Labor Hall of Fame

James P. Mitchell: social conscience of the Cabinet

Secretary of Labor in an administration widely perceived to be "probusiness," Mitchell's farsighted attempts to promote peaceful labor relations, address the concerns of disadvantaged citizens, and seize the opportunities offered by new technology won accolades from both sides of the political fence

Henry P. Guzda

President Dwight David Eisenhower appointed Martin P. Durkin as Secretary of Labor in January 1953. Alleging that the President had reneged on promises to support amendments to the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, Durkin resigned, having been in office less than 8 months. Durkin was former president of the United Association of Plumbers and Pipe Fitters union, and organized labor defended their fellow unionist's efforts to change what they called the "slave labor act."

Eisenhower appointed industrial relations specialist James P. Mitchell to replace Durkin. Joseph Loftus, of *The New York Times*, wrote that Mitchell "was like a man heading into an Arctic gale in a sunsuit." Most of the labor movement was critical of Mitchell's appointment because he came from management's side of the bargaining table, and labor, in general, viewed the Eisenhower administration as favoring business concerns over workers' interests. Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks, who believed his agency represented business and thus should have a voice in labor policy, deemed the appointment as "incredulous." American Federation of Labor president George Meany stated that "Jim Mitchell will be as good a Secretary of Labor [as Weeks] will let him be." Considering the scenario, *The Washington Evening Star* asked, why did Mitchell even want the job?

The Secretary-designate also faced internal chaos. Following World War II, the Congress had practically dismantled the Labor Department, transferring labor functions to other Cabinet or Government bodies. In fact, congressional debate often centered on the possibility of merging the Department of Labor, the smallest of Cabinet agencies, and the Department of Commerce. A.H. Raskin, correspondent for *The New York Times*, noted that the Department of Labor was disorganized and without proper resources. It was said that morale in the Labor Department was lower than at any other executive agency.

Seven years later, in 1961, incoming Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg accepted the transference of power, thanking Mitchell for delivering to him a strong, vibrant entity. Between 1953 and 1960, programs and resources of the Labor Department expanded dramatically. Although still the smallest agency in the Cabinet, its personnel levels and program funding had increased.

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Mitchell was instrumental in rebuilding the agency's morale.

In 1961, Department employees expressed their affection for the departing Mitchell by organizing a testimonial dinner. Organized labor also hosted a dinner, and George Meany, not known to praise the Eisenhower administration, introduced the outgoing Secretary as "Jim Mitchell, the best secretary of labor we have ever had!"

Building blocks

James P. Mitchell's life has been described as the classic Horatio Alger story—from rags to riches. He was born in 1900, in a working-class neighborhood in Elizabeth, NJ. His father died in 1912, leaving the family without any means of support. Mitchell's childhood was cut short. He and his two sisters, and his uncle, Thomas Mitchell (15 years old)—a future Academy Award winning actor—were obliged to contribute to the family's support. Despite the hardships, James completed his primary education at Saint Patrick's school in Elizabeth, and graduated from high school in 1917, even managing to devote some spare time to amateur boxing.

In 1919, Mitchell opened a small "butter and egg" dairy store; he opened a second store in 1921. He married his high school sweetheart, Isabelle Nulton, on January 22, 1923, but the young couple had little time to enjoy business success. A recession that same year forced both stores into bankruptcy. For the next few years, Mitchell held an assortment of "odd jobs," including truckdriver, coal salesman, and lumber salesman. In 1929, he joined the Western Electric Co. and embarked on a career in industrial relations and personnel administration.

The Great Depression struck the industrial Northeast hard, but experience in personnel administration was in demand for many of the new Federal relief programs. Mitchell became New York City area director of the Works Progress Administration construction program, then left during World War II to administer labor relations for the construction division of the Army Quartermaster Corps. Despite wartime controls over wages, prices, and strike activities, turbulent industrial relations plagued the construction industry. Mitchell, however, received praise from both contractors and building trades unionists for his unfailing fairness.

