

Introduction

Labor history is a lot of nonsense. —JAMES R. HOFFA¹

Jimmy Hoffa's judgment may have been unduly dismissive, but the record of his life, his career, and his union does raise questions about the work of labor historians, especially what has been called "the new labor history." Since the 1960s, a generation of scholars dissatisfied with the old labor history's narrow focus on the institutional features of trade unions has produced a mountain of literature on American workers, their consciousness, their identities, their politics, and their various communities and organizations. Out of this scholarship has come a set of highly influential conclusions about labor's history in this country, and, by implication, its future as well. The story of Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters, however, stands in mocking defiance of those conclusions.

The practitioners of the new labor history in the United States have produced countless studies of the unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which emerged out of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935, but only a pitiful few on the affiliates of the AFL after the split.² In fact, a new student of the field looking through the labor history section on the shelves of the typical research library might not know that the AFL and its constituent unions continued to exist after 1935. This disparity is particularly curious when one considers that even at the height of the CIO's growth, the AFL was three times larger in membership, and that on its own terms the AFL could be considered the most successful working-class organization in American history, having dramatically improved the material conditions of

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tens of millions of workers—female and male, skilled and unskilled, agricultural and industrial, native-born and immigrant, black, white, Latino, and Asian.³

No AEL union was larger or more successful than the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT). By the end of Hoffa's career, the membership of the IBT stood at more than two million—making it the largest labor union in the history of the United States—and nearly all of those members enjoyed wages, hours, and working conditions far superior to those of workers in similar occupations before the growth of the union.⁴ Yet no academic historian has written a study of the Teamsters union or of its most important leader, Jimmy Hoffa.

Hoffa's Teamsters defy the new labor history in other, more important ways as well. While scholars of the 1960s generation have attempted to find within the labor movement a purpose other than “delivering the goods,” the Teamster locals in Detroit and later the international union under Hoffa's leadership adhered to a strictly economic mission, and scorned the attempts of radicals and “labor statesmen” to bring worker organizations into the political and managerial classes. Perhaps new labor historians have shunned the Teamsters because the union supplies substantial evidence to support the claim made by Selig Perlman that American workers in an organization devoid of radical intellectuals would choose the “pure and simple” objective of material improvements over grander aspirations of social transformation.⁵ Similarly, the rapid growth and material accomplishments of the Teamsters under Hoffa's leadership present new labor historians with the troubling fact that much of this success was caused not by the “industrial democracy” they endorse but by the compelling power of competition both within the IBT and from rival unions. Moreover, where Hoffa and the Teamsters failed to deliver the goods, anticompetitive forces were largely responsible.* Of course, it should be expected that contemporary labor historians would avoid a market analysis since, as has been noted even by scholars sympathetic to the cause, virtually all share some sort of anti-market political orientation.⁶

*Since an essential function of trade unions is to limit competition between workers within the labor market, the argument presented here differs substantively from libertarian and “neo-liberal” endorsements of universal competition. The competition described in this study was between and within trade unions for representation of workers, nor between workers for jobs.

The existing literature on Hoffa and the Teamsters has done little to correct the deficiencies of labor history. Most of it was produced by journalists and government investigators bent on exposing Hoffa's immorality and is therefore preoccupied with his illicit dealings with underworld figures. Only two biographies of the Teamster leader have been written by academic scholars; an important work concentrating on Hoffa's collective bargaining techniques that was published in 1965 by the economists Ralph and Estelle Dinerstein James, and a 1991 biography by Arthur A. Sloane, a professor of industrial relations, that relies on secondary research. But even the study by the Jameses, who enjoyed exclusive access not only to Hoffa himself but to many IBT records that have subsequently been destroyed, leaves much of his story either obscured by mythology or utterly mysterious. While much is known about his later career and eventual disappearance in 1975, the literature provides only a cursory record of Hoffa's twenty years with the Detroit and Michigan Teamsters before his rise to the IBT presidency in 1957. And since the chroniclers of Hoffa and the Teamsters have not been historians, the changing social context of his life has been largely ignored.⁷

This study attempts not only to fill in gaps in the historical record but also to examine Hoffa historically. Here Hoffa and his union are shown as products of a multitude of social forces—both material and ideological—that emerged and evolved during his lifetime. This is, therefore, more an examination of those social forces than it is of Hoffa himself, and in this way it breaks not only from conventional biographical forms but also from the strict institutional approach of the old labor history. This anti-biography borrows from the innovations of contemporary labor historians in many other ways as well. The culture, community life, and ethnic, racial, and gender identities of the Detroit Teamsters are treated as determinative, not decorative, in their history. As will be seen in the following pages, it is impossible to fully understand Hoffa's union without understanding the complex web of relationships, stretching from local bars to the White House, from which it developed.

