treatment of the workers. This, he noted, needed to be combined with adequate planning and management, and effective training. Elaborating on proper treatment, he mentioned the necessity for sanitation and safety measures, supplying comfortable homes for the workers, and conducting workdays “sufficiently short to enable the worker to return to work the next day refreshed for the task he has to perform.”<sup>22</sup>

President Wilson established the National War Labor Board (NWLB) and the War Labor Policies Board (WLPB). Walsh and Taft, through the NWLB, set up a comprehensive industrial code that defended the right of workers to organize, put in place methods for conciliation, and established the eight hour work day in war industries. In exchange labor agreed to suppress strikes for the duration of the war. In a September 1918 article, “Labor Accepts its Responsibilities,” Secretary Wilson claimed that labor in “America and Europe alike is performing a tremendous task” and urged the cooperation

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<sup>20</sup> John Lombardi, *Labor's Voice in the Cabinet; A History of the Department of Labor from its origins to 1921* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), p. 205.

<sup>21</sup> There is continued correspondence between Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, as well as Secretary of the War Department, Newton Baker, and Gompers regarding hours, duties, and piece-work on board and in the Navy Yards. For several examples see *Gompers Letterbooks*, reel 228, p. 412, 894 and reel 259, p. 281.

<sup>22</sup> William B. Wilson, “The Efficiency of Labor,” *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 78 (1918), p. 66-74.

to continue. He highlighted the efficiency of the “industrial army” in the US.<sup>23</sup> Once the war ended, however, the question remained whether the wartime measures, especially those that benefited workers, such as higher wages and the eight hour day, would remain.

In addition to his domestic agenda, Secretary Wilson also focused on international aspects of labor regulations. He chaired the organizational committee for the first ILO meeting that convened in Washington in October, which will be discussed below.

Wilson was receptive to consulting the British to better understand how to conduct labor relations during the war. Born in Scotland, into a union household, Wilson always kept an eye on union-business relations across the ocean. His union connection led many labor leaders considered him as an important intermediary between the workers and the US President.

Both Gompers and Secretary Wilson, along with the President, took the domestic agenda into the realm of the international. The big issue for each of these men was whether labor could possibly hold onto wartime gains while also avoiding the chance that the chaotic situation in Europe, including a wave of socialist revolution, would reach American shores. The main question, and this became an essential in the debate over the ILO and labor standards, was whether the rest of the world would bring down American standards, or, vice versa. US labor leaders, most famously through what Gompers referred to as “Labor Bill of Rights” (from Section 6 of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act) claiming, “the labor of a human being is not a commodity,” carried this mantra into an international forum.<sup>24</sup> Both Gompers and Wilson defended the worldwide right for

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<sup>23</sup> William B. Wilson, “Labor Accepts its Responsibilities,” *American Federationist*, September 1918, vol. XXV, no. 9, p. 781-2.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Gompers, “Labor’s State Legislative Demands,” *American Federationist*, July, 1916, vol. XXIII, no. 7, p. 546. It was this clue, that of the common vocabulary between the AFL and the ILO (which still



workers to organize, supported wages that provided for a decent standard of living, stood firm on limiting the use of child labor, and endorsed one full day of rest during the week. European labor unionist and social reformers had been supporting these measures for years. Now, however, the leadership of the international labor movement fell temporarily into the hands of the Americans.

### **Academic/ Legal Labor Advisors**

John Andrews was the main administrative force behind the American Association of Labor Legislation. A student of John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin, headed the organization from 1909 until his death in 1943, when the AALL ceased to function. Through this organization Andrews oversaw investigations of labor conditions with a view to promoting what he felt to be necessary labor legislation. The AALL used reports generated by these efforts to draft model bills, intended to be introduced into state legislatures, or perhaps even the US Congress. The AALL also organized for testimony before legislative committees. Andrews coordinated lobbying efforts, wrote letters, and distributed informational material to back up the propositions. Andrews saw the endeavor as a rational conversation underway between informed experts, labor, and government officials. During the First World War the AALL led a campaign for national health insurance. Andrews wrote about this, but also about the international labor standards movement. The AALL itself was an offshoot of the International Association of Labor Legislation. AALL members included Florence

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remains as one of the ILO's fundamental principles) that first alerted me of the important connection between Gompers and the ILO. This seemed odd at first based on the fact that the US did not join the organization until 1933. It reflects the early role of Gompers and other Americans in the internationalist labor standards movement following World War One.

