David Dubinsky: a life with social significance

Drawing on his immigrant heritage, David Dubinsky envisioned a worldwide socioeconomic role for unions; his ideals were a major force in molding the U.S. labor movement

Gus Tyler

In his history of the United States, entitled *America*, George Brown Tindall noted a new sense of "commitment and affirmation" abroad in the land during the years of the Great Depression. According to Tindal, this spirit found expression in a most unusual 1937 Broadway musical inspired by the president of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, David Dubinsky. "The surprisingly popular musical show, *Pins and Needles*, put on by members of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, caught the new feeling of dedication in one of its numbers, 'Sing Me a Song With Social Significance.'"

The lyrics of the song, written by Harold Rome, a lawyer turned tunesmith, sounded the mood of a movement on the march:

> "Sing me a song with social significance,
> All other tunes are taboo.
> I want a ditty with heat in it,
> Appealing with feeling and meat in it.
> Sing me of wars and sing me of breadlines,
> Tell me of front page news.
> Sing me of strikes and last minute headlines,
> Dress your observation in syncopation."

This song of social significance was, of course, not written by Dubinsky. Yet it was his, the child of a man for whom the presidency of a union was a means to live a life of social significance.

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Coming to power in the '30's

In 1932, David Dubinsky was elected President of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. The union was in dire straights. Its energies had been drained in an exhausting internal war between Communists and non-Communists; its treasury had been emptied; it was over its head in debt; the Great Depression piled woes on woes. In his first days in office, Dubinsky defined his mission: "I felt it was my job," he said, "to give the International a decent burial."

Later that year, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President of the United States. Dubinsky liked to quip that, while both men were elected president in the same year, Dubinsky was elected before President Roosevelt. With the coming of the New Deal, however, the man who had seen himself as fated to bury the International now saw himself as the person destined to resurrect it.

Under the wings of the Blue Eagle, symbol of the National Recovery Act, the union leaped back to life. Members and money came pouring in. The newly elected President of the Garment Workers Union found himself confronted with an embarrassment of riches. What was the union to do with all these newfound members and with all that money in the treasury? If the union were a business out to attract customers and to accumulate cash, the answer would be easy: get rich. But to Dubinsky, the object of a union was to further a "movement," the economic and politi-

cal struggle of the working class to realize a cooperative commonwealth. What could he do to impart his vision to the raw new recruits, now carrying the cards of Dubinsky's union?

Dubinsky found an answer to his question in Vienna where in 1934 he witnessed the convention of the Socialist International. The Viennese Socialists, then the dominant force in the ancient city, took advantage of the occasion to show off not only what they had accomplished in providing housing, education, health care, and a higher standard of living for workers and their families, but also what they were doing to raise a new generation to carry the movement forward. Thousands of youth demonstrated their athletic prowess, their talents as singers and dancers, their deeds of mind and body. All in the name of "the movement."

Dubinsky was inspired. He returned to the United States resolved to do with his members and their families what the Austrian Socialists were doing with the workers of Vienna. He called upon Louis Schaffer, an activist who had been engaged in the presidential election campaign of the charismatic Eugene Victor Debs, to devote his enormous energy and unbridled imagination to add new dimensions to the existing educational program of the union. The idea was to make the union a "way of life," a center of athletic activity, of artistic expression, of social communion, of political participation, of creative performance, of intellectual engagement. The union was to be what future workers should—and could—be.

In New York City, where the bulk of the industry and membership was sited, the union bought a building in the heart of the theatrical district to accommodate its choral, dance, musical, and acting groups. It was at this "Labor Stage" that *Pins and Needles* was born. The show was an overnight hit, and would go on to enjoy the longest run of any musical up to that time. Its appeal was, in part, its timeliness—its caustic, yet comic, critique of the status quo and its call to put an end to the needless woe. But more captivating than the words and the music were the actors and actresses, all of whom were workers from the shops—fabric cutters, pressers, sewing machine operators, finishers, shipping clerks, buttonhole makers, zipper setters, and the like.