But perhaps the most important point of agreement between this work and recent scholarship is the causal agency that both grant to ordinary workers. As the following pages will show, one of the most significant determinants of the course of Hoffa's career was the desire

of his union's members for material improvements in their lives and their willingness to act on that desire. Ironically, though, when applied to Hoffa and the Teamsters, the methodology of the new labor history yields starkly different conclusions from those reached by its creators.

As this narrative will demonstrate, the public Jimmy Hoffa was produced by an unregulated and amoral political economy. In Hoffa's "Depression City," small businesses—like most trucking firms—could be terrified into submission to the union, police and politicians could be bought, saloons became the locus of social activity, and criminals left unemployed by the repeal of Prohibition furnished a ready source of useful services.⁸ For Hoffa personally, the unfortunate consequence of building a labor organization in this environment was the constant threat to his power from rivals within the Teamsters and from other unions. This meant a grim life for Hoffa, but because it forced him to be accountable to the interests of the members, for them it proved to be a boon.

With the rise of the New Deal and the CIO in the 1930s and the wartime state in 1941, Hoffa's primitive world of unfettered competition and desire was confronted by concerted attempts, from the streets of Detroit to the national capital, to impose civilization on that world and to remake its working class into a responsible citizenry. The CIO's campaign to unify the labor movement within a monolithic and disciplined industrial organization and to share power in a managed economic system—the product of a semi-socialist idea that later came to be called "corporatism"—merged with efforts by state and federal governments to tame and regulate the conflict between labor and capital. After World War II, the managerial and self-regulating impulses of corporatist union leaders found common cause with crusades by government reformers to bring social responsibility and ascetic morality to the labor movement. However, the intrusions by these civilizers into Hoffa's jungle—many of which benefited Hoffa personally—produced dubious results for the working class itself. It is hoped, therefore, that for those of us who study the history of workers, and, more important, for workers themselves, the narrative that follows will at least raise questions about the ideal of worker self-management that has fired the imagination and guided the efforts of so many labor historians.

One

American Soil

Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression into barbarism. —FRIEDRICH ENGELS¹

When James Riddle Hoffa was born in Brazil, Indiana, on February 14, 1913, American socialism had reached its apex. Just twelve years after its founding, the Socialist Party could boast of a membership of more than 100,000, the election of 1,200 party members to public offices across the United States, and the ongoing publication of more than 300 periodicals. Most impressive was the widespread popularity of another native of west-central Indiana, Eugene Debs, who received more than 900,000 votes as the party's nominee in the 1912 presidential election. But over the next several years, during Hoffa's childhood, the United States provided a stark answer to the query posed by Friedrich Engels at the close of the nineteenth century. Jimmy Hoffa's America crucified Eugene Debs and set fire to his world.²

In the fall of 1925, Debs wrote a letter to his local newspaper in Terre Haute bitterly lamenting the fate of both his hometown and his country. Debs had returned to live in Terre Haute after his release from the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, where he had served three and a half years for violation of the Espionage Act—the penalty for having given a series of antiwar speeches during World War I. The leader of the Socialist Party of America saw a new world when he moved back to the town of his childhood. The party he had spent much of his life building was nearly destroyed, the victim of government repression

and a postwar right-wing resurgence. Most painfully, he saw that America, and even Terre Haute, had been fully transformed by modern industrial machinery. Aged and depleted from his years in prison, Debs lacked the energy and spirit to renew the fight for socialism but held out hope that others might take up the work of redeeming what he saw as a fallen America. Gone were the “simplicity and beauty” of pioneer life in the Wabash Valley, he wrote to the *Terre Haute Tribune*. “This is predominantly a business age, a commercial age, a material and in a larger sense a sordid age, but the moral and spiritual values of life are not wholly ignored by the people.” Having never moved from Christian socialism to the “scientific” doctrine of his immigrant comrades, Debs looked not to objective conditions for salvation but to what he believed to be the God-given moral sensibility of human beings. “Sentiment, without which men are lower than savages, is still rooted in and flowers in the human soul and makes possible the hope that some day we shall seek and find and enjoy the real riches of the race.”³