Kelley, Samuel Gompers, and Woodrow Wilson, the latter serving as a symbolic vice president.

The AALL provided a specific policy outline for national health insurance, published in the *American Labor Legislation Review*. In additional publications, Andrews offered statistics about estimated economic loss to American business due to sickness, drawing comparison to Germany under a rigorous national health insurance plan. He came up with a figure estimating “total social and economic sickness per annum” and possible savings if health insurance could be instituted.<sup>25</sup> Thus, he argued that disadvantages of the system in place came not just in lost wages, but in lost productivity, highlighting the preventative effect of health insurance. Andrews saw labor standards as a vital component of national well-being. Like Gompers, he stressed the great opportunity in light of World War One to establish minimum protections for workers throughout the world. This would be, he averred, good for business, in that it would avoid unfair competition with countries with lower standards. It was strange, he claimed, that American business was slow to realize this.<sup>26</sup>

Allyn A. Young was an economist who worked with Richard Ely on labor issues, publishing, with his mentor and others, works such as *Outlines of Economics* in 1916 that looked closely at economic dimensions of labor legislation in both theory and in practice. The volume analyzed social insurance, including how it might be focused for old age, sickness, and unemployment. It also discussed “the necessity of adjusting laws and social

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<sup>25</sup> John B. Andrews, “Social Insurance,” *Annals in the Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 69, The Present Labor Situation; Compulsory Investigation and Arbitration. (January 1917), pp. 42-49. For two good discussions on the war time insurance campaigns see Beatrix Hoffman, *The Wages of Sickness; The Politics of Health Insurance in Progressive America*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 200) and Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in United States* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> John B. Andrews, “International Labor Standards Legislation,” *Proceeding of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York*, vol. 8 no. 3, The League of Nations Covenant. (July, 1919), pp. 86-89.

machinery to enlarge ... production,” due to increased industrial development in the United States. The book argued that modernization demanded changes in labor laws.<sup>27</sup> Especially known for his work on the theory of increasing returns, Young also studied the concentration of wealth and changes in general prices.<sup>28</sup> Professor Young headed the economics Division of the Inquiry, focusing especially on the study of labor problems.<sup>29</sup> The Inquiry mobilized political and social scientists to help shape the outline of Wilson’s “new world order.” Young also sat on the War Trade Board, a body that coordinated Inter-Allied governments with business groups, especially those in manufacturing and shipping. Once postwar international deliberations began, he took charge of the Economic Division of the Paris Peace Delegation. Young drafted several labor clauses, insisting on connecting these with equality of trade conditions.<sup>30</sup>

Secretary of Labor Wilson appointed Felix Frankfurter as chairman of the War Labor Policies Board. Frankfurter wrote that this organization was “the voice of all the industrial agencies of the government.”<sup>31</sup> Its aim was to coordinate government policies dealing with labor. In this capacity Frankfurter assisted the Secretary of Labor in the War Labor Administration, formulating reports and arranging conferences between President Wilson, union officials, agency officials, and business representatives. He also served as legal counsel to Secretary of War Newton Baker. Frankfurter traveled to Europe to study

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<sup>27</sup> *Outlines of Economics*, Richard T. Ely, Thomas S. Adams, Max O. Lorenz, and Allyn A. Young, eds. (New York: MacMillan, 1916).

<sup>28</sup> Young published many articles during and after the war. One relevant example was, “Do the Statistics on the Concentration of Wealth in the United States Mean What they are Commonly Assumed to Mean?” *Publications of the American Statistical Association*, 15:117 (Mar., 1917), pp. 471-484. Giorgio Colacchio offers a current assessment of Young’s main contribution to theory in “Reconstructing Allyn A. Young’s Theory of Increasing Returns,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 2005, vol. 27:3, pp. 321-344.

