
PHIL MURRAY: AT THE INTERFACE OF AMERICAN LABOUR AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

菲尔·默里：在美国劳工
与天主教社会教学的交界处

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ABSTRACT

Economic, political, and religious factions struggled for control of work forces in the 19th century as industrializing societies in Europe and the United States of America (US) gained power. In Europe, where class distinctions were entrenched, political parties that focused on the labouring classes emerged, with significant impact from the religious organizations that dominated each society.

In the US, with a less class-defined society, and without the tradition of an established church, political parties based on the “working class” did not materialize, nor did parties controlled by a religious faction. US political parties were coalitions of economic, geographic, and ethnic alliances. The saga of Philip Murray, one of the key leaders of the US unionization era of 1920-1950, illustrates the complexity of the US work force, the importance of secular political forces for unionisation, and the influence of the Catholic Church on the process.

ORGANISING LABOUR

As the US economy boomed in the late 19th Century, among those pulled into its industrial labour force were American farmers, immigrants from western and eastern Europe, and Afro-Americans from the American South. Within those groups were Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, and secularists promoting various social initiatives. For Europe's Catholic communities and for the increasingly large number of Catholics in the US, Pope Leo XIII on 15th May 1891 issued his encyclical *Rerum novarum* which addressed these industrializing and increasingly contentious societies (Leo XIII, 1891). His encyclical guided Catholic social action up to and through the Great War from 1914 to 1918 that shattered Europe's traditional societies and placed renewed pressure on US social structure. The economic collapse of 1929-1930 brought an entirely new crisis.

During these decades, Philip Murray emerged from the US working class through the patronage of John L. Lewis to become an important US labour leader. The encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII in 1891 and Pope Pius XI in 1931 (Pius XI, 1931) motivated Murray's wider ethnic and religious network and strengthened his efforts. Heineman (1999, 117) asserted that "Murray embraced the labour encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI" and sent "Catholic organizers to the mill towns" in an effort to deflect attempts to paint the Steelworkers Organising Committee (SWOC) as a communist organization (97). *Time magazine* (1952 Aug 4) confirms that Murray had Pope Leo XIII's encyclical in his Pittsburgh office, but adds Murray's quip that, "my grandparents had these ideas before Leo wrote them."

FROM THE COAL FIELDS

On 22nd October 1877 in the Scottish town of Blantyre 207 coal miners were killed in a methane gas explosion. Phil Murray was born there nine years later on 25th May 1886. His father was an Irish Catholic coal miner and president of the local miners' union, while his mother was a textile worker who died when Philip was two. As the oldest child, he went to work in Scotland's mines in 1896 at age ten. In 1902 at age 16 he immigrated with his father to the US. His 1912 association with John P White, the president of the United Mine Workers (UMW) connected him to a key US labour organizer, John L Lewis. Murray then rose to the top ranks of the labour movement, as Lewis appointed him head of the SWOC in June 1936, then his successor as head of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in November 1940. The UMW was the base of Phil Murray's mentor, John L Lewis, an American-born Protestant who was raised in the Mormon household of his influential mother. His attachment to his father's roots in Wales was distant. Lewis supported Republicans in the 1920s after his rise to the top of the UMW at the age of 39 in 1920. A forceful personality, he had spent his early years with his father and brothers in Iowa's coal mines. With dictatorial drive he sought a better economic deal for the coal miners, who were, as he had been, at the bottom of America's industrial pyramid.

SOCIAL REVOLUTION

In Philadelphia, the Knights of Labor was founded in 1869 as a secret society of tailors, but by 1879 it had evolved into the first US national labour union and was organizing cooperatives, boycotts, and limited strikes. Initially the

Catholic Church had feared it as quasi-masonic, but Catholics entered openly when it dropped secrecy and ritual. Between 1879 and 1896 under its Irish-Catholic leader, Terence Powderly, it grew into America's largest labour organization. In Chicago in August 1886, the Haymarket Riot created an anarchist scare that destroyed the loosely organized group and left an opening for a nationwide union. The New York cigar maker Samuel Gompers seized the opportunity and in December 1886 in Columbus (Ohio) formed the American Federation of Labor (AFL) which he led for the next four decades until 1924. In September 1890, also in Columbus, the Gompers-led AFL organized the UMW, which became the AFL's largest union.