After undertaking some postwar projects for the Army, Mitchell returned to private industry. He served as the chief industrial relations officer at R.H. Macy's department store in New York City from 1945 to 1947, and then moved across the street to Bloomingdales department store as vice president of labor relations and operations from 1947 to 1953. Industrial relations in the retail trade industry were poor during the postwar period, marred by strikes and charges that Communist subversives controlled the trade union movement. Nonetheless, Mitchell maintained a rapport with Bloomingdales' unionized employees, who even waived a "no executives" standard to let him join their fishing club.

During these years, Mitchell also served with several Government bodies, including the prestigious Hoover Commission, which had been appointed to study alternative reorganization plans for the Federal bureaucracy.

The President's advisor

The Eisenhower administration assumed office in January 1953. Mitchell wanted the labor portfolio, but accepted an alternative appointment as an Assistant Secretary of the Army when the Labor Cabinet seat went to Durkin. Although on good

The Labor Hall of Fame

The Labor Hall of Fame, an activity of the Friends of the Department of Labor, posthumously honors Americans who have contributed most to enhance the quality of lives of American workers.

The twelve persons elected to the Labor Hall of Fame are Samuel Gompers, John R. Commons, Cyrus S. Ching, Frances Perkins, John L. Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, George Meany, Walter P. Reuther, Henry J. Kaiser, Robert F. Wagner, James P. Mitchell, and Eugene V. Debs.

A panel composed of national leaders from unions, industry, academia, and government, and chaired by Monsignor George Higgins, makes the selection to the Labor Hall of Fame. Former Secretary of Labor W. J. Usery, Jr., chairs Friends of the Department of Labor, an independent membership organization established in 1987 "to support the traditional programs and goals of the U.S. Department of Labor, and to generally support the cause of improved labor-management relations."

The Hall of Fame is housed in the north lobby of the Frances Perkins Building, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20212. Friends of the Department of Labor invites Hall of Fame nominations. They may be submitted to Friends of the Department of Labor, Box 2258, Washington, DC 20013.

terms with the union president, Mitchell felt that Durkin would have difficulty in dealing with the other Cabinet members, who were wealthy and business-oriented. In fact, the press described the Eisenhower Cabinet as consisting of nine millionaires and a plumber (Durkin). On October 9, 1953, less than 10 months into the Eisenhower term, James P. Mitchell became the eighth Secretary of Labor.

Any Secretary of Labor has to balance responsibilities. They must serve as part of the Cabinet team, but must also find ways to promote the interests of American workers. While most Secretaries espouse neutrality in labor-management relations, a working relationship with organized labor is important for a successful tenure. Mitchell knew he could never have a good relationship with AFL president George Meany unless the latter was convinced that the U.S. Department of Commerce had only marginal influence on administration labor policies.

The issue of Taft-Hartley reform served as the crucible wherein the new Labor Secretary molded his plan of operation. Mitchell said he would take legislative proposals to the White House and the Secretary of Commerce could do the same. Assistant Secretary of Commerce Lothair Teetor apparently misinterpreted Mitchell's message, and reacted by claiming that the administration had reached consensus on strengthening the controversial labor law to restrict union activities. Commerce Secretary Weeks followed, calling critics of administration labor policies, "pinks, professional radicals, and left-wing medicinemen."

Mitchell acted quickly. First, he issued several press releases criticizing "right-to-work" laws, which the Commerce Secretary supported and which organized labor despised. According to journalist Joseph Loftus, Mitchell then met with the President, armed with a compendium of complaints, including his own, against the allegedly false statements by Commerce Department officials. Subsequent comments by Weeks and his associates became significantly more subdued.

During the Eisenhower years, organized labor often criticized administration policies and figures. Some labor leaders included Mitchell in their attacks, but most regarded the Secretary as their friend in the administration. For example, James Carey, president of the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), introduced Mitchell at a building and construction trades convention, stating, "Whatever else the American labor movement may think of the present Republican administration, it will and does acknowledge that the U.S. Secretary of Labor is both a fighter and an extremely courageous man."