The songs the workers sang were socially significant, but more meaningful was the dramatic demonstration that the men and women who were voicing these tuneful protests and purposes to inform and inspire a nation were themselves just "ordinary people." As one of their ditties put it:

"We're not George M. Cohans nor Noel Cowards,
Or Beatrice Lillies nor Willie Howards.
We're plain, simple, common, ordinary,
everyday men and women
Who work hard for a living.
We're from the shops."

The young Dubinsky

At David Dubinsky's induction into Labor's Hall of Fame in January 1994, a brief video showed him addressing a convention of the Garment Workers Union. Impassioned, as always, he thundered: "We do not live by bread" (long pause) "and butter alone." A few titters ran through the audience at Dubinsky's improvisation on a well-known biblical theme. If they had known the life and works of David Dubinsky from his revolutionary youth in Poland to the days of his prominence as a spokesman for U.S. labor and liberalism, they would have known that his "bread and butter" utterance was vintage Dubinsky. Instinctively, he mixed the sacred with the profane, the classical with the colloquial—not merely in his figures of speech but in the way he thought and acted.

Speaking extemporaneously to his convention, Dubinsky recalled the spiritually uplifting phrase that "man does not live by bread alone." In doing so, he was trying to distinguish the "social unionism" of the Garment Workers from the spirit of those who looked upon labor organizations merely—almost solely—as mechanisms to churn out "bread and butter." Ever the pragmatist, Dubinsky knew that "bread and butter" was basic. But ever the idealist, he insisted that there was more to life than the next meal. For Dubinsky, the class struggle was a classroom in which workers would gather not simply to flex their collectivized muscle but to develop their collective mind and soul.

Convinced that God helped those who helped themselves, the 14-year-old Dubinsky had joined a union of bakers—the trade of his father—in Lodz in 1903. This was no ordinary union; it was an affiliate of the General Jewish Workers' Union—the *Bund*, a highly political organization of Jews from Poland and other parts of the Russian Empire.

The *Bund* was ideologically driven. It believed in the right and the need of Jews to preserve and promote their culture. But it did not espouse Zionism, in a Jewish state, as a solution to the Jewish "problem." The *Bund* sought a far more ecumenical and universalist solution, namely, a worldwide cooperative commonwealth. Socialism—global socialism—was the ultimate answer for the oppressed workers of the world and for the persecuted wandering Jews.

At the age of 15, the young Dubinsky became secretary of his local in Lodz. Thus it was that,

as a teenager, Dubinsky officially began a socially significant life devoted to his secular religion.

For his efforts, the young Dubinsky was punished. In 1906, he was arrested by the Czarist police, thrown into prison, and held there until he would be old enough for exile and hard labor in Siberia. In the *Bund*, Dubinsky had started his education on how to remake the world. In jail, he began learning to survive in the world as it is. With some assistance from his father, the young jail bird "greased" his way through the gruesome gears of the Czarist system. The timely "tip" to a guard helped him make his careful way through the miserable maze of a tyranny tempered by corruption.

Prison life also permitted him to make the most of his natural talents as an actor. Approaching the meanest man in the cell block, the young Dubinsky explained that he needed a father in this God-forsaken place. Could he, please, entrust this man with a big body and a bigger heart to hold Dubinsky's few rubles in "safekeeping." The big brute, treated like a human, responded like a human. He became Dubinsky's father—*pro tem.*

When the time came for Dubinsky, now in his late teens, to make the trek to Siberia, he managed to finagle his way to freedom—with much charm, a few rubles, and a little bit of luck. The year was 1910. On New Year's Day of 1911, he landed in New York at age 19, wise in the ways of the world as it was and aflame with the desire to make the world what it should be.

The new immigrant

How would this greenhorn make a living in the *goldene medinah* (the golden land)? His first job was as a dishwasher. Quickly, he rose from this lowly status to become a sewing machine operator making knee pants. Some relatives, impressed with the young man's "good head," suggested that he study medicine. The young *Bundist* refused to be seduced. A doctor could cure one man's illness; Socialism would cure all mankind's illnesses.

