Library of Congress

Cincinnati, Ohio, between 1910 and 1920

SINCLAIR LEWIS ■ *BABBITT* ■ 1922

CH. 27: The Labor Strike

No issue ignited the partisan divide in postwar America more than the nationwide labor strikes of 1919-1921. The "labor vs. capital" battle pitted industrial workers who demanded higher wages in the postwar inflation economy against the industrialist "bosses" who rejected unions as the product of foreign-inspired anarchist and Bolshevik (Communist) agitators. The general public, angered by the strike-induced product shortages and frightened by postwar unrest, overwhelmingly sided with "capital." Those who defended union' goals—or simply their right to protest—risked ostracism as unpatriotic "radicals." This is what happens to George Babbitt, the midwestern middle-class businessman of Sinclair Lewis's classic novel *Babbitt*, when a labor strike polarizes the city. Struggling to identify his own political stance, Babbitt finds himself caught between his newly adopted liberal views and his business colleagues' unequivocal condemnation of the strikers. In this chapter, Lewis captured the us-vs.-them mentality of the Red Scare in America when many were "ready to disown any friend who did not hate the enemy." [Because Lewis modeled Zenith on Cincinnati and other midwestern cities, photographs from Cincinnati's labor history are used here to illustrate the chapter.]

I

THE strike which turned Zenith into two belligerent camps—white and red—began late in September with a walkout of telephone girls and linemen in protest against a reduction of wages. The newly formed union of dairy products workers went out, partly in sympathy and partly in demand for a forty-four hour week. They were followed by the truck drivers' union. Industry was tied up, and the whole city was nervous with talk of a trolley strike, a printers' strike, a general strike. Furious citizens, trying to get telephone calls through strike-breaking girls, danced helplessly. Every truck that made its way from the factories to the freight stations was guarded by a policeman, trying to look stoical [i.e., fearless] beside the scab driver. A line of fifty trucks from the Zenith Steel and Machinery Company was attacked by strikers—rushing out from the sidewalk, pulling drivers from the seats, smashing carburetors and commutators [electric switches], while telephone girls cheered from the walk, and small boys heaved bricks.

white and red: conservative/ anti-union and liberal/pro-union

scab: a worker who continues to work during a strike; a "strikebreaker"

The National Guard was ordered out. Colonel Nixon, who in private life was Mr. Caleb Nixon, secretary of the Pullmore Tractor Company, put on a long khaki coat and stalked through crowds, a .44 automatic in hand. Even Babbitt's friend, Clarence Drum the shoe merchant—a round and merry man who told stories at the Athletic Club, and who strangely resembled a Victorian pug-dog—was to be seen as a waddling but ferocious captain, with his belt tight about his comfortable little belly, and

Library of Congress National Guard in Cincinnati during streetcar strike, May 17, 1913

his round little mouth petulant as he piped to chattering groups on corners. "Move on there now! I can't have any of this loitering!"

Every newspaper in the city, save one, was against the strikers. When mobs raided the newsstands, at each was stationed a militiaman, a young, embarrassed citizen-soldier with eye-glasses, bookkeeper or grocery clerk in private life, trying to look dangerous while small boys yelped, "Get onto de tin soldier!" and striking truck drivers inquired tenderly, "Say, Joe, when I was fighting in France, was you in camp in the States or was you doing Swede exercises in the Y. M. C. A.? Be careful of that bayonet, now, or you'll cut yourself!"

There was no one in Zenith who talked of anything but the strike, and no one who did not take sides. You were either a courageous friend of Labor, or you were a fearless supporter of the Rights of Property; and in either case you were belligerent, and ready to disown any friend who did not hate the enemy.

A condensed-milk plant was set afire—each side charged it to the other—and the city was hysterical.

And Babbitt chose this time to be publicly liberal.

He belonged to the sound, sane, right-thinking wing, and at first he agreed that the Crooked Agitators ought to be shot. He was sorry when his friend, Seneca Doane, defended arrested strikers, and he thought of going to Doane and explaining about these agitators, but when he read a broadside [printed handout] alleging that even on their former wages the telephone girls had been hungry, he was troubled. "All lies and fake figures," he said, but in a doubtful croak.

Seneca Doane: a liberal lawyer in Zenith who defends the unions' cause

For the Sunday after, the Chatham Road Presbyterian Church announced a sermon by Dr. John Jennison Drew on "How the Savior Would End Strikes." Babbitt had been negligent about church-going lately, but he went to the service, hopeful that Dr. Drew really did have the information as to what the divine powers thought about strikes. Beside Babbitt in the large, curving, glossy, velvet-upholstered pew was Chum Frink.

Chum Frink: a friend of Babbitt; author of nationally syndicated popular poetry

Frink whispered, "Hope the doc gives the strikers hell! Ordinarily, I don't believe in a preacher butting into political matters—let him stick to straight religion and save souls, and not stir up a lot of discussion—but at a time like this, I do think he ought to stand right up and bawl out those plug-uglies to a fare-you-well!"