In fact, Mitchell established hegemony over all administration functions relating to labor, and influenced political appointments to the National Labor Relations Board and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS). He even wanted a door constructed in the wall that separated the offices of the Labor Secretary and FMCS Director Joseph Finnegan. Mitchell aides Walter Wallace and John Gilhooley quickly pointed out that the Taft-Hartley Act had removed the FMCS from the Department in 1947 to diminish the Labor Secretary's influence in the resolution of labor-relations disputes, and that Congress would protest such a blatant power move. Mitchell bowed to these political concerns, but it remained undisputable that he was President Eisenhower's spokesman on labor matters.

While the Secretary of Labor may not officially become involved in labor disputes, many who have held the office have played significant roles in dispute resolution. By the time Mitchell left office, he had had a considerable impact on the field of industrial relations. His achievements included mediation of the 1954 strike by workers at the atomic energy producing sites in Oak Ridge, TN, and Paducah, KY. He also assisted in the 1956 Louisville and Nashville Railroad strike settlement. In 1959, he played a crucial role in settling a 116-day steel strike. In his book entitled *And the Wolf Finally Came*, labor journalist John Hoer called that work stoppage the largest single strike in U.S. history in terms of effects on the national economy.

The steel strike seriously affected a recovering economy. Unemployment rates had risen above 7 percent during the 1958 recession, but were declining. However, the strike forced the Labor Secretary to honor a spring promise that he would "eat his hat" if the unemployment figure did not recede below 5 percent by November 1. On a clear autumn day, Secretary Mitchell ate a cake in the shape of a white fedora with dark chocolate hat band—on the steps of the Labor Department building. He dedicated one slice each to R. Conrad Cooper, chief negotiator for U.S. Steel Corp., and to United Steelworkers Union president David McDonald.

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It was a public relations stunt, but it demonstrated Mitchell's belief in labor-management responsibility and his willingness to prod the combatants into settlement by any legitimate means. Long before the theory of labor-management cooperation became fashionable, Mitchell had promoted the concept. At his nomination hearings in 1953, he said:

> The development of better industrial relations . . . can be one of the priority assignments that I would hope to devote myself to. I believe we

need confidence of both the employer and unions in the doing of that job.

Not until 1984 did the Labor Department establish a Bureau of Labor-Management Relations and Cooperative Programs, but some of the groundwork for that Bureau was laid in the 1950's.

Getting the house in order

Mitchell established hegemony over all administration functions relating to labor.

To Mitchell, reorganizing the Labor Department was just as much a priority as improving labor-management relations. Journalists had compared the internal operations of the Department with the destructive feuding among the Balkan countries of Europe prior to World War I. This "balkanization" among the Bureaus and offices of the Department led to inefficiency and waste of resources. Morale among the Agency's personnel seemed to be at an all-time low. According to former Bureau of Labor Statistics official Aryness Joy Wickens, Mitchell was a personnel specialist "par excellence," and things changed.

The Department was reorganized from top to bottom. Mitchell brought in his longtime friend, business executive John (Jock) O'Connell, as Under Secretary (the second-ranking position in the Department) to monitor day-to-day operations. He also gave line authority to Bureau heads and forced them to cooperate with each other by assigning cross-divisional projects. He adopted many of the reforms recommended by the 1948 Hoover Commission, on which he had served. Executive orders reorganized the Department's regional districts to balance workloads and to group areas with common economic problems. And, at a time when administration officials were asking for budget cuts, Mitchell fought for, and received, increased appropriations.

One of the most novel reforms involved balancing responsibilities between political appointees and career bureaucrats. Based on Hoover Commission findings, Mitchell assigned career workers to back up political appointees. This mirrored the British Cabinet system, which provides executive-branch continuity and stability in the United Kingdom despite sudden changes in administration. For example, career civil servant Millard Cass became Deputy Under Secretary to support "Jock" O'Connell, and each Bureau head had similar deputy-career support by 1959. Although succeeding administrations, both Democratic and Republican, would politicize the system, Mitchell's initiative was nonetheless a groundbreaking experiment in bureaucratic reorganization.

