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“Eight Years as Madame Secretary”
By Frances Perkins

If Frances Perkins had done no more than take the oath of office on March 4, 1933, as Secretary of Labor, she would have earned fame as the nation's first woman Cabinet officer. Actually her experiences in office have created their own fame, heavily overshadowing the mere circumstance of gender. Hers was the job of dealing with unemployment in the depth of the depression: with the phenomenal growth of trade unions' with the split in the labor movement; with sit-downs, defense reemployment, defense strikes, Communists. She has been more instrumental than most persons realize in the development of the President's social and economic program. This is Secretary Perkins's story of her part in that program as told to Katharine Hamill, a member of Fortune's staff. Fortune is proud to present it not only as contemporary history, but for the light it sheds on the character of a public servant who is too little understood.

When I came to the house on Sixty-fifth Street that evening late in February, 1933, I was shown up to Mr. Roosevelt's study on the second floor. Mr. Roosevelt and I were old friends—we had known each other for over twenty years, ever since the days when he was a New York Assemblyman and I had gone to Albany as secretary of the Consumers' League—and he gave me a friendly greeting. Then he came right to the point.

“I've been thinking things over and I've decided I want you to be my Secretary of Labor.”

The message from Mr. Roosevelt's secretary that morning, asking me to come to see him, had left me disquietingly sure that the rumor of my appointment could no longer be ignored and I had spent the whole day going over arguments to persuade him not to appoint me. I know that he thought well of my work as Industrial Commissioner of New York, and that he had made up his mind to appoint a woman to his Cabinet, but aside from personal reluctance to take on new responsibilities I honestly felt that I was not the right person for the job, and it seemed to me that the arguments I had ready to present were not only reasonable but unanswerable.

The chief argument was that I was not a bona fide labor person and that labor had always had and would expect to have again one of its own people as Secretary; labor wouldn't be satisfied politically with an outsider. Mr. Roosevelt's answer to that was that he thought the time had come for all working people, organized and unorganized, to have more than political consideration. I did not think that it would be a bad thing to have a woman in the Cabinet, if she were the best one for the job, but I thought that a woman Secretary of Labor should be a labor woman. I tried to describe all my shortcomings, and he said he had considered everything and he knew my record in New York and thought I could accomplish the same things for the whole country that I had for the state.

Having failed thus far to convince him I went off on another tack. I said that if I took the post I should want to do a great deal, and I outlined a general program of labor legislation and economic improvement. None of it was radical—all of it had worked well in certain states and in certain foreign countries—but I thought that Mr. Roosevelt might consider it too ambitious to be undertaken immediately in the U. S. In broad terms my proposals were for immediate federal aid to states for direct relief (remember that we were then in the depths of depression and unemployment), an extensive program of made work, a study and approach for the establishment by federal law of minimum wages and maximum hours and of unemployment insurance and old-age insurance, the abolition of child labor, and the creation of a federal employment service. To my satisfaction Mr. Roosevelt said that he entirely agreed with me, and that he wanted me to accept the appointment and go ahead with the program. The conversation took only about an hour.

It seems to me that many people have a confused idea of the duties and authority of the Secretary of Labor, and I should like to set them forth as clearly and simply as I can. The Secretary of Labor has no power to rule over labor. In fact the Secretary has no more legal power over working men and women than the Secretary of Agriculture has over farmers or the Secretary of Commerce over businessmen. The Congressional Act that created the Department of Labor in 1913 specifically states its purpose: “To foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners of the United States, to improve their working conditions, and to advance their opportunities for profitable employment.” The only power I have is to act as labor’s spokesman in the government. To order labor around would be to seize power I have not been granted under the law.

When Mr. Justice Cardozo administered the oath of office I solemnly swore “to support and defend the Constitution of the United States.” I took that to mean that I was to “promote the welfare of the wage earners” within the framework of the general welfare of all the people of the U.S.—a framework in which no group should gain at the expense of other groups. That ideal—of all groups working for the good of the whole—is difficult of achievement and there have been and will be many slips by the way, but it is still an ideal worth striving for.

I have been called incompetent (and worse) because I have not prevented strikes, and I am aware that there is a theory that if I were a two-fisted male I should be able to stop strikes. The accusation that I am a woman is incontrovertible. As for being two-fisted, I’m sure that it is unrealistic and lacking in human knowledge to believe that betting tough or cracking down on working people would make things better. I believe that strikes and disputes should be settled on an equitable basis, by negotiation, conciliation, and mutual agreement. There have been two-fisted males in this office and strikes were never prevented, because no Secretary of Labor has ever had the authority or the power directly to stop strikes, and it’s doubtful if any clear thinking citizen would be willing to give to any agency of government the absolute right and power to interfere with other citizens.

Later on in this article I shall discuss labor disputes and strikes in greater detail. Here I want to say that in the twenty-three years since the end of the first World War strikes

have lessened in violence and in duration, and the percentage of men striking to men working has declined markedly. In 1919 the percentage was 20.8, in 1920 it was 7.2; in 1939 it was 4.7, and last year 2.3. Sometimes, when I say that I expect increased numbers of strikes when employment increase, people interpret the work “expect” as “hope.” Of course I don’t hope that strikes will increase when employment increases, but it would be unrealistic to overlook the fact that they do.