Dubinsky's older brother, Godel, was an officer in the bakery workers' union in New York and could have paved the way for Dubinsky in that trade. Some might know or speculate on why Dubinsky did not want to follow in the trade of his father and his brother, but—whatever the reason—he decided to go into an industry in which tens of thousands of Jewish immigrants were sweating away their lives to earn their daily bread. The thread plied by apparel workers was his thread to his people.

He served an apprenticeship as a fabric cutter and joined the prestigious Local 10, whose members were the "aristocrats" of the trade. It was as hard to get into the cutters' skilled craft as it was to get out of the grip of the Czarist police. But, in both cases, the same approach worked—charm, grease, and luck. By 1921, at age 29, Dubinsky was elected general manager of Local 10—chieftain of the proletarian elite in the garment industry.

War on a second front

Ever since his first strike in Lodz, Dubinsky had known who the "enemy" was; it was the capitalists. But, almost from the moment he took office in Local 10, he had to wage war on a second front—against the Communists. For two decades, the battle raged—first within the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union; then, within the American Labor Party; and finally, on the world stage in the post-World War II days, as the Communists hoped to make their World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) the voice of world labor.

In this war on a second front, Dubinsky was never alone. But repeatedly, he was a pivotal player in containing and ultimately eliminating the Communists from the U.S. labor movement, from U.S. politics, and from the international labor movement.

The political fratricide within the Garment Workers Union was the most savage and significant of the many wars fought on this second front. The bulk of the union's membership consisted of Eastern European Jews who had suffered under the knout of the Czar. To these people, whoever toppled the hated Romanoffs was a savior worthy of worship. The appeal of the Communists to the garment workers in the 1920's was a natural.

The organized opposition to the Communists in the Garment Workers Union was not led by conservatives but by Socialists, generally in alliance with the Anarchists. The latter group consisted of non-Communist radicals who did not object to the Bolshevik deposition of the royalists or the expropriation of the capitalists, but who did take issue with Communist suppression of every party, including the Social Revolutionaries, the Mensheviks (Social Democrats), the Anarchists, the Constitutional Democrats, and others. The anti-Communists also did not want to see the Garment Workers' Union fall into the hands of American Communists who would be directed in detail by the Kremlin.

Dubinsky played a decisive role in the prolonged factional struggle. The cutters were the key to the industry. Though relatively few in number, their power and influence were great. And under two of their presidents—Benjamin Schlesinger (the Socialist) and Morris Sigman

(the Anarchist)—Dubinsky was the energetic organizer, the sly strategist, the passionate persuader—the anti-Communist power behind the presidents. It was thus that Local 10 became the weight that tipped the balance against communist influence in the apparel industry during the 1930's.

A second engagement with the Communists was fought within the American Labor Party, a third party in New York State established by Socialist-minded unionists to provide union members a way to back Roosevelt in 1936 without having to identify themselves with the Democratic party of Tammany Hall. Dubinsky was one of the founders of the party.

Communists enrolled in the American Labor Party and, in the party's first years (1936–39), were among the most dedicated fans of Roosevelt. Those were the days when the Soviet Union was constructing "popular fronts" abroad to include any and all who opposed Hitler. But when, in 1939, Stalin joined with Hitler to partition Poland, the Communists in the American Labor Party tried to deny the party's backing of Roosevelt because he was friendly to the Allies. And when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, the Communists reversed directions, as directed, and embraced Roosevelt again—as a champion of democracy.

As the war began to wind down, with a clear victory for the anti-Nazi forces in sight, the Communists tried to take over the American Labor Party by making the most of the then-prevailing amity between the United States and the Soviet Union and trading on their own high-profiled identification with democracy under the slogan, "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism." Dubinsky resisted the Communist take-over of the party because he had seen the Stalinist stalwarts turn and twist with every change in the policies of the Soviet Union, and expected more of the same in the future. Several of Dubinsky's closest personal and ideologic friends in the New York labor movement opposed him in his efforts to keep the American Labor Party from becoming just another tool in the hands of the Comintern (Communist International). They contended that Dubinsky was needlessly continuing to conduct a war that was over.

The Communists carried the day, winning control of the American Labor Party. In 1944, the non-Communists who had sided with Dubinsky left to form the Liberal Party. Within a few years, the number of votes cast for the Liberal Party surpassed that of the American Labor Party.