The socialist utopia that Debs imagined closely resembled his own memories of the “beloved little community” of Terre Haute during his youth, “where all were neighbors and friends.” While this surely was a romanticized description, the small Indiana city in the late nineteenth century did offer sources of inspiration for a communitarian such as Debs. Established at the intersection of the Wabash River and the National Road and promoted as a railroad link between the eastern markets and St. Louis, until the turn of the century Terre Haute developed slowly enough to allow it to remain an exemplar of small-town American republicanism. Despite the presence of the Terre Haute and Indiana railroad and the Vigo Iron Company, the predominantly native-born and Protestant white population enjoyed the close social relations of a decentralized economy. Most businesses employed only a handful of people, and even the railroad maintained a personalized work environment by limiting its hiring to familial and friendship networks. Workers were more likely to identify with their employers than to feel class antagonism towards them. Added to this was a pervasive Christian evangelicalism, handed down from the Second Great Awakening, that imbued the community with the ethics of self-sacrifice and social responsibility.

As an adult in a rapidly changing world, Debs was motivated by a

longing for his “beloved little community” and a fear that it would be buried under the advance of industrial capitalism. But unlike most workers who shared these feelings, Debs’s intellectual training enabled him to articulate them. His father, the product of a wealthy Alsatian family, introduced him to the works of the greatest French writers and social theorists, including Voltaire, Rousseau, and Victor Hugo. From his early immersion in Enlightenment thought Debs developed a view of the world as a single community, which, paired with the lessons of Terre Haute’s culture of social obligation, created in him a sense of responsibility for the entire human race. He aspired to be a manager of others, to correct the human impulses that threatened social harmony. A teenage friend expected him either to become the owner of a large business or to join the railroad and “step into a Master Mechanics job in charge of all the engine men.” Indeed, as a leader of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen—whose motto was “Benevolence, Sobriety and Industry”—Debs viewed the trade union as an instrument of moral discipline. “It is no small matter to plant benevolence in the heart of stone, instill the love of sobriety into the putrid mind of debauchery, and create industry out of idleness,” he wrote in 1881. “These are our aims, and if the world concedes them to be plausible, we ask that they find an anchoring place in its heart.”

As smokestacks grew higher, railroad lines stretched longer, and moral depravity sank deeper in Terre Haute and the rest of America, Debs’s inclinations naturally turned him toward socialism. Flowing directly from his yearning for the classless Christian community of his imagined youth and his ambition to oversee it, Debs’s socialism shared the basic principles of socialists around the world, but it bore his own distinctive mark. Within a collectively managed political economy, workmen would organize, discipline, and regulate themselves and thereby “work out their own salvation, their redemption and independence.” But to transform workers into responsible social managers, socialism would have to be above all a moralizing mission. “What is Socialism?” Debs rhetorically asked a crowd of party members. “Merely Christianity in action.” And who would bring it about? “The martyred Christ of the working class.”⁴

Twenty years later, in prison, his movement crushed, his health shattered, and the world outside lost to capitalism, Debs wrote a letter

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to a friend that described a troubling dream he had had. "I was walking by the house where I was born—the house was gone and nothing left but ashes. All about me were ashes. . . . The house was gone—and only ashes—Ashes!"⁵

Rising from those ashes was not the phoenix of socialism or a new Christ of the working class, but something else altogether. The fuel for the railroad engines and blasting furnaces that incinerated Debs's Terre Haute came from coal mines a few miles away, in the towns where Jimmy Hoffa spent the first eleven years of his life.

In the late nineteenth century, Clay County accounted for more than half of Indiana's coal production. Much of that coal was put on railroad cars in Brazil, the county's seat and largest town, and shipped sixteen miles west to Terre Haute. In 1910 John Cleveland Hoffa and Viola Riddle Hoffa moved to Brazil from nearby Cunot, a farming town where Viola was raised. The relocation was necessary for John, since the headquarters of his employer, Ben Mershon, an independent coal prospector, was in Brazil. John Cleveland Hoffa was a member of the third generation of Hoffas in Indiana. His German ancestors had immigrated to Pennsylvania, then moved west along the National Road, ultimately settling in Indiana in the early nineteenth century. John and Viola, who was of Irish descent, moved themselves and their newborn daughter, Jenetta, into a house in "Stringtown," the neighborhood in Brazil with the highest concentration of miners. In the front room of the house, Viola gave birth to their second and third children: William Henry in 1911 and James Riddle, on St. Valentine's Day, 1913.⁶

By 1913 Brazil had reached its peak as a boomtown. After a geology survey in 1871 revealed that the land around the town contained two trillion tons of coal, the little stopover along the National Road took off. Within three years Brazil's population grew from a few hundred to a few thousand, and by the time of Jimmy Hoffa's birth it topped out at 11,000. Like most fast-growing mining towns during this period, Brazil was a world apart from Debs's Terre Haute. The prospects for upward mobility and workers' identification with employers had been greatly diminished by the concentration of the mining industry into the hands of a few companies. State regulations and contracts won by the United Mine Workers of America (UMW) had raised wages and

improved working conditions for coal miners, but the deep-shaft mines surrounding Brazil were still deadly. Explosions, fires, and cave-ins were commonplace, as were less spectacular fatalities caused by intense heat, poisonous vapors, pneumonia, and black lung.