Collective bargaining, carried on with mutual responsibility and intention to conclude a bargain, is a constructive process, and labor’s efforts to organize are not disorder. Association brings obligations and standards and mutual rights, as much to carpenters and automobile workers as to doctors and lawyers and manufacturers. Working people are bound to take more and more effective part in the organized life of all society and to be consulted as any other group is consulted. I do not believe that labor will “take over” industry or manage industry. Wherever managers come from they are managers because they have the ability to manage, not because they belong to any group or class.

Part of the Department of Labor’s job should be to help labor and management work out a code of ethics—to act as the stimulating and advising agency, the counselor rather than the ruler, to evoke the genius for self-direction, self-government, and self-development that industrialists and workers have in common with other men.

Yankee at court

The Department of Labor was still in the old building on G Street when I arrived in Washington to take office. My predecessor, William Doak, very kindly stayed for an hour or so after I came in on March 6 to introduce me to the heads of the bureaus. As the bureau chiefs came up to shake hands with me the first day, I remember that seven men said, “I am in charge of immigration.” The only one who didn’t say it was the gentleman who bore the title “Commissioner General of Immigration.” That gave me an idea of how the Department had been operated, that and the fact that when I asked to be taken around to all the offices to be introduced to the staff no one knew just where the offices were or who was in them. The whole Department was slipshod. The offices were dirty, files and papers were missing, there was no program or plan of work, there was an internal spy system, and everyone was scared of everyone else and trying to get into my good graces by telling tales about the others. This was shocking. I had come from the New York Department of Labor where esprit de corps, pride in the department, and general good will prevailed. I wanted to begin immediately to reorganize the bureaus and to put the whole Department on an efficient basis, but there wasn’t time in those first few weeks of the new administration. The general emergency, the working out of broad policies took all our thought and effort.

At the first official Cabinet meeting I was apprehensive and a bit off guard. I was afraid my fellow members might think me too talkative, and I decided not to say anything unless asked. Everyone else was also quite stiff and solemn and uncertain at that first meeting, for most of us didn’t know one another and most of us hadn’t yet acquired official poise. I sat there listening, determined not to speak. The President went all around

the table and asked questions and listened to everyone. Then he turned to me and smiled. “Frances, don’t you want to say something?” I didn’t want to but I knew I had to. There was silence in the room and all the other Cabinet members looked at me with tense curiosity—I think some weren’t sure I could speak. I said what I had to say in a very short time. I told them that I had called a conference of labor leaders and experts to formulate recommendations for relief of unemployment and that a program of public works would undoubtedly be the first step.

A relief program for the unemployed was the most pressing need. Harry Hopkins and William Hodson came down from New York to see me. They strongly recommended immediate federal relief aid to the states, as did many others who know the situation of unbearable need and want and the collapse of state and municipal funds in that year 1933. I took them to consult with the President. Mr. Hodson was the Director of the Welfare Council of New York City and Mr. Hopkins was Chairman of the New York State relief administration, and the President had known and trusted them both when he was Governor of New York. Mr. Hopkins was very sympathetic to our ideas of a work relief program and he later became head of the Works Progress Administration, but the immediate necessity was to get money out to the states for the emergent needs of people, and he was made Administration of Emergency Relief.

When the President and I first talked about immediate work relief, early in March, I suggested sending some of the unemployed men to camps, and the President suggested that they work in forestry. He said that particular care must be used in the selection of the men. “You’ve been talking about resurrecting the Employment Service,” he said. “Why can’t it select the boys?” “Because it hasn’t been resurrected yet.” “Well, resurrect it.” So in about three days we set up the Federal Employment Service and worked out rules for selecting the CCC boys. The Employment Service, which may have seemed absurd to the public when unemployment was so great, is of real value now in supplying industry with information on available labor, and labor with information on available jobs.

My appearance in Congress on March 23 to testify for the CCC was the first time I had come before a congressional committee as Secretary of Labor. It was also the first time that newspaper reporters called my way of speaking “blunt,” “brusque,” and “clipped.” Every since that day those words have been applied to my New England way of speech. When I was a child my father used to rap the table and say, “Don’t waste people’s time with vaporings. If you have anything to say, say it definitely and stop.” I know now that I have been too formal with reporters, too polite in a formal way—as New Englanders are polite to strangers.

I haven’t a flair for publicity—as I now know. I am not cozy and revealing with reports. I can’t say, “Come on in, boys,” and I wouldn’t if I could because I don’t think of them as “boys.” I have always found it pleasant and helpful to talk with reporters individually, but the mass interview with its obliteration of human personality seems to make friendliness and understanding difficult. I was wrong in not understanding that when reporters came to a press conference they had to go away with news, that their jobs depended upon getting news.