Continuing challenges

When World War II ended, the Soviet Union took advantage of its hard-won standing as one of the victorious allies to call upon unions everywhere to join the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), an organization initiated by the Kremlin. The prestigious British Trade Union Congress responded positively; so did the U.S Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). So also did a few social-democratic union federations in Europe.

As in the case of the American Labor Party, however, Dubinsky resisted the call to join. He sensed that, today, Stalin might pose for an amiable photo with Churchill and Roosevelt; tomorrow, he would be growling at both as he reached out for domination over the Balkans, Greece, and ultimately all Europe.

It did not take long before Dubinsky's worst fears were realized. When the United States offered its Marshall Plan to save Europe from economic collapse and political disaster, the Kremlin denounced the proposal as U.S. imperialism and called upon its followers everywhere to oppose the move. The CIO severed ties with the WFTU, as did the British Trade Union Congress and others. In the fall of 1949, a new world labor organization was created in London. It was the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), representing some 50 million workers in 53 countries. (The key word in the title was "free.")

For the AFL-CIO, involvement with the ICFTU marked a radical departure from past practices. Traditionally, U.S. labor had tended to avoid entangling alliances. In part, this reflected an isolationist attitude that was as much part of labor's thinking as it was part of the Nation's mindset. In part, too, men like Samuel Gompers, a non-Socialist and longtime president of the AFL (1886–1924), felt very much out of place at meetings of the "Second International," whose affiliates were almost all led by Marxists.

The transformation of the U.S. labor movement from its innate isolationism to an intensive internationalism did not take place overnight. If a date had to be set for the beginning of this process, it might very well be the year 1934, when Dubinsky was elected to be the first Garment Workers president to serve on the executive council of the AFL. At a mass meeting in New York's Hippodrome to celebrate Dubinsky's election to the Council, Matthew Woll, one of the AFL's senior vice-presidents, explained the social significance of the event: "David Dubinsky's election to the Federation's executive council means more than the recognition of a man. It means a recognition of the race he sprang from and a notice to Hitler that we Americans recognize no racial distinctions or restrictions in the labor movement." The AFL was beginning to crawl out of its isolationist shell.

Dubinsky came to the 1934 convention with a private agenda that tested his strategic skills. Several months before the convention, Dubinsky, together with B. Charney Vladeck, manager of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, and Adolph Held, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' bank, had organized the Jewish Labor Committee (Vladeck had been a cellmate of Dubinsky's in Czarist Poland.) The object of the committee was to be a Jewish voice in the labor movement and a labor voice in the Jewish community and, in both instances, to heighten public awareness about the meaning and menace of Hitler. As the AFL convention neared, Dubinsky wondered how he could sensitize the Federation to the Nazi threat and how to get the U.S. labor movement to do something about what was happening in Germany.

Dubinsky knew it would not be easy to move the Federation to take action. "Too many of the Federation's key people were isolationists," he recorded in his autobiography. "Many were slow to see the menace of any totalitarianism except Communism. Some were secret admirers of both Hitler and Mussolini." Dubinsky also felt that he, a newcomer to the executive council, with a lingering Eastern European Jewish intonation, was not cast for the difficult role of stirring the convention delegates to act against a distant foe. So, as was his wont, he strategized.

He pursuaded AFL chief William Green to invite Sir Walter Citrine, head of the British Trade Union Congress, to address the convention. He also managed to have Green invite Vladeck to deliver a speech. On the long train ride from New York to San Francisco, the three men—Citrine, Vladeck, and Dubinsky—conspired to get the convention to set up a labor chest to aid the oppressed people of Europe. At the convention, Sir Walter's elegant eloquence and Vladeck's passionate pleading carried the day. The convention voted enthusiastically to come to the aid of their oppressed European colleagues.

That same year, the United States, breaking with its isolationist past, affiliated with the International Labor Organization, an organization the Nation had shunned ever since the Senate had rejected President Wilson's proposal to join the League of Nations. To represent U.S. labor at the International Labor Organization, AFL president Green appointed Dubinsky, the youngest and newest member of the executive council.