Aryness Joy Wickens once stated that departmental personnel were loyal to Mitchell because of "reciprocity." One outstanding example of this relationship involved Bureau of Labor Statistics Commissioner Ewan Clague. In the summer of 1954, Clague's reconfirmation hearings as commissioner stalled. The tradition of "senatorial courtesy" called for the administration to get confirmation approval from Pennsylvania's two Republican Senators, Clague having taught at the University of Pennsylvania before entering Government service. But a newspaper clipping surfaced that, in 1933, had quoted Clague as advocating state socialism to cure the Nation's economic ills. The Pennsylvania Senators balked, as this was the so-called "witch hunt" period of the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy era, and refused to approve the nomination. Mitchell, however, refused to capitulate. He appointed Clague as a special assistant and renominated the former Commissioner a year later. Congress then reconfirmed Clague, who would go on to serve several distinguished terms as U.S. Commissioner of Labor Statistics.

Interoffice and interdivisional barriers within the Labor Department also fell. In rebuilding some program operations or starting new ones, Mitchell transferred personnel from one Bureau to another, especially from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, where a rash of postwar Ph.D graduate hires in the fields of mathematics and economics had resulted in a body of talent that could be usefully applied throughout the Department. Departmental expansion included establishment of an Office of Research and Development (1956), complemented by a Program Planning and Review Committee charged with achieving maximum efficiency in program development (1957). The international labor affairs function was upgraded to Bureau status (1959), and the Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training was directed to concentrate on employment and training not associated solely with craft apprenticeship (1958). Following passage of the Landrum-Griffin Act in 1959, Mitchell created a new Bureau of Labor-Management Reports, with 22 field offices, to monitor pension funds and to administer other reporting requirements for unions and employers.

Mitchell's "hands on" approach reached all departmental levels. The Secretary would routinely call personnel, both clerical and professional, at random and invite them to lunch to inquire about working conditions. Hospitalized employees and workers experiencing personal tragedies often received flowers or messages of condolence from the Secretary. When Mitchell left office in 1961, the Department's employees sponsored a testimonial dinner for their former boss, presenting him with a plaque to show their affection; that plaque is on display in the Labor Department's Hall of Fame.

Social conscience

Journalist Harry Hamilton once called Mitchell the "social conscience of the Republican party." Mitchell's sensitivity in this regard probably was best illustrated by his efforts to improve the lives of America's disadvantaged citizens. He served as co-chairman of the President's Committee on Government Contracts, providing leadership for the Government's program to eliminate discrimination in employment. Mitchell actively promoted civil rights progress, even publishing a series of articles about the achievements of and contributions made to society by African-Americans. Within his own Department, Mitchell had the highest ranking African-American civil servant in the person of Assistant Secretary Earnest J. Wilkins. In 1956, the Secretary of Labor became an unofficial administration spokesman in condemning Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus for opposing the enrollment of black students at Little Rock High School. Yet Mitchell will be remembered most for his efforts on behalf of another segment of forgotten Americans.

If American-born migrant workers had had to vote for a secular patron saint, it would have been a close choice between journalist Edward R. Murrow and Mitchell. As Chairman of the President's Commission on Migratory Labor, Mitchell conducted an aggressive campaign to end exploitation of these workers. *New York Times* correspondent A.H. Raskin, who worked with Mitchell on this problem, wrote about the migrant's life, stating:

> He follows the sun and the crops. He travels over highways lined with deluxe motels, their neon signs boasting of good food and television in every room. But journey's end for him is likely to be a tarpaper shack, a chicken coop, a tent, or a dilapidated barn.

And even when the travellers arrived at a worksite, there was often no guarantee of finding employment. No work meant no money. Travel conditions were equally horrible; there were Federal and State laws regulating interstate transportation of animals in the 1950's, but no laws regulated the transportation of migrant workers.

The exploitation of children under this system was particularly appalling. Most migrant families, in desperate need of earning even a few pennies more per day, allowed children as young as 5 or 6 years old to work and taught them to avoid Government inspectors. Even States wanting to enforce child labor laws could not compete with the economics of the system. As journalist Raskin stated: "beans are in competition with school, and beans are winning out."