When I was a child I was so shy that I couldn't walk into the public library to ask for a book or go into a store to buy a spool of thread. Since I have been the Secretary of Labor I have rediscovered that shyness. I don't like personal publicity. For the record I am willing to say that my ancestors came to New England from England and Scotland in the seventeenth century, that I was born in Boston in 1882 [1880], that I am a member and communicant of the Protestant Episcopal Church, that I married Paul Caldwell Wilson in 1913, and that we have one daughter, Susanna, who was born in 1916. I have always felt that one's job and one's personal life are separate.

Labor in the laboratory

In the early Cabinet meetings I urged an extensive public-works program, believing that if such a program had been started in 1929 or 1930 the depression would never have been so deep as it was, but that it was better to start it late than not at all. It was urged and discussed both as a means of relieving unemployment and as a method of stimulating sick industry. Mr. Farley, Mr. Wallace, Mr. Ickes, Mr. Dern all agreed. The chief opponent of the plan was Lewis Douglas, then Director of the Budget, who believed that the economy of the country should be allowed to follow its natural cycle, allowed to drop to a bottom from which he said it would rise in the course of time.

He and General Hugh Johnson and Rex Tugwell and a number of others began to work on a different sort of plan for stimulating industry. Many people in the government and outside of it contributed to the ideas that finally found form in the National Industrial Recovery Act. Into the NIRA under Titles I and II went the Johnson-Tugwell-Douglas plan for industrial recovery by voluntary codes of fair competition and our long-considered plan for public works. The NIRA also contained a mechanism for establishing a floor for wages and a ceiling for hours, the necessity for which was so amply demonstrated by the startlingly low levels to which wages had fallen and the consequent drying up of the purchasers' market. My own contribution was largely in the development of the wage and hour section and public works.

We counted greatly on NIRA to act as a shot in the arm for industry and I think it undoubtedly did. It also gave us an opportunity to try many social adjustments sorely needed; for instance the labor-management advisory boards became a proving ground for the technique of employer and employee conferences and settlement of mutual problems by mutual agreement. Mistakes were made, of course, and some serious trends toward monopoly and price fixing may have crept in in the haste of the time, but these could have been adjusted, and I believe that, if the program had been continued, great good would have come out of NIRA.

As a matter of fact, NIRA was the greatest single cause of the revival of the American spirit and the starting of the rise from industrial depression. The energy, imagination, and drive of General Hugh Johnson were invaluable; there was hardly anyone else in the U.S. who could have done just what he did at that time.

The original plan for the NIRA gave industry pretty tight control of wages and hours, and William Green of the A.F. of L. urged the inclusion of a plan to give labor the legal right to organize and to bargain collectively. Our various ideas on that subject were merged eventually into Section 7A which Mr. Green called labor's new Magna Charta. Labor unions in this county had almost touched bottom. The A. F. of L., which had had over four million members in 1919, has less than two million in 1933, and all during the twenties the so-called open-shop movement, which in many respects was a pure antiunion movement, had been successful in keeping unions down. Much of the "welfare work" of the big industries and many of the wage increases of the boom days were designed to keep workers from organizing, and it was a not unusual practice to fire union members from plants and run organizers out of town. During the depression, with unemployment increasing and wages decreasing, it was impossible for labor to organize. As soon as the NIRA was passed and labor was given the legal right to organize, there was a great rush on the part of the leaders to build up their depleted unions. John L. Lewis took what money the United Mine Workers had left in the treasury and sent organizers into the field to proclaim that the government had given the workers the legal right to join unions. This was sometimes stated in an exaggerated way, and many were led to believe that the President himself was asking them to join.

The newly organized workers, often rather desperately, demanded pay increases and more work. The coal miners, working in a particularly distressed industry and pinched by meager part-time employment, called strikes. General Hugh Johnson thought that these and other strikes would brake the slowly turning wheel of industrial recovery. He set up the first Labor Relations Board. Senator Robert Wagner served as Chairman, with representatives of labor and industry as members. The board was startled to find that it couldn't make people do things. Employers often refused to recognize a committee of the workers and it was Gerard Swope of General Electric, trying to help settle a dispute in a hosiery mill, who first suggested to the employer that he allow a vote to be taken in his plant to determine whether or not the union represented his workers or a substantial part of them. Later, when Senator Wagner drafted his National Labor Relations Act, he incorporated the consent-election plan.

In a way the consent-election provision was antiunion. Never before had a trade union been asked to *prove* that it represented the majority of the workers, and I remember asking Mr. Green if he had considered that. He said he had. "In the days when we had to fight for organization and recognition we were obliged to strike for it. Now that the law gives us the rights to organize we must take our chances. I believe this is the democratic way." If it were not for the division in the labor movement itself, which often results in one faction or the other calling a strike simply to prevent an election it is afraid of losing, I believe that collective bargaining by this time would have made greater headway in establishing orderly methods of settling disputes without strikes in the organized industries.