In subsequent years, the Federation's international involvement proliferated. "The role of the AFL in foreign affairs," noted Dubinsky, "is one that does great credit to American labor." Dubinsky gave "special credit to George Meany, who came out of the most parochial section of the labor movement."

George Meany, who succeeded Green as president of the Federation, was a Bronx plumber, raised in an area that was then the outskirts of the city, a practitioner of the narrow unionism of the archetypical craft unionist of that day. His transformation into a global freedom fighter was due in part to the change in U.S. political psyche as a consequence of involvement in World War II. Meany's change was also due, he told me in an interview for a brief biography, to his contact with socialist unionists who were active in New York, especially in the painters' union. Subsequently, he extended his education in a close and constant friendship with his favorite gin rummy partner, David Dubinsky. When Dubinsky gave "credit" to U.S. labor and to George Meany for their impressive role on the world stage, he was not unaware of the part he had played in the education and evolution of both Meany and "the movement."

The close relationship between Meany and Dubinsky, a proximity ceremonially observed by Dubinsky's sitting right next to the "chief" at executive council meetings, also rested on Meany's recognition of the part that Dubinsky had played in reuniting the labor movement that, for two decades, had been engaged in a fratricidal war between the AFL and the CIO. The protracted bloodletting had begun at a Federation convention in 1934, when the country was in the throes of the Great Depression and when millions of unorganized workers in mass manufacture (a sector stimulated during World War I) were eager to win a voice in the workplace. The majority of the Federation convention insisted that these manufacturing workers be organized into craft unions; a minority urged that they be organized into industrial unions. The vote reflected the relative strengths of the craft versus industrial unionists in the Federation.

The minority decided to form a Committee of Industrial Organization to encourage and to assist in the organization of the unorganized into industrial unions. Its leading figures were John L. Lewis of the miners; Dubinsky; Sidney Hillman of the clothing workers; Max Zaritsky of the hat, cap, and millinery workers; and Charles Howard of the typographers.

Dubinsky joined the new group with crossed fingers; he was afraid that what began as a "committee" within the Federation might too easily turn into a new "federation" battling the old Federation.

Reflecting Dubinsky's apprehensions, the resolution of the Garment Workers Union to affiliate with the CIO contained a clear caveat: "Our International union, which more than any other union, has fought dual unionism and opposition within its own ranks, would strenuously oppose any movement which has for its purpose to act

as an opposition to the American Federation of Labor or to promote any dualism." Four years later, Dubinsky's fears were confirmed. He received an invitation from Lewis for the Garment Workers' Union to attend "the first constitutional convention for the purpose of forming a permanent organization." The CIO would now change its name and character from Committee to Congress. Dualism was to be institutionalized.

The General Executive Board of the Garment Workers' Union decided not to attend. "Being vitally interested in the reconciliation of the two parts of the labor movement," read the resolve, "we decided that we remain an independent union until peace is established in the labor movement, or until it is otherwise decided by a regular or special convention of the union." In a radio broadcast, Dubinsky explained that he was not calling for a "plague on both your houses" but that "we shall continue our friendship with both organizations in the labor movement, although not affiliated with either." He then moved, doggedly and deliberately, step by measured step, to reunite the labor movement.

His first step was to contact Green, as informally as possible, to suggest that the Garment Workers' Union would be prepared to reaffiliate with the Federation if Green would comply with three conditions set forth by Dubinsky: first, to discontinue the penny-a-member tax by the Federation to raise funds for a war against the CIO; second, to deny the Federation Executive Council the power to suspend affiliates and to reserve such power exclusively for the Federation convention; and third, to rid AFL affiliates of officers who were "honchos" of the underworld.

At the 1940 convention of the Garment workers, Green promised to accept the first two conditions. He was silent on the third. The convention voted to reaffiliate with the Federation anyhow, while instructing its delegates to the next AFL convention to fight for the ouster of the mobsters.