The Labor Department conducted public hearings to expose and publicize the horrible conditions of migrant life—conditions that made the migrant camps in author John Steinbeck's novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, pale by comparison. Yet, the Labor Secretary encountered powerful opposition to his efforts to improve the lot of migrants. The legislative chairman of the National Farm Labor Users Conference advised his lobbyists: "Do anything you can, anywhere, to stop and to prevent the holding of public hearings." In addition, the other co-chairman of the migrant committee, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson, was alleged to be allied with the large agribusiness interests that used migrant labor.

Co-chairman Mitchell simply circumvented the opposition. Most growers advertised for labor through the U.S. Employment Service, an agency of the Labor Department. Mitchell denied employers access to the service if they failed to provide decent and sanitary facilities for workers. The Labor Department extended this ban to growers using imported Mexican labor under the terms of the "Bracero" program, a joint compact between the United States and Mexico. The Department also closed down some of the worst camps for noncompliance with the law. In addition, Mitchell conducted public hearings to expose the poor conditions of migrant labor.

The Employment Service established an Annual Worker Plan to prevent employer representatives from reporting false crop conditions, earnings potentials, or housing conditions to Government officials. Under the plan, employers had to apply, in advance, for clearance orders to employ seasonal labor, and to clearly specify the name and address of a worksite, type of activity, and starting date and duration of employment. Such achievements did not make Mitchell popular among the ranks of large growers.

Mitchell has been called "the social conscience of the Republican party."

Mitchell was committed to improving the lives of migrant workers. He participated in the filming of Edward R. Murrow's haunting documentary, *Harvest of Shame*, televised on Thanksgiving Day, 1960, which showed Americans where and how the bounties of their dinner tables were procured. In his official role as Labor Secretary, Mitchell told the television audience that the living and working conditions of the migrants were "a shame, a shame for America."

Agriculture Secretary Benson, along with other Cabinet members, thwarted many of Mitchell's initiatives. Migrant workers had no labor organization, and their information on work issues was most often obtained from exploitative work-crew chiefs. According to Murrow, "No Samuel Gompers had sprung from the soil." It was not until the 1970's, under the leadership

of Caesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, and, in the 1980's, under the banner of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, that migrant workers would begin to make economic progress on their own initiative. And, no significant long-run changes would come about as a result of State or Federal legislation during the following decades, except in California. But Mitchell's efforts were acknowledged. Democratic Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota commented on the success of public hearings on the issues:

> In all fairness, I want to take this occasion to commend James Mitchell . . . I am pleased that he has gone forward and held public hearings to strengthen the regulations . . . Extraordinary pressures were exerted to prevent such hearings from taking place.

Despite limited successes and marginal reforms, Mitchell and others did succeed in directing public attention to a national disgrace.

Training, technology advancement

The launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957 frightened many Americans into believing that we were technologically inferior to our cold war foes in providing for a trained and skilled future work force. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy's Secretary of Labor Arthur Goldberg noted that, while succeeding administrations receive much of the credit for employment and training efforts to diminish the skills gap, the origins of many recent policies and proposals lay in James Mitchell's stewardship of the Labor Department. For example, in 1969, the Philadelphia Plan, designed to eliminate racial discrimination in construction employment in a particular geographic area, generated significant controversy. But as early as 1958, Mitchell had written, "Unions and management have too often been responsible for maintaining costly restrictions (that is, apprenticeship acceptances) in the skilled trades because of race or national origin."

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In response to fears that automation would "deskill" the work force, Mitchell stated, "automation has no threat for the highly skilled worker." Technological advancement, he added, would reap benefits for those workers with the scientific and analytical skills to adapt to the changing work force.