The A.F. of L.-C.I.O. split was largely an internal fight for control, in which the idea of vertical unions was only a minor issue. At all times I have tried to bring the two factions

together, always appointing representatives of both groups to committees and advisory boards. I have urged John Lewis over and over again to make peace with the A. F. of L.—and he has said over and over again that he expected to make peace “when the right time comes.” The President wrote Mr. Lewis a letter asking him to make peace. That irked Mr. Lewis. It was after that that he called me “woozy in the head.” I received letters and telegrams from labor organizations (both A. F. of L. and C.I.O.) asking me to keep on trying to make peace. Fortunately the rivalry of the leaders has not crystallized among the rank and file, and I think that the government’s attitude has had something to do with this. Reunion could be made tomorrow without ugly scars of hatred and rancor between the wage earners in each group. Some initiation fees and union dues are too high for present conditions, and other reforms are needed also. Unions are private organizations, and necessary reforms should come from within. Private organizations sometimes become “institutions” in the life of a society, and today trade unions are rapidly acquiring this status. It carries with it great opportunities for social contribution, for improvement of life—but it also imposes great obligations.

Out of the wreckage

As soon as the Supreme Court decided the Schechter case in May, 1935, and thereby declared the NIRA unconstitutional, we were on the alert to salvage as many of its good features as possible. Before NIRA was passed we in the Labor Department had been working on a bill to provide labor standards that industries must meet before obtaining government contracts. Within a week of the death of NIRA we were able to recommend passage of that bill. Following the lines of the earlier Davis-Bacon Act, which operated in the construction field, it provided for an eight-hour day and forty-hour week, prohibition of child and convict labor, payment of prevailing minimum wages, and safe and sanitary workshops in all industries bidding for public contracts. There were some complaints about the establishment of prevailing wages for “localities” (which were interpreted to mean economic localities), but the minimum-wage order in steel, in which it was determined that there were six principal steel-producing localities in the country, was the only case in which this construction was attacked in the courts. A group of small steel companies succeeded in securing a stay of the wage decision. The Supreme Court, however, upheld the validity of the wage order. With the passage of the Walsh-Healey Public Contracts Act companies with good labor standards could compete for government contracts without competition from the sweatshops.

It seemed to me important to establish, after the NIRA had gone, some federal law for minimum wages and maximum hours. Many lawyers and legislators told me that it would be impossible to draft a wage-and-hour bill that would stand up under the constitutional requirements. I read the Schechter decision over and over again and finally decided that it did not expressly forbid the regulation of hours and wages and that within the decision there lay a hint of how it could be done directly rather than with the complication of agreements on prices and contracts inherent in the NIRA. I wrote out my ideas of what a wage-and-hour bill should be in pencil on a slip of paper and gave it to the solicitor of the Department. He said he thought it would be unconstitutional, but I asked him to put it in the form of a bill for study anyway. The Department of Justice worked on different

approaches. Finally all proposals were combined and, in the spring of 1937, a wage-and-hour bill was introduced in Congress. Just before its introduction the Supreme Court had upheld the Labor Relations Act and overruled the Adkins case which had been a barrier to minimum-wage laws. Our bill passed the Senate but encountered hard sledding in the House committees. It was finally brought to the floor on petition, only to be recommitted in the special session. It was not until the following spring that the House adopted a greatly revised version of the bill. It was signed by the President on June 25, 1938.

Before either the Wage and Hour or the Walsh-Healey bill was made law we had had the satisfaction of seeing the U.S. once more a member of the International Labor Organization and of seeing the Social Security bill passed. The I.L.O. drafts international treaties on labor policies and is vitally concerned with international economic competition resulting from low standards of living and working conditions. The U.S. had been a member of its predecessor organization long before the World War but we were automatically excluded from the new organization created by the Treaty of Versailles after our refusal to join the League of Nations. I recommended to the President that some way be found for the U.S. to rejoin, and he suggested that I talk to Secretary Hull. For a year I worked with the State Department and our consular office in Geneva. In 1934 a detailed memorandum was presented to members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and a resolution introduced giving the President authority to accept membership. After short debate it was passed by the Senate and the House. Since then we have taken a leading part in the work of the I.L.O.

Legislation for unemployment insurance and old-age insurance was a method of social action I had been working toward for many years. I had written about it, talked about it, tried to prepare the public to accept the idea of guaranteeing at least a minimum security to the nation's wage earners. In the summer of 1934 I talked to the President about it several times, and he appointed the Committee of Economic Security, of which I was Chairman, to study the whole question. Several times the conferences of the committee broke up but we always found a way of getting together again and of working out compromises. The bill was introduced in the House in January, 1935, and did not go to the President for his signature until the middle of August. The signing of the bill was a great occasion, and I believe the social-security program to be as important as any reform the present Administration has proposed and carried out. Certainly my part in it was as constructive as anything I have done. This legislation came at the time of the agitation for the Townsend plan and other extravagant and absurd pension schemes. It provided a way for people to contribute to their own old-age insurance. I hope that someday it can be expanded to include some sort of aid for the care of wage earners during illness and for the prevention of illness.

I have made some mistakes in picking the personnel of the office, and there have been some mistakes in these new forms of administration, but I doubt that I have made serious errors affecting the life of the country in policy or point of view. One error was that I expected vigorous, clear, partisan opposition, long analytical debates, modifications, intelligent and constructive proposals from the opposition, and instead our bills

sometimes went skimming through before we had a chance to perfect them. The Wage and Hour bill was the only one that was debated sufficiently.