In Europe by the mid-19th century as industrialization fragmented societies, heated confrontation arose. In 1864 in London Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin plotted revolution for the working class and the seizure of power by armed rebellion through what came to be known as the 'First Socialist International.' Following the disaster for socialists of the Paris Commune of May 1871, Marxists had repackaged their programs by 1889 into a 'Second Socialist International' which sought political power through the existing political process. Socialists pursued political power through control over the labour movement and fought bitterly with the AFL whose primary goal was to maximize economic benefits for members. *Time Magazine* (1952, Aug 4) wrote that Gompers used to sum up his ambitions for labour in one word: "More."

The Catholic Church formally entered the ongoing labour struggles on the side of private property and the sanctity of the family through *Rerum Novarum* of May 1891. Pope Leo XIII's encyclical observed that "the elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, ...in the

changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some... and the utter poverty of the masses." The encyclical sought to define the "relative rights and mutual duties of the rich and of the poor," while warning against "crafty agitators" that were "intent on making use of these differences... to stir up the people to revolt" (Pope Leo XIII, 1891, par 2). The document judged that "The socialists, ...in setting aside the parent and setting up State supervision, act against natural justice, and destroy the structure of the home." Rejected was the socialist tenet of a "community of goods," which was injurious to those "it would seem to benefit" and "directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind" (par 14, 15).

CATAclysm OF THE GREAT WAR

The US entry into World War I in April 1917 provided the impetus to create the National Catholic War Council (NCWC) with a purpose at its January 1918 launch "to promote Catholic participation the War" and to lobby for Catholic interests. But the war was over just ten months later.

One of its five departments was the lightly staffed Social Action Department (SAD), from which Rev. John A. Ryan advanced the US Catholic social justice movement. Ryan had drafted the *Program of Social Reconstruction* that the February 1919 conference had issued. While Ryan pursued "his apostolate of writing and lecturing," Fr. Raymond McGowan and a field secretary took care of operations that included seminars across the US. Ryan gave the benediction at the inaugurations of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) three times in succession, but he was forced to retire from the Catholic University of America in 1939 at age 70 (Higgins, 1993, 36-37, 52-4). At his death in September

1945 McGowan stepped into the directorship 1945-1954, while the Catholic labour journalist, Fr. George Higgins, who had joined SAD in 1944 as Ryan faded, became Director from 1954 to 1972. During Higgins' directorship in 1966 the Council was renamed the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) with a secretariat entitled United States Catholic Conference (USCC). Finally, both were recombined in 2001 into the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

The NCWC meeting in June 1917, which was the first meeting of the entire US Catholic hierarchy of Bishops since 1884, came just five months after the Woodrow Wilson had won a Presidential election for which the Democratic Party slogan had been, "He kept us out of War." The organizer of the conference was the *Catholic World* editor Msgr. John J. Burke, who gained the backing of the second American Cardinal, James Gibbons of Baltimore, and became secretary general. Unfortunately, there was no common understanding of the NCWC's goals. After Pope Benedict XV gave his approval in February of 1920, Cardinal O'Connell of Boston in February 1922 lobbied Rome for its suppression by asserting that it usurped the role of local Catholic dioceses. Initially successful, his efforts were reversed in July 1922 by the new Pope Pius XI after the "most forceful protest to Rome in American catholic history" (Dolan, 2017). The word *Conference* was then substituted for *Council* to avoid it being construed as a legislative body.