<sup>29</sup> Shotwell, *At the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 112.

<sup>31</sup> Felix Frankfurter, “The War Labor Policies Board,” *American Federationist*, September 1918, vol. XXV, no. 9, p. 797.

the methods used in both Britain and France in dealing with problems in industry. At the end of the war he was appointed as a legal representative, one particularly familiar with labor issues, at the Paris peace conference.

In Paris, joining the Labor Commission in March, Frankfurter provided legal advice, and perhaps more importantly, a rational temper in negotiating the labor clauses. Gompers seemed loath to diverge from his philosophical position that labor should stay free from the direct legislative process. There is a great deal of scholarship that deals with this aspect of Gompers' approach to unionism. Frankfurter, according to Shotwell, was an essential factor in compromising with the Europeans in order to allow governmental representatives into the ILO. As legal advisor Frankfurter understood the importance of reaching an agreement in a technical sense, committed to the idea of harmony of action.<sup>32</sup>

Academic intellectuals argued that international standards were necessary, not just from the standpoint of labor, but in the interest of the general public. These three men took the lessons they learned during the war and applied them to the need for a lasting international cooperative society. They utilized their expertise in policy formulation, economics, and law in order to help avoid problematic labor-employer relations, through agreements backed by state power. They all worked toward regulation of labor standards, realizing that competition with other countries that skimmed on labor standards could potentially threaten US production, prosperity, and class harmony. Thus, better labor organization meant more cooperation, greater efficiency, and more intelligent

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<sup>32</sup> Frankfurter reported to Secretary Wilson. See this "Harmony of Action by Labor Adjustment Agencies" which included a special section on the enforcements of standards. "Frankfurter to William B. Wilson" October 15, 1918, Link, *PWW*, vol. 51, pp. 363-7.

international trade. Movement toward these goals were particularly important in light of postwar labor unrest.

### **Social Justice Activists**

The early twentieth century consumer movement overlapped significantly with what historians recognize as “female reform,” a largely middle-class movement of educated women who had been backing protectionist movements for women, children, and families since the 1880s and supporting progressive political leaders who committed to these causes. Highly conscious of labor exploitation, social justice activists in both of these movements focused on working conditions and utilized consumer boycotts to protect laborers. The focus of consumer ethics crossed international borders since activists understood that trade with nations that lacked regulation, employing vast number of child laborers, paying the lowest of wages, and negligent when it came to safety regulations helped profit certain business, but hurt laborers all over the world. Florence Kelley, president of the National Consumer’s League (NLC), also sat on international advisory committees concerned with industrial hygiene and industrial safety. Through these efforts she helped monitor policies related to labor standards.

Before her actions with the NCL, Kelley worked with Jane Addams at Chicago’s famous Hull House. Here social reformers of all sorts studied labor issues, and offered their insights on potential policies that would help the working poor, in a neighborhood filled with working class immigrants. Addams, Kelley, and many of their cohorts became involved in both domestic and international causes. The International Alliance of Women, including consumer advocates, sent representatives to the Paris Peace

Conference in 1919 to work with some of the special commissions that touched on social and employment issues including avoiding industrial exploitation, issues of citizenship, and the defense of human rights. Years before this, Jane Addams traveled to Europe and spoke at the International Alliance for Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship conference in Budapest, Hungary in 1913. Women who included themselves in such international activities, focused on the well being of all people, regardless of nationality. In Paris in 1919, this involved questions of citizenship rights, for both women and men, in the postwar settlement. In their view the struggle for equal rights became part and parcel of the struggle for peace.<sup>33</sup>

An International Congress for Working Women took place in Washington at the same time as the opening meeting of the ILO. Sponsored by the National Women's Trade Union League of America, the meeting gathered representatives from somewhere between 10 and 20 (the sources disagree) countries to discuss and promote fair labor standards for women. The conference focused on employment issues for women such as fair wages and the regulation of overtime. Delegates also discussed legal standards of individual countries concerning the employment of women before and after childbirth, insurance against unemployment, compulsory education, and the goal to work towards the abolition child labor worldwide.<sup>34</sup> The Congress called for a universal eight hour workday and legally binding maternity leave for working women. Other women who attended included Eleanor Roosevelt, Rose Schneiderman, representing labor in the Cap Makers Union, Mary Van Kleeck, Mary Anderson of Women's Trade Union league (later the Labor Department), and Julia O'Connor, President of the Telephone Operators

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<sup>33</sup> For a helpful narrative of women activists in the international realm, see Leila Rupp's *Worlds of Women; The Making of the International Women's Movement* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> "Union Women's Labor Program," *New York Times*, October 12, 1919. p. 50.