I also failed to understand the degree to which politics entered all policies and legislation, and perhaps I have spent too much time and thought on administration. I think it might have been wise to put more emphasis on establishing the basic conceptions of the legislation with the public. The election results in 1936 and 1940 show that the people have accepted the Administration's program, but I think it was a mistake not to have been able to establish the program more clearly with those groups, often our critics, who ought to have had in this period a constructive, if minority, part in the legislative programs of the country. We took great pains and a long time in the preparation of the public for the social-security program. If we could have had the same amount of time or the public discussion of protective labor legislation (collective bargaining, for example) we might have had a labor-relations program that would be more acceptable to all groups.

Overhauling the works

When I took office I made up my mind not to discharge employees of the Department just because they were Republicans, but I found I had to discharge many of them because they were incompetent. Many of them were political appointees and some of them were quite unfit for their jobs. With the exception of the Children's and Women's bureaus, which have always been operated smoothly and effectively and which I shall not discuss here, several of the bureaus and services were disorganized and inefficient.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics had not been allowed to publish even the figures it had collected. I had criticized and challenged its unemployment statistics during the early years of the depression and I was particularly anxious to do a good and honest job there. I went to the American Statistical Association and got them to appoint a committee to make a thorough analysis of the bureau and to recommend a program and a possible director. From their list I chose Isador Lubin of the Brookings Institution and under his guidance the bureau has grown into the recognized source of reliable, faithfully interpreted statistics on labor matters and the economics of labor. Mr. Lubin was loaned a year ago to the National Defense Advisory Commission and is now a close advisor of the President on defense problems, but the standards and the authority of the bureau are well established.

The bureau's statistical assay of the nation's manpower needs has been the vital key to the whole planning of labor supply, distribution, and training in the defense program. It gave impetus to the apprenticeship program that we in the Department had advocated and developed ever since NRA days. During the depression there had been opposition from labor unions and employers to the idea of apprenticeship because so many already-trained workers were out of work. We had tried to create an interest in the states through our Division of Labor Standards, which supplies advice and information and aid to all state labor authorities. We had set up committees of labor and industry and established standards for apprentice training, but only a little headway was made before the defense program was started. Then the army recommended the training of apprentices, demands

began to come from industry, and the trade unions recognized the need of adding to the supply of skilled workers. We had the standards and the methods of training ready, and now there are 125,000 young apprentices working in industrial plants, spending 10 per cent of their time in related vocational schools. In addition to promoting apprentice training the Division of Labor Standards (which I established in 1934) drafts model state labor laws and cooperates with the states in all problems of the health, safety, and working conditions of workers.

The Conciliation Service has done notable work for a long time. It was set up in 1913 under the section providing "that the Secretary of Labor shall have power to act as mediator and to appoint commissioners of conciliation in labor disputes." Since 1933 we have increased the personnel of the service in both quantity and quality. Men with long practical experience, trained in labor relations, have been added to the staff, and we now have 110 conciliators under John Steelman with four regional supervisors.*

- *Editor's note: see Fortune, June, 1941, "Strike Doctors."*

The service is emphasizing more and more the prevention as better than the cure of disputes and one of its aims now is to have labor-management agreements include provisions for the utilization of the service before negotiations are interrupted or work has stopped. In the last twenty-eight years the service has handled 30,000 cases involving 23 million workers.

The Immigration Service was in bad repute when I took office in 1933. About the only functions of the service the public knew about were charges of case fixing and terrorization of aliens through the activities of a notorious secret raiding squad. One of the first things I did was abolish the squad. We were lucky to secure as Commissioner General the late Colonel Daniel MacCormack, a man of broad social and administrative experience, who came to us from the presidency of the Fiduciary Trust Co. I put him in complete charge, and he acted with great effectiveness. There was no fixing of cases, no illegal raiding. He broke up gangs of immigrant runners in Havana and Puerto Rico, concentrated on the prevention of illegal entries, developed, enlarged, and improved the border patrols, and merged the immigration and naturalization services into an efficient modern unit. We realized that we held tremendous power over the lives and freedoms of human beings, and we tried not to use our power arbitrarily, not to separate families; to administer "the laws of man that the laws of God might have a chance to operate."

I am certainly in favor of the punishment or deportation of any alien engaging in treasonable conduct or subversive action, but the Wickersham report showed us what abuses and what hazards had existed in the Immigration Service before 1933, and both Colonel MacCormack and I were determined to act with restraint and with scrupulous fairness. The moving of the Immigration Service from the Department of Labor in 1940 was in line with the President's general plan of government reorganization. I believe that under present circumstances, where there is almost no normal immigration but where the danger of entry of spies is real, the service is well located in the Department of Justice.

Communism and Bridges

Communism may have gained a foothold in lands of oppressed peoples, but I cannot imagine its taking hold in America where everyone is so conscious of political freedom and where economic and cultural opportunities for reforms by open political methods are the rule. The principles and the methods of the Communist party appear to me to be destructive and disintegrating, and their economic and political views to be unsound or untrue. Communism, in my opinion, has no place in American life, and I believe that American working people are too tough-minded to embrace it.