Eventually by the 1940-50s over one hundred 'Catholic Labor Schools' had been created to teach workers both Catholic social principles, in opposition to Marxist strategies, with a focus on union organizing and administration (Higgins, 1993, 54-5). By this time Lewis and Murray had already organized the coal miners

and steelworkers into powerful labour unions of national import, with the newly formed CIO having a reported 4 million members as early as 1938. McGreevy (1993, 144) contends that the absence of American Christian trade unions, in contrast to Europe, "limited the contact of Catholic clerics with the labour movement before the mass industrial unions of the 1930s" and that Catholic leadership earlier was focused on "the struggle against socialism." The relatively late start of Catholic Labor Schools supports the assertion. Cronin notes (1948, 84-5) that the NCWC itself only began its summer Institute on Industry in the early 1940s. Once established, Catholic schools were non-denominational and supplemented education efforts of existing labour unions and did not seek to create a Catholic union or internal Catholic blocs.

The global economic crash of 1929-1931 soon racked Europe. Responding in May 1931, Pope Pius XI issued the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno, Reconstruction of the Social Order*. The encyclical stressed that "economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces" and went well beyond Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* of forty years earlier, which had sanctioned both private property and workers organizations. *Quadragesimo anno* criticized unrestrained capitalism, socialism, and communism, while the concepts of subsidiarity and solidarity were introduced as guides to equitable social organization. Subsidiarity sought a middle ground between oppressive socialism and capitalist individualism, emphasizing that management should be undertaken at the least centralized but still competent authority. Solidarity emphasized the reality that worker, enterprise, and society had common purpose. Phil Murray, who was an organizer not a theoretician, appears to have tracked the encyclical, as indicated by *Time's* (1952 August 4) report that he insisted

that workers and management were part of one functional community, and that pursuit of greater economic benefits for workers did not mean 'class warfare.'

FDR notably boosted *Quadragesimo anno* in Detroit during the 1932 presidential campaign by claiming it was one of the greatest documents in modern times (McGreevy, 2003, 150). However, the document controversially proposed the creation of industrial management councils where employers and workers would jointly manage industry. The US political situation ruled out that strategy (Clark, 1987, 122-5). Phil Murray, however, supported the idea and agreed to add his name in 1940 to the SWOC staff-written *Organized Labor and Production* (Clark, 122). He also presented the idea to Roosevelt in late 1941 but it was quickly brushed aside (Clark, 9-11, Higgins, 135-6). The concept temporarily resurfaced in early 1961 during the new Kennedy administration, but it was never pursued (McDonald, 1969, 151-2).

ORGANISING LABOUR BUT AMERICA FIRST

FDR, as US president from March 1933, established the right of collective bargaining via the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 5th July 1935. Lewis and Murray were then able to create America's most powerful unions, organized from the top down. In this era workers had little time, few funds, and could be faced with harsh retaliation from anti-union employers. Lewis supplied the money and the cadres, appointing district managers to sign up workers at the factory level. From 1936 to 1942 Lewis backed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the United Autoworkers (UAW), and United Rubber Workers (URW). On 17th June 1936 he set up

the SWOC in the heart of the U.S. steel industry in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) with Murray as its head. Lewis also employed aggressive leftists. When challenged on the use of these organizers, Lewis wisecracked, "who gets the bird, the hunter or the dog?" Left-wing cadres were not naïve. By 1940 they were implanted in America's leading labour unions as Lewis turned over the presidency of the CIO to Murray in late November.

The SWOC moved forward dramatically on 17th March 1937 when Myron Taylor, Chairman of US Steel (the largest producer of steel in the US) after a mission to the Vatican for FDR, offered Lewis a stunning deal: an 8-hour day and 40-hour work week, 1.5 times pay for overtime, a minimum wage of US\$5 per day, and a week holiday. Taylor gave the SWOC, "de facto recognition as the sole workers' agent in day-to-day operations of the mills covered by the agreement" (Zieger, 1988, 94-5). Murray was amazed that such a deal could be reached. But FDR also sided with Lewis' rival, Sidney Hillman, while giving major defence contracts to Bethlehem Steel that blocked SWOC organizers. Lewis therefore backed the Republican Wendell Willkie the November 1940 election and expected the CIO to abandon FDR, vowing to resign as CIO president if it did not. Two weeks after Willkie lost, despite hundreds of union members beseeching Lewis to keep from retiring as he had promised, Lewis nominated Murray as his successor. He was elected by acclamation (McDonald, p.136).