Union.<sup>35</sup> Secretary of War Baker addressed the Congress on October 31. He spoke about the hopeful advancement of “social consciousness” and international proposals that would aid in the “betterment of individuals.” Baker also mentioned the fear that the end of war would bring a lowering of the “social ethic.”<sup>36</sup> In addition to women social reformers, an important group of social justice advocates, supporting the international labor movement in the US, came out of academia.

As noted, a whole group of academic experts, in politics, economics, law, and history participated in the Inquiry commission. Edward M. House assembled and then administered the effort, which began life as a secret project. The Inquiry dealt primarily with problems of policy and the organization and training of the members to be included in the US delegation to the peace conference. James Shotwell worked in miscellaneous studies of all sorts and House asked him become familiar with a wide range of details concerning public opinion, speeches and periodicals, and the positions taken on particular issues by labor unions and chamber of commerce groups. Along with Allyn Young, Shotwell took his work with the Inquiry on to Paris, also specializing on policy issues concerning international labor. Shotwell later wrote extensively about this experience, compiling numerous volumes on the founding stages of the ILO.

Shotwell’s position in Paris took on the dimension of all around technical assistance for the American commission, referring to himself as both librarian and manager of the agenda. In addition to searching for needed documents, he acted as a broker between divergent expert opinions. Shotwell provided an important link as a

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<sup>35</sup> “Women of 12 Lands in Labor Conference,” *New York Times*, October 29, 1919, p. 3. Anderson and Schneiderman made the trip to Paris as unofficial labor delegates. Shotwell discusses his meetings with them in *At the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 239 and 244.

<sup>36</sup> Ask Women’s Equality in Labor Conference,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1919, p. 6.

historian to the creation of the Labor memorandum, and thus, the founding of the ILO. His role as generalist allowed him to reflect, somewhat detached, upon the nature of the international labor agreement. Shotwell wrote that he considered an international organization such as the ILO essential in providing the groundwork for future peace. The ILO could become, he argued, not just an institution beneficial to the workers, but a positive forum supporting the interests of workers, capital, and government, “to deal with the problems that are most real to most people the world over.” Upon reflection, he claimed that the organization could well have been called the International Organization for Social Justice.<sup>37</sup>

The argument made for international cooperation of social activists such as Kelley whose interests in consumer protection had always aimed at elevating the labor standards and who now clearly saw the ILO as a means toward protecting workers throughout the world. Addams concerned herself with the fundamental rights of workers and citizens. These women crossed paths with socially conscious intellectuals such as Shotwell over issues of peace and humanitarianism, but also linked to social and economic rights. The preamble to the ILO which stated that, “universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice,” which reflected the sentiments of both Shotwell and these feminist reformers.

### **October / November 1919 and Beyond**

Labor representatives left Europe with a concrete plan for enacting the ILO. The first meeting of the ILO opened in Washington on October 29, 1919. Despite their

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<sup>37</sup> “There can be no assurance of permanent peace in the world,” Shotwell wrote, “that perpetuates spoliation of the rights of others.” Shotwell, *At the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 55.



exclusion from Paris negotiations both the Germans and Austrians received invitations to join. Logistics in transportation, it seems, kept them away. Still, those who did attend noted the particular importance of Germany in such an endeavor and voted that Germany be included in the relatively select ILO Governing Body consisting of only eight countries. Almost forty nations sent delegations to Washington this first year. The Soviet Union did not attend. Japan sent the largest group of representatives, accompanied by a significant number of eager Japanese journalists.<sup>38</sup>

According to one account the participants embraced “immense hopes and aspirations” that their work would contribute to the reconstruction of a new international order.<sup>39</sup> Secretary Wilson functioned as chair, even though the US was designated an “unofficial” participant since until the Treaty of Versailles was ratified there could be no official American representation. The meetings lasted until mid-November, thus overlapping with the US Senate’s intense debate over the ratification of the Treaty itself.