Because the deportation case of Bridges has been reopened by the Department of Justice after revision of the immigration statutes by Congress and is now being heard, I do not believe it appropriate for me to add to what I said about the case on February 8, 1939 when I testified voluntarily before the House Judiciary Committee. Representative J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey, a Republican member of the Dies committee, had asked that I be impeached for obstruction of justice in the deportation proceedings against Bridges, and the Judiciary Committee met to determine whether or not the recommendation was justified.

At the hearing I pointed out that as Secretary of Labor I had no power to remove an alien merely because he was regarded as undesirable or as a labor agitator; but that I was required to deport an alien who advocated the overthrow of the U.S. by force or violence, or belonged to an organization that so advocated. The Department had announced hearings on the Bridges case on April 28, 1938, but on April 6 the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals of the Fifth District had delivered an opinion on the case of Joseph Strecker, holding that an alien who had been an acknowledged member of the Communist party was not on that ground deportable under the immigration law. We postponed the Bridges case until we could take an appeal and get a Supreme Court decision on the Strecker case. To have done otherwise would have been to ignore the courts.

The House Judiciary Committee cleared me of all counts of the impeachment charges. After the Supreme court had disposed of the Strecker case, I designated James M. Landis, Dean of the Harvard Law School, to act as a special examiner in the Bridges case, and he was given full authority to act as presiding immigrant inspector. Mr. Landis studied some 8,000 pages of testimony, held hearings for eleven weeks, and finally made a 75,000 word report to me. He found that the evidence did not show that Bridges was a member of or affiliated with the Communist party. His findings determined the ruling dismissing the deportation order.

My action in the Bridges case was one of the causes for the opinion, expressed by some groups, that I was “coddling” labor. It was hardly coddling to act according to the law in that case, nor is it coddling, in all the work of the Department, to “foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners, as the Secretary of Labor is appointed to do. An opposing opinion, held by certain labor groups, is that I have not always acted solely in the interests of labor—because I have always seen the problems of the workers in relation to the public interest. I do not believe that working people want coddling any more than

any other responsible group wants it. I have faith in the possibilities of human nature, faith that the wage earners will accept their responsibility to all the people of the U.S. and will purge their ranks of subversive or dishonest people. Organizations have to do it from time to time. It's not a new problem for trade unions, merely a larger and more pressing one at the moment because of the hazards of the times.

Communists have had a foothold—really only a toehold—in a few unions in the U.S. The working people as a whole, even in those groups where there have been inexcusable disturbances, are patriotic and honorable. We must help the members of the unions to support honorable, patriotic leaders who make it possible for them to get rid of subversive or racketeering elements.

Before talking about the present strike situation I want to go back and discuss the wave of sit-down strikes that broke over the country in the winter of 1937. Sit-down strikes, as such, were without precedent in this country, but the principle of the sit-down is as old as human grievance. It is a gesture of desperation, a confession of weakness, a last resort of the weak. For centuries the Chinese have “sat down” in the paddy fields or inside their masters' houses and refused to work, and Chinese poetry is full of “I shall do no violence, but here I sit.” In the Middle Ages men and women flung themselves down in the roadways in protest and despair and refused to move. Children intuitively understand the principle of the sit-down. Undisciplined women sometimes use it to get their own way.

During the early thirties there were scattered stay-in strikes in some European countries, and in February, 1936, the workers in a rubber plant in Akron staged the first serious sit-down strike in this country. The managers did not get particularly excited; although puzzled, they behaved as if in a way a man had a property interest in his job. They invoked no violence. We were very much concerned about the strike because we were afraid of the sit-down technique spreading to other industries, and we sent conciliators to Akron and conferred there with the workers and employers. The strike was settled in about a month and we thought that was the end of sit-downs.

Then, at the end of December, 1936, the sit-down started at General Motors. The employers refused to meet a committee representing the United Automobile Workers, and the U.A.W., a new union without a contract, accused the company of interfering with the efforts of employees to organize for collective bargaining. We tried to persuade the employers to meet the committee but they insisted that the strikers must leave the plants before negotiations began. We tried to persuade the strikers to leave the plants, and they insisted that General Motors must promise not to remove equipment to other plants before they would leave. Several times we arranged conferences in Washington, but the G.M. managers declined to come. We were in touch with the union through its leaders and, by telephone, with Governor Frank Murphy of Michigan. The federal government of course is not a peace officer. Any action looking to eviction was within the Governor's jurisdiction. Our duty was to act as conciliator and get work going again by negotiation. If G.M. could have seen its way to meet that committee the first day the strike would have ended—and if they had met even earlier it would never have started. We brought all

the influence we possessed to bear on the employers and on the strikers, but it wasn't enough.

I did not speak out publicly against the strikers at the time because I believe it is bad policy to call either side names when you are trying to adjust a difficulty. If you are trying to settle a family quarrel you don't shout to the neighbors about how ill you think of one member. Governor Murphy knew that the alternatives were to call the militia and shoot it out or to evoke the moral sense of strikers and employers. He believed in the latter and chose it. It was the best way. Aside from humanitarian considerations it prevented an aftermath of soreness and bitterness, such as the aftermath of the Pullman strike in 1894, and it *taught* the men rather than *compelled* them to do the right thing.

