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Institution: Pennsylvania State University Project for Global Workers’ Rights

Research project: The United States and the International Labor Organization, 1919–1954

Time frame: 1919–1954

Abstract: Despite initial support during the post-WWI negotiations for the creation of the International Labor Organization (ILO), the United States failed to join in 1919 due to national-level political fights that quickly stifled President Woodrow Wilson’s internationalist dreams. Fifteen years later, however, Franklin Roosevelt sought out membership and was able to press for US engagement with the ILO in a very different political environment created by the crisis of the 1930’s depression. Once the United States joined the ILO in 1934, the nation quickly exerted a strong influence. US New Deal labor policy experts worked with specialists in the International Labor Office to press ILO member states to support fundamental rights for workers, including the right to a decent standard of living. The ILO’s 1944 Declaration of Philadelphia extended the institution’s objectives to include social welfare pledges and economic development aims, alongside those relating to more traditional standards of work. US liberals pinned their hopes on the promise of this “Philadelphia Charter” as a directive for the postwar global political economy.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, U.S. reformers and policy makers were at the center of innovative thinking on ILO international labor standards. Still, they approached this subject with a rose colored vision of U.S. potential, assuming that the nation’s can-do spirit, coupled with a good dose of American idealism, could accomplish all goals: nurture world peace, stimulate economic growth, and support fair and positive social relations. Yet former Roosevelt-era administrators quickly came under attack in the decade following WWII as domestic political battles once again pushed the nation towards much more skeptical relations with the ILO. In fact, by the 1950s the ILO—along with the entire UN project itself—became a target for counter attacks by those who
opposed universalizing mandates. This assault, including intense criticism on the methods of the ILO presented serious complications for the ongoing project of establishing international labor standards.

My work on US-ILO relations considers the diverse ideological streams in the US and its foreign policy history. The purpose of my project is to explain why the ILO shone so bright within US international relations discourse for three decades, from the 1930s through the 1950s, only to undergo serious attack by the year 1954. Through my work, I aim to recover the narratives, the networks, and the ambitions of the men and women who promoted the ILO idea in America and beyond.

_Publications:_


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