The culture of Brazil expressed the pain and desperation created by its economy. Violence, suicides, drunkenness, prostitution, and gambling were common features of everyday life. In the 1910s, Brazil featured one saloon for every 500 residents. Most were concentrated on Meridian Street, a few blocks from the Hoffas' home, which was known as "Bloody Row" for the frequency of its drunken brawls and homicides. Battles between white and black miners were especially vicious in a town that had attracted significant numbers of African Americans from the South. The rest of Stringtown was dotted with brothels and gambling houses, including one operated by Hoffa's uncle and namesake, James.⁷

Of course, all this sinning prompted a great amount of repentance. Like other Indiana coal towns, Brazil had almost as many churches as saloons. One of the largest was the First Christian Church, which the Hoffas attended every Sunday. Their participation, however, came more from a sense of obligation than from belief. "We weren't a very religious family," Hoffa later recalled. This attitude is evident in his bored, mechanical account of a typical Sunday morning:

Dressed starch-white-clean, we trooped off to the Christian Church of Brazil to attend a rather formal service patterned after the eastern Congregational Church order of worship. The standard operating procedure was to begin with the singing of a hymn, followed by a prayer, with the congregation still standing, then the singing of the doxology, 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow. . . .' Then came the reading of the Scripture lesson, to which, ultimately, the sermon made reference. That was followed by a choral selection and the offertory, the taking of the collection.

Through indifference, both Hoffa and his brother, who later followed him into the Teamsters, escaped the Christian sense of duty that had defined Eugene Debs's life:

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Mother went home after church services, but we had to remain for Sunday school, a session lasting nearly an hour in which we learned the meaning of some passage in the Bible, customarily based on a little "Reader" that was handed to us each week by our Sunday-school teacher. . . .

All told it made for about two and a half hours of inactivity, and I am grateful that neither Billy nor I was ever graded for our attentiveness or application to the subject matter under consideration.⁸

Hoffa's father spent much of his time traveling to surrounding counties on prospecting trips with Mershon. One day in 1920 he returned early from one of these trips, disoriented and exhausted. About a week later he died of unknown causes, just short of his fortieth birthday. Viola Hoffa was now forced to support the family, which had added a fourth child, Nancy, in 1915. She washed and ironed laundry for coal miners, cleaned houses in the town's wealthy neighborhood, and cooked in a restaurant, but the amount of money she received for these jobs was too small to sustain five people. By 1920, wages in Brazil had begun to decline, especially for women. The town's economic growth ebbed during the war as several of the local mines were found to be "worked out." Hoffa's mother decided to move the family to Clinton, located eleven miles north of Terre Haute on the Wabash River, which had surpassed Brazil as the boomtown of the region and where several relatives from the Riddle family lived.⁹

Clinton was even further removed than Brazil from Debs's vision of producer republicanism. In 1920, the town's thirty-two mines were producing nearly two million tons of coal annually but not much republicanism. Like Brazil, Clinton had grown quickly, fallen under the domination of a few companies, and suffered all the social destruction attendant upon coal mining. But Clinton's population was far different from Brazil's, and light-years from Debs's Protestant, Anglo-Saxon neighborhood. The separation between workers and employers was especially pronounced. Beginning at the turn of the century, family networks brought thousands of Italian immigrants to work in the mines. They filled the north side of the town, creating the largest concentration of Italians in Indiana. Viola Hoffa moved her family into a small house near her sister's home on North Third Street, in the heart

of “Little Italy.” There, with the help of the three children, she operated the “Hoffa Home Laundry,” washing and ironing the coal-blackened clothes of mine workers. Jimmy and Billy picked up bundles of laundry from customers, gathered wood to fire the laundry tubs standing in the yard, delivered the clean clothes, and collected the money.