At the Federation convention later that year, the Garment Workers' Union delegates submitted their antiracketeer resolution. It was defeated on the grounds that it was an unwarranted invasion of the autonomy of the AFL affiliates. When Dubinsky retired to the bar for a nightcap, he was confronted by Joe Fay, a prime suspect in the murder of a union dissident. "How do you have the nerve to come here with such a dirty lousy sonuvabitch resolution?" Fay demanded of Dubinsky. When the diminutive Dubinsky did not answer, Fay bellowed the question again, and again. Rising from his seat to bear down on Dubinsky, the big bulky Fay upset his table. The room exploded. The ensuing barroom brawl captured front page headlines across the Nation.

Dubinsky became the noble little David pitted against the Philistine Goliath. The attempt of the underworld to infiltrate and take over the U.S. labor movement was no longer a dirty little secret discussed in hushed tones far from the public ear. The war against the mobsters in the movement had been declared.

Dubinsky now had still another reason to work for the unification of the labor movement. In the AFL, as it was, he saw little chance to clean house. "It was plain that the gangster element was so powerful thanks to their allies in the building trades and Teamsters that Green and all the rest of the respectable leaders in the Federation were in panicky retreat before them," noted Dubinsky in his life story. If the industrial unions could be brought into a unified labor federation, the chances for cleaning house would improve.

Dubinsky bided his time. It came when William Green, head of the Federation, and Philip Murray, head of the CIO, died within a month of each other in 1952. The new presidents were George Meany and Walter Reuther, a young "old" Socialist who had, in the past, leaned heavily on Dubinsky for moral and monetary support in the organization of the auto workers. When the AFL and the CIO were brought together in the big "moige" in 1955, Dubinsky looked upon the event as a marriage made in his head.

The merger, the drive against the mobsters, the international involvement, the formation of the American Labor Party and the Liberal Party, the vast educational, athletic, and cultural programs, and the containment of the Communists were all facets of a coherent concept: the class struggle was a great classroom in which workers could and would learn how to be an effective voice in the workplace, in the Nation, and in the world. This was Dubinsky's Bundist dream as a youth; it was his dedication and deed as a national and international leader of labor in his mature years.

Yes, the class struggle was a classroom. But who would be the instructors in the years to come?

As Dubinsky approached his 60th birthday, his eyes were on the future. His generation of leaders had been born in the radical turmoil of Old World proletarian protest and had been reared in the rough-and-tumble of uninhibited and unregulated class warfare. Where would a new generation of leaders get its ideologic education, and where would it develop the sophistication to operate effectively at a time when labor-management relations were a matter of wide public concern and subject to statutory and administrative regulation?

"In 1947," noted Dubinsky, "I shared with the ILG convention my conviction that labor generally needed new sources of leadership. My idea was that we had to pull in idealistic young people

from the colleges who wanted to make trade unionism a career."

Established in 1950, the Garment Workers' Training Institute did not limit its enrollment to college students; it also recruited promising young people from the shop. The mix was good, as in the earliest days of the Garment Workers' Unions, when the semiliterate and illiterate workers learned about Kant, Hegel, and Marx from the "professor" at the next sewing machine, and the "professor" learned about how workers felt, thought, and acted. The cross-pollination produced a sturdy breed at the turn of the century, and the Institute did the same as the century moved into its second half. It became a model of leadership training for the U.S. labor movement.

One of the instructors at the institute, the highly respected labor historian, Philip Taft, summarized Dubinsky's contributions in an essay that appeared in *Labor History* 2 years after Dubinsky's retirement:

> "For almost forty years, David Dubinsky has been one of the most influential leaders of labor in the United States. He played a major role in the formation of the Committee for Industrial Organization, in the great organizing drives of the mid–1930's. and in uniting the fragmented ranks of labor. He was the first head of an AFL union to demand action against racketeering and he initiated the first intervention in forty years by the AFL against a corrupt international. He was the first to call attention to American labor's need for an expanded international program to meet the Communist challenge in all parts of the world, to provide aid to trade union victims of totalitarianism, and to assist in the establishment of democratic labor organizations wherever such assistance was necessary. He has been a leading advocate of greater political participation by labor and of support for more extensive legislative programs in the state legislatures and in Congress."

In his youth, in his years as president of the Garment Workers' Union, and in his years after retirement (1966–81), as director of the union's Retiree Services Department, Dubinsky lived a long life "with social significance."