Several times the officers of the company came to Washington to confer with me but they wouldn't be persuaded to meet the union committee. I remember one meeting that lasted several hours and became involved with hair splitting, philosophical, almost metaphysical explanations of the company's labor policy. As the hours went by and the conversation grew more abstruse and cosmic I could see that Mr. Knudsen was growing restless. Finally, when he couldn't stand it any longer, he stood up and said, "I want to go back to Detroit and make automobiles. I can make automobiles under any labor policy." This realism always made me trust that man's judgment.

Early in February, Governor Murphy, who had the power of subpoena, summoned both sides to a conference in the name of the President of the U.S. That brought everyone around. When the agreement was reached on February 11 I wired congratulations to Governor Murphy and added that the agreement had strengthened my belief that even serious differences of opinion in industrial life can be adjusted by agreement based on reason and good will. I still believe that.

I made a careless blunder during the General Motors strike. The questioning was hot at one press conference. I told the correspondents that I thought the company should meet the union committee. "Do you think the company should meet the committee even if the union is conducting an illegal strike?" I answered that I thought they should meet them anyhow, and added, offhand and I suppose in the irritation of fatigue, "And I don't know whether it's illegal or not." The next day the papers reported that Miss Perkins said sit-down strikes were legal. And in a few days people were saying that Miss Perkins thought sit-down strikes were fine, and that everybody ought to go on a sit-down strike. The truth is that I was entirely against sit-down strikes and was doing my best to stop them, to advise all workers to abandon them, but the myth of my condoning them was stronger than the truth—and still is.

Strikes in defense

People often ask me how I feel about strikes in defense industries. I don't "feel" about them, any more than a doctor "feels" about an operation while he's performing it. I think it would be desirable to have no strikes in defense industries; I should like to have all labor-management disputes settled by conference and agreement without resort to

stoppage of work. But I cannot make pronouncements damning one side or the other during an ordinary strike. On the other hand a public statement, such as that made by the President in the North American case, is effective where one side violates an agreement.

The strikes in the first six months of this year have not involved so many workers and have not lasted so long as to interfere substantially with the defense program. Most of them have been potential rather than actual threats to the program. There is no evidence that a union has called a strike for the purpose of defeating or slowing down the defense program. Some unions have been overambitious and selfish. Some strikes have been reckless and careless demonstrations of strength and determination to win what was wanted by strength alone. But I do not think that there have been any deliberate, conscious, against-the-government strikes. In the North American Aviation strike and the San Francisco shipbuilding strike the strikers showed bad faith in violating their agreement. Those who persuaded them to strike were no friends of the labor movement. In some of the disputes the employers have refused to enter into real collective bargaining with intention to conclude an agreement or have refused to meet union committees. These refusals have resulted in the demand for recognition—which often runs through strikes where there are other primary causes. Many of the closed-shop and union-security strikes are due to rivalry between the C.I.O. and the A.F. of L. Only a few strikes have been truly jurisdictional as between different crafts—the old quarrel. I believe jurisdictional strikes are always unfortunate and, in defense industries, unjustifiable; and so in reality are those for domination as between the A.F. of L. and the C.I.O. They ought to agree on a boundary for their separate activity for “the duration.”

The greatest number of the recent strikes have been for increased wages. Workers, like everyone else, are thinking in terms of getting on in the world. They read reports of new profits and quite naturally want to share in those profits. They are sure that money is being made, and when the plant next door grants an increase they want one too. Mr. Ernest Weir set the pace when he voluntarily without union request gave a 10-cents-per-hour increase at National Steel. Publicity made Mr. Weir’s 10-cents-an-hour increase the fashion, and the demands ran through all the big industries.

When the General Motors contract ended and negotiations for a new one were in process last spring a strike threatened there. Our conciliator, James Dewey, kept Mr. Steelman and me constantly informed by telephone from Detroit. Mr. Hillman and Mr. Knudsen both tried to settle the difficulty. The U.A.S. wanted the case certified to the Mediation Board where they thought they could get a recommendation for a 10-cents-an-hour wage increase. The contract negotiation dragged along for almost two months. On April 25, after consultation with Mr. Hillman and William H. Davis of the board and Mr. Steelman, I certified the case. Mr. Dewey came here with the company and union representatives and as we always do, we made our records available to the board. Mr. Davis discussed the case with me over the telephone several times a day (those days were almost twenty-four hours long) and we kept Mr. Hillman informed. There were several anxious times when it seemed impossible to avert a strike but finally, a few hours before the strike deadline on May 16, the union waived its demand for a closed shop and the company agreed to accept the board’s recommendation of a 10-cents-an-hour increase.

If strikes increase or persist for a long time, they may be a threat to the smooth functioning of the defense program, but it doesn't solve the problem to call employers who won't bargain "traitors" or for reckless trade unionists to strike when adjustments, even if slow, could be made by other means. There will be adjustment with the help of the government agencies for mediation.