As negotiated in France, national delegations to the ILO consisted of two government representatives, one individual representing labor, and one standing in for employers. The US unofficial group included representatives of the US Chamber of Commerce and the AFL. As the press noted, the International Labor Conference became possible due to a joint resolution passed by the US Congress, but noted that the US “would be forced to sit by as an onlooker” until the US joined the League of Nations.<sup>40</sup>

Voting members at the meetings reached agreement on four conventions: advocating an

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<sup>38</sup> “First World Congress of Labor,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1919, p. XX12.

<sup>39</sup> Harold Butler, “The Washington Conference,” in *Origins of the International Labor Organization*, vol. 1, p.306.

<sup>40</sup> According to Shotwell, he personally proposed an amendment, never accepted, to provide an alternative for ILO membership if the US failed to enter the League. See “Suggestion for an Amendment of the Covenant Making Provision for Association with the League,” *At the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 231. Quote taken from “See America Out of Labor Parlays,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1919, p. 15.

eight hour day in “industrial undertakings,” setting out suggestions on how governments might undertake “remedial legislation” to remedy unemployment, and stipulations concerning women and children in industry. The conventions then were to be submitted to respective governments. The conference also offered several “recommendations,” including safety measures against anthrax, lead poisoning, the use of white phosphorus in the manufacture of matches, and quite importantly, reciprocity of treatment of foreign workers.<sup>41</sup>

Although Congress allowed for US sponsorship of the Washington Conference no money became allocated. Franklin D. Roosevelt, then Assistant Secretary of the Navy, stepped in and provided logistical support from the Department of the Navy.<sup>42</sup> The Senate, on November 18, voted on two reservations qualifying US participation in international labor standards regulation. The first failed, yet, the second, which defended the Senate’s desire not to embrace the labor clauses unless Congress accepted them by a joint resolution, passed. On November 19, the Senate voted on the Treaty itself, denying US participation. The argument against international commitment, at least concerning labor standards, hinged on the fear that committing the US to such international negotiations would necessarily relinquish freedom of maneuverability. This would, critics argued, limit domestic ability to make adjustments to the economy.

The World War One settlement represents the beginnings of international labor standard recommendations through the ILO, known afterwards as “international labor codes.” Nations that failed to accept the decisions made by the International Labor

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<sup>41</sup> Spencer Miller, Jr., “American Labor’s Relation to the International Labor Organization,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, vol. 166, The International Labor Organization, (March 1933), p. 158.

<sup>42</sup> Harold Butler, “The Washington Conference,” p. 310.

Commission would, according to a diplomat reporting to the *New York Times*, be “brought to reason” by depriving trade privileges to such a state.<sup>43</sup> Before the delegates of the first ILO meeting left Washington they set a date for a second session to take place in Genoa (not Geneva) the summer of 1920. This conference dealt specifically with labor standards in the seafaring trades, so vitally important for trade and a sound international economy, and sought the establishment of National Seamen’s Codes.

Despite the importance of a short-lived rapprochement in the US between organized labor and the government, making possible the inclusion of labor leaders in the peacemaking process, labor issues, and the ILO itself, seemed to be a minor part of the historical account. Early ILO architects hoped that the organization could help foster cooperation between domestic industries, promote international trade, and also speak to issues of human rights and attempts at enforcing international law. The voices of Samuel Gompers and James Shotwell, and the acumen of Felix Frankfurter are reflected in important details of the history of the international labor standards movement.