Having moved to Clinton the year Prohibition was put into effect, the Hoffas saw the birth and growth of an industry that became second only to coal in the area. In the 1920s, Clinton quickly gained notoriety as one of the bootlegging centers of Indiana, with illegal stills in the surrounding forests supplying the speakeasies in Little Italy and other towns in the coal belt. The Hoffas also witnessed the transformation of Clinton into one of the roughest towns in the Midwest, where violence often moved out of the mines and into the town’s streets. Police raids on bootleggers frequently resulted in shoot-outs, federal attacks against the town’s sizable Socialist Party branch were equally fierce, and strikes called by the United Mine Workers were typically met with armed resistance from scabs and cops. Stirred into this explosive mix were various Italian criminal organizations and a highly visible local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, which held marches down the main streets in Little Italy to intimidate the Catholic, “un-American” immigrants.¹⁰

For four years, the Hoffa family managed to eke out an existence in their turbulent neighborhood, but by 1924 Clinton’s economic base had begun to wither. The mechanization of mining and a declining demand for coal closed several mines, depressed wages, and squeezed the already meager profits of the Hoffa family business. Viola was forced to move again, and this time she chose the biggest boomtown in the Midwest. In 1924 the family packed up, left the relatives, and headed for Detroit.¹¹

The Hoffas were among thousands of migrants then arriving in the Motor City from the South and Midwest. They were brought there by the dramatic growth of the automobile industry, which by 1924 was churning out several thousand new cars each day and paying some of the highest wages in the country. The city’s population, which surged above one million in the 1920s, was increasingly made up of African Americans and “hillbillies” from the American hinterland as well as immigrants from all over Europe. Detroit’s neighborhoods changed

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virtually overnight, as one ethnic group replaced another through this period of extraordinary growth. Most of these newcomers were single men who planned to stay only a few years, save money, and return home. The 1920 Census recorded 87,000 more men than women, or 119 men to every 100 women, living in Detroit. Among the country's seventy largest cities, only Akron, Ohio, contained a greater gender imbalance. Many of these single men were clustered around the factories in the industrial area of the Lower West Side, the neighborhood where the Hoffas settled. Eleven-year-old Jimmy Hoffa had arrived in a volatile and highly masculine world.¹²

The Hoffas rented a flat in a house on Merritt Street that was occupied by three other families. Their immediate neighborhood at the time was made up mostly of native white rural refugees and German immigrants, many of whom were employed in the various nearby automobile plants, machine shops, and lumberyards. Viola Hoffa worked in the few industries that were open to women. She first took a job in a laundry as a clothes presser, then heard that General Motors was hiring women at its massive new Ternstedt parts plant near the Hoffas' house. For four years she worked at Ternstedt alongside thousands of other women, most of them Polish and Hungarian immigrants, performing repetitive work on pieces of machinery as they moved past her on the assembly line. From there she moved to somewhat less dehumanizing work as a radiator cap polisher at the Fisher Fleetwood plant. The wages Viola earned in the jobs consigned to women at the bottom of the automobile industry forced her children to work to supplement the family income. Not yet a teenager, Jimmy Hoffa worked after school and on weekends doing odd jobs for the C. F. Smith grocery store and other retail shops in the neighborhood.¹³

After completing the ninth grade at the Frank C. Neinas School, Hoffa spent the summer working in grocery stores to help support the family. When the school year began he walked to Western High School to enroll, but before his name was called he turned and headed back home. He had decided to end his schooling so that he could fully enter the world of work. Lacking Debs's love for book-learning, Hoffa felt no ambivalence about his decision. "It didn't seem right to have to spend so much time at inconsequential pursuits before being able to get down to man's business," he recalled later. "And it was man's business that interested me, not kid's." Hoffa's first experience in "man's

business” was as a stock boy at Frank and Seder’s Dry Goods and General Merchandise store. He earned two dollars a day and proudly handed over the money to his mother at the end of each week.¹⁴

The death of his father had created in Hoffa a fierce sense of obligation to provide for his family, but the conditions of his life prevented that feeling of responsibility from extending beyond his home. Many years later, Hoffa described his social philosophy:

Every day of the average individual is a matter of survival. If by chance he should go from home to work and have an accident, lose an arm or an eye, he’s just like an animal wounded in the jungle. He’s out. Life isn’t easy. Life is a jungle. . . . Ethics is a matter of individualism. What may be ethical to you may be nonethical to someone else. . . . But my ethics are very simple. Live and let live and those who try to destroy you, make it your business to see that they don’t and that they have problems.”

The course of Hoffa’s life, and the fate of much of the American labor movement, would largely be determined by his struggles with the heirs of Eugene Debs who sought to impose order, morality, and an ethos of collective responsibility on the jungle.