The strikes that have taken place when a case was actually before the Mediation Board or where the board had made a fair recommendation are inexcusable. I believe the President acted forcefully in taking prompt steps to reopen the North American plant. It was obvious there that only a small proportion of the men had ever intended to be on strike. The strike action was irresponsible and in bad faith. I hope there will never be another situation like North American, but prompt action will be taken whenever there is this sort of deliberate departure from the orderly procedure provided by a friendly government. It is my opinion that a relatively few persons, not exclusively connected with the labor movement, have been responsible for the inexcusable stoppages of work in North American, Puget Sound, Aluminum, and a few others.

Early last winter we realized that the time element was going to be more and more important in the defense program, that strikes must be prevented or settled quickly, and that prestige would be as much needed as reason in the settlements. We studied the War Labor Board of 1918 and the Twentieth Century Fund report recommending the creation of a mediation board. I recommended the appointment of a mediation board with tripartite membership. Many labor people, particularly Philip Murray, opposed the idea of a mediation board. Mr. Murray had his own plan for labor-management committees in each industry, assuming that if labor and management had an equal voice there wouldn't be trouble. Secretary Stimson and Secretary Knox got interested, and Sidney Hillman became concerned when coal and steel disputes threatened. On March 19, after prolonged consideration and consultation, the President accepted the idea, signed the executive order, and appointed the board.

The reason it was arranged to have the cases certified by the Secretary of Labor was to keep the board from being swamped by picayune disputes. Everybody naturally wants his case to go to the highest court. Anyone not winning under normal processes wants to go the board. Only the most difficult (and by that I mean the most resistant to settlement) cases should be sent. During all the serious disputes I have been in constant consultation with the Mediation Board and with Mr. Hillman of OPM. The board's only complaint was that I sent them too many cases. At the end of May I appointed a committee made up of Clarence Dykstra, John Steelman of the Conciliation Service, and Maxwell Brandwen of the OPM to pass on cases for certification, and since then I have followed their recommendations.

In the first quarter of this year there were 791 strikes involving 275,000 workers, and 3,336,000 man-days of work were lost to industry. For the twelve months of 1940 there were 2,508 strikes involving 576,988 workers. During that year 6,700,872 man-days of work were lost through strike. In the same year 42 million man-days were lost through

industrial accidents (including those in agriculture) and almost 59 million through colds and influenza. If all deaths and permanent disabilities suffered in industrial accidents had been counted, the loss in working time (now and in the future) from accidents in 1940 would mount to more than 234 million man-days. Of course it is true that those idle days scattered throughout industry, did not result in complete stoppages, and by citing them I do not mean to belittle the seriousness of strikes, but it is well to remember that health and safety are as important to industry as the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The Department of Labor ought to do a great deal more than it does to bring together employers and workers for the purpose of discussing and agreeing on legislation. Eventually we should be called in for advice about efficiency, safety, and health by employers as well as labor. We might even be able to develop in the country large numbers of engineers and architects skilled in factory design. A well designed and well-run factory is a beautiful thing, and the process of manufacture can be a work of art. I have made many trips around the country to see the new plants and new processes. I have to see things with my own eyes to understand them, and I can judge more competently about fair wages and hours and conditions of work, about the possibilities of accidents and disease, and even about the cause of industrial disputes, if I can see the machines and the plants and the men and women working—and the bosses.

The Department has done a great deal to make labor statistics and industrial information available and readable, and to simplify and clarify forms of employer-employee contracts, but we can do more. There is more to be done in promoting opportunities for adult education among wage earners and their families both in technical fields and in the field of general culture. In future I hope the Department will be the focus of wage earners seeking information and advice on health, housing, and education. The service of the Department of Agriculture to farmers might well be adapted to the needs of industrial workers.

We are conducting a study to analyze the probable postwar economy with special reference to the problems of labor. We can't foresee, of course, all the problems or what the exact problems will be, but we can work out remedies to propose under the varied circumstances that may arise. The Department was partly responsible for the present decentralization of defense plants and we are working on plans to keep those plants going in the manufacture of civilian supplies after the war.

There are still many labor problems unsolved. The problem of agricultural labor has scarcely been touched, and the time will come when we must work it out with the Department of Agriculture. We must make studies of depressed areas, of rehabilitation, of declining industries, of occupational trends on a long-time basis. But those are for the future. Our efforts now must be concentrated on the program of national defense. Materials for defense are of first importance now, but we know that the security of a nation depends not only on its physical defenses but on the well-being, good faith, and spontaneous cooperation of its people. Some economic security, good working conditions, an adequate standard of living contribute to national defense as surely as do tanks and ships and planes.

Far from functioning with slow clumsiness, our democratic system has accomplished great social and economic improvements in the last twenty years and significantly in the last eight. American democracy is justified in being proud of those accomplishments, but it must continue to plan and develop a free and constantly better society, under laws that are not harassing rules but patterns of order in which all men seek to help themselves and others to do and to have the right thing because they think it is right. Moral judgment should be put into every action—personal or public. Only with moral judgments thus involved can we use democracy for the most ennobling results.

Transcribed by C. Rice; proofed by S. Peskin.