President Wilson claimed to bring home from Paris a charter for a new order that would offer reassurances in terms of both security and prosperity. It represented, he affirmed, a new era through liberating people earlier held back by the force of authoritarian rule, and would be backed by the stronger force of international law. Wilson thought this was possible, laying the basis for free world trade while also providing humanitarian services through guaranteeing fairer treatment of labor.<sup>44</sup> Historians have often remarked that Wilsonian internationalism was an attempted, if largely unsuccessful,

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<sup>43</sup>“British Plan on International Labor Board Which will be responsible to the League of Nations,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1919, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> “Cablegram, Through Mr. Tumulty, to the American People, June 28, 1919. From the Congressional Record, vol. 58, pp.1952-1953,” Stoddard and Dodd, *War and Peace, PPWW*, vol. 1, p. 523-4.

projection of U.S. progressivism abroad. Wilson and labor seemed to reach agreement in the US on a unified labor program, yet this agreement collapsed in the final months of 1919. One may wonder, however, if this “progressivism abroad” interpretation can be extended to include the specifically *labor-related* aspects of Wilsonian internationalism. Included here would be arrangements set forth during the Paris Peace negotiations for the creation of the ILO, which still exists today. I argue that Wilsonian labor internationalism notable for its contribution to setting up a new institutional structure for setting labor standards and supporting international trade. This was both moral and economic endeavor.

As we have seen, it is not only possible, but necessary, to write about Wilsonian internationalism, specifically liberal labor internationalism, without Wilson himself overpowering the conversation, yet still standing as its decisive spokesman. It is also possible to discuss the choice made by the US to distance itself from the League of Nations, including the ILO, by looking beyond the tragedy of “Wilson as a broken man.” The culmination of this story is, in fact, Wilsonianism without Wilson, since the President was absent from public life during the initial meeting of the ILO in October 1919. In mid- November, Wilson was still in convalescence from the effect of his stroke, while the US Senate voted against the Treaty. Two of the fourteen “reservations” involved unwillingness to become involved with international labor regulation.<sup>45</sup> Here a different tragedy played itself out, which was a missed opportunity to set in place international standards for labor, prior to the acceleration of international trade and investment and to the movement of much industrial employment to less developed countries with cheaper labor markets during the later twentieth century.

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<sup>45</sup> “Labor Amendment to Treaty Debated,” *New York Times*, October 31, 1919, p. 17.

The US removed itself through the constitutional process as international labor leaders, corporate managers, and state representatives debated the reciprocity of treatment of foreign workers, setting up comprehensive work codes for seamen and agricultural workers, and providing for the repatriation and transit of emigrants displaced by war or stranded merchant marines. The US did participate in the ILO endeavors, through unofficial AFL representatives as advisors, for the first 15 years of its existence, finally joining in the midst of the Great Depression. The “shape of things to come” in my title makes reference to the next postwar settlement, with the signing of the United Nations Charter on June 26, 1945, along with the continued efforts of the ILO, both included in the broader prosecution of the fight for the protection of labor and human rights practices. These issues received greater attention (even if still lacking in their results) in the era the *re-establishment* of a robust economic globalism in the late twentieth century.<sup>46</sup>

From the standpoint of issues of power, income, wealth, and security, US commitment to “democracy and liberty for all” translated into a call to solicit the support of organized labor, an important part of which played a constitutive role in the emerging Wilsonian Internationalism. Wilson himself noted that he sought to unleash the nations “irresistible energy... for the commercial conquest of the world,” through challenging businessmen and producers to be “efficient, economical, and enterprising masters of competitive supremacy.” In all, Wilson thought the US could become a nation filled with, “better workers and merchants than any in the world.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Jeffrey Frieden, *Global Capitalism; Its Fall and Rise in the Twentieth Century* (New York: W.W. & Norton Company, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Speech on “Tariff,” (April 8, 1913) reprinted in *The New Democracy; The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926), vol. 1, p. 34.

Liberal labor internationalism found support in members of labor unions, professional social scientists, consumer groups, and socially conscious intellectuals. This paper brings together policy and economic studies, labor history, and international relations in its analysis of emerging liberal transnational labor solidarity. Each of the groups came together around an attempt to initiate international labor standards for different reasons, be these trade and efficiency, democracy, labor rights, or social justice. My future work will take the story into the interwar years, and through World War Two, into yet another post war settlement.

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