Many administration officials, however, opposed Government initiatives to achieve these ends. Employment and training expert Garth Mangum has noted that, while none of the officials spoke publicly against the concepts of upgrading worker skills and embracing technological advance, the majority of the Eisenhower team preferred to attain these goals through privately invested and maintained programs. Undaunted by such opposition, the Labor Department staff focused on employment and training issues. Mitchell's successor, Arthur Goldberg, credited passage of the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961 and the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 to the research and analysis performed by Mitchell's staff in the late 1950's.

Power struggles

Mitchell's struggle to focus attention on training issues highlights a problem that plagued his final years in office. By 1958, there was increasing friction between the Secretary and other administration officials. One labor journalist predicted that the President would soon lose his best "left-hander" (Mitchell). And, it did appear that Mitchell had lost influence. For example, in 1957, he promoted an increase in the minimum wage from 75 cents an hour to $1. President Eisenhower, however, backed an increase to only 90 cents because his chief economic advisor, Arthur Burns, thought the extra 10 cents would be inflationary.

The recurrent Taft-Hartley labor law reform issue also caused observers to question the strength of Mitchell's influence. Not until 1959, following exposes of labor-management corruption by the Congress and the news media, did significant changes occur in basic labor law. Mitchell's proposals to reform the Taft-Hartley Act were partially adopted—including reporting and disclosure of union funds to protect individual rights, allowing striking workers to vote in representational elections, and giving building and construction trades unions exclusive bargaining representation without elections in some situations—but he had hoped to get more protections for workers written into the Landrum-Griffin Act.

Ironically, one of the greatest accomplishments of his 7-year tenure was followed by severe disappointment. After the co-mediation of the 1959 steel strike, for which settlement Mitchell credited Vice President Richard M. Nixon, Washington rumors noted the possibility of Mitchell's nomination for vice president on the 1960 Republican ticket. Some Labor Department staff members claimed that Bloomingdales head Fred Lazarus had promised Mitchell financial support, and that some labor leaders in the building and construction trades had agreed privately to endorse the ticket if Mitchell were on it. And, while Mitchell told a conference that no one "runs" for the vice presidency, close friends agreed that he wanted the office. However, the Republican ticket for 1960 would consist of Nixon and Henry Cabot Lodge.

Nonetheless, Mitchell worked for the election of the Republican party. Several union leaders were almost convinced to endorse the ticket, but they grew to feel that Nixon did not show sufficient interest in labor issues. John F. Kennedy won the election with considerable support from organized labor.

In 1961, James P. Mitchell ran unsuccessfully for the governorship of his native New Jersey. He then joined the Crown Zellerbach Corp. as director of industrial relations. The former Secretary, who had come to be identified by many with the liberal Jacob Javitz-Nelson Rockefeller wing of the Republican Party, did not appear to believe he was through with politics. Yet, his political career was over. A chain-smoker with a weight problem, he had experienced some health problems as early as 1960. On October 19, 1964, a massive heart attack claimed his life.

Postscript

Friends of James P. Mitchell often commented on the charisma of the man. They talked about his warm smile and rolling gait of walk. Reporters often wrote of his broad shoulders, which made him look taller than his 5-foot, 10-inch frame. Former staff members remember his sharp intellect and his political victories over businessmen, labor leaders, and other Cabinet officers. Others commented on how, during his tenure as Secretary, he erased the Labor Department's "inferiority complex." In 1964, shortly after Mitchell's death, his successor, Arthur Goldberg, commented:

> The burden of a Secretary of Labor is a heavy one, yet he bore it always with a warm regard for all of the people who served him, and whom he served. His contribution to his nation was an enduring one, both in what he accomplished and in the way he accomplished it.

Even individuals with philosophical differences respected the man. Perhaps one of the most cogent accolades came from Eisenhower administration critic and fellow Labor Hall of Fame inductee, United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther, who called Mitchell, "a fine, decent, upright citizen with, I believe, a sense of social responsibility . . . ." □

A note on communications

The *Monthly Labor Review* welcomes communications that supplement, challenge, or expand on research published in its pages. To be considered for publication, communications should be factual and analytical, not polemical in tone. Communications should be addressed to the Editor-in-Chief, *Monthly Labor Review*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington, DC 20212.