POST-WAR TURMOIL & ANOTHER WAR

When peace was restored, wages that had been capped fuelled strikes throughout the economy. Nearly five thousand strikes put 4.5 million workers out of work in 1946, while Murray had to deal with worker revolts, an inept

Truman administration, pro-Soviet organizers, and competition from Lewis in the UMW and William Green at the AFL. In January 1946, the USWA demand for wage increases could not be agreed until US Steel's own steel price increase were approved by Washington. Negotiations were unsuccessful, resulting on 20th January 1946 in the largest steel strike up to that time. With mid-term elections coming, Truman capitulated in mid-February and ordered approval of the steel price increase. Murray then got his \$.185 per hour pay raise, and two more in April 1947 of 11.3% and July 1948 of 7.4% (Tiffany, 1988, pp.36, 58).

In November 1948 Truman unexpectedly won the Presidency, the Democratic Party regained control of both houses of Congress, and the Cold War with the Soviet Union began. Internal problems with the Soviet-affiliated Left had already emerged in the USWA in May 1946, when Murray required Lee Pressman, the CIO general counsel to draft a policy statement that stated: "this union will not tolerate efforts by outsiders – individuals, organizations or groups, be they Communist, Socialist or any other group – to infiltrate, dictate or meddle in our affairs (McDonald, p.183-4)." By 3rd October 1948 Lee Pressman, who had resigned, was named as a member of a Soviet intelligence operation (New York Times, 1948 Oct 3). Truman policies in Asia were also unravelling as the armies of Chiang Kai-shek were defeated in late 1948. Murray at the CIO's November Convention denounced leftists in the unions, asserting they "wanted to drive Truman out of the White House, and they did not care whether Dewey or the devil was elected (1948 Nov 23)."

MURRAY AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS INFLUENCE

Fears of the Soviet Union skyrocketed. In April 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was set up, while the Soviets exploded their first nuclear weapon on 26th August 1949. When steel companies refused to follow an arbitration award, Murray led 500,000 USWA workers out in a major strike on 1st October 1949. Then, with growing prestige, he expelled eleven unions from the CIO due to control by Soviet networks, including the United Electrical union which was the CIO's 3rd largest (McDonald, p. 212-3).

The undeclared war, economic controls, and attacks on Soviet subversion undermined Truman's support. In October Murray began negotiations over the USWA contract that expired at year-end 1951. Negotiations failed, and on the evening of 8th April President Truman seized the US steel industry to force a settlement.

On 2nd June, the US Supreme Court overruled Truman's seizure. A strike of 650,000 steel workers followed. Key Truman officials felt that Murray exercised more "more control over this country than the President, the Congress we elected, and the officers appointed under the Government" (*Time*, 1952 Sept 29). Though the strike ended on 26th July, it gave Truman and his Democratic Party a major political black eye just three months before the U.S. presidential election. General Dwight Eisenhower then won a crushing victory over the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson in November. Murray had in fact tried to draft Eisenhower for the Democratic ticket in 1948. (McDonald, pp. 193-4).

A LITTLE-KNOWN GRAVE

Five days later at the height of his influence, Murray died of a heart attack on 11th November 1952 aged 66. His competitor at the AFL and former colleague in the UMW, William Green, also died at the age of 80 ten days later 21st November, forcing leadership changes at the top of the CIO and AFL, the two most powerful labour organisations in the United States. The Pittsburgh labour priest, Fr. Charles Owen Rice, spoke of Murray's love for "his God, his Country, and his Union" at the eulogy he delivered at the 14th CIO convention in Atlantic City on 8th December 1952.

Murray's gravestone now stands sparsely visited in St Anne cemetery of Castle Shannon, seven miles south of Pittsburgh. The guide for his salient accomplishments is clear from the message on the stone: "Ave Maria, Lady of Fatima pray for us."



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