"Yes—well—" said Babbitt.

The Rev. Dr. Drew, his rustic bang flopping with the intensity of his poetic and sociologic ardor, trumpeted:

"During the untoward series of industrial dislocations [strikes] which have—let us be courageous and admit it boldly—throttled the business life of our fair city these past days, there has been a great deal of loose talk about scientific prevention of scientific—*scientific!* Now, let me tell you that the most unscientific thing in the world is science! Take the attacks on the established fundamentals of the Christian creed which were so popular with the 'scientists' a generation ago. Oh, yes, they were mighty fellows, and great poobahs of criticism! They were going to destroy the church; they were going to prove the world was created and has been brought to its extraordinary level of morality and civilization by blind chance. Yet the church stands just as firmly today as ever, and the only answer a Christian pastor needs make to the long-haired opponents of his simple faith is just a pitying smile!

poobah: satirical slang for a haughty high-ranking person or a self-styled expert

"And now these same 'scientists' want to replace the natural condition of free competition by crazy systems which, no matter by what high-sounding names they are called, are nothing but a despotic paternalism. Naturally, I'm not criticizing labor courts, injunctions against men proven to be striking unjustly, or those excellent unions in which the men and the boss get together. But I certainly am criticizing the systems in which the free and fluid motivation of independent labor is to be replaced by cooked-up wage scales and minimum salaries and government commissions and labor federations and all that poppycock.

despotic paternalism: i.e., socialism as viewed by union opponents

"What is not generally understood is that this whole industrial matter isn't a question of economics. It's essentially and only a matter of Love, and of the practical application of the Christian religion! Imagine a factory—instead of committees of workmen alienating the boss, the boss goes among them smiling, and they smile back, the elder brother and the younger. Brothers, that's what they must be, loving brothers, and then strikes would be as inconceivable as hatred in the home!"

It was at this point that Babbitt muttered, "Oh, rot!"

"Huh?" said Chum Frink.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about. It's just as clear as mud. It doesn't mean a darn thing."

"Maybe, but—"

Frink looked at him doubtfully, through all the service kept glancing at him doubtfully, till Babbitt was nervous.

II

The strikers had announced a parade for Tuesday morning, but Colonel Nixon had forbidden it, the newspapers said. When Babbitt drove west from his office at ten that morning he saw a drove of shabby men heading toward the tangled, dirty district beyond Court House Square. He hated them, because they were poor, because they made him feel insecure. "Damn loafers! Wouldn't be common workmen if they had any pep," he complained. He wondered if there was going to be a riot. He drove toward the starting point of the parade, a triangle of limp and faded grass known as Moore Street Park, and halted his car.

The park and streets were buzzing with strikers, young men in blue denim shirts, old men with caps. Through them, keeping them stirred like a boiling pot, moved the militiamen. Babbitt could hear the soldiers' monotonous orders: "Keep moving—move on, 'bo—keep your feet warm!'' Babbitt admired their stolid good temper. The crowd shouted, "Tin soldiers," and "Dirty dogs—servants of the capitalists!" but the militiamen grinned and answered only, "Sure, that's right. Keep moving, Billy!"

capitalists: used by union supporters as a negative term for industrialists and business owners

Babbitt thrilled over the citizen-soldiers, hated the scoundrels who were obstructing the pleasant ways of prosperity, admired Colonel Nixon's striding contempt for the crowd; and as Captain Clarence Drum, that rather puffing shoe dealer, came raging by, Babbitt respectfully clamored, "Great work, Captain! Don't let 'em march!" He watched the strikers filing from the park. Many of them bore posters with "They can't stop our peacefully walking." The militiamen tore away the posters, but the strikers fell in behind their leaders and straggled off, a thin unimpressive trickle between steel-glinting lines of soldiers. Babbitt saw with disappointment that there wasn't going to be any violence, nothing interesting at all. Then he gasped.

Among the marchers, beside a bulky young workman, was Seneca Doane, smiling, content. In front of him was Professor Brockbank, head of the history department in the State University, an old man and white-bearded, known to come from a distinguished Massachusetts family.

"Why, gosh," Babbitt marveled, "a swell [guy] like him in with the strikers? And good ole Senny Doane! They're fools to get mixed up with this bunch. They're parlor socialists! But they have got nerve. And nothing in it for them, not a cent! And—I don't know's *all* the strikers look like such tough nuts. Look just about like anybody else to me!"

parlor socialists: derogatory term for middle-class supporters of the union movement

The militiamen were turning the parade down a side street.

"They got just as much right to march as anybody else! They own the streets as much as Clarence Drum or the American Legion does!" Babbitt grumbled. "Of course, they're—they're a bad element, but—Oh, rats!"

At the Athletic Club, Babbitt was silent during lunch, while the others fretted, "I don't know what the world's coming to," or solaced their spirits with "kidding."

Captain Clarence Drum came swinging by, splendid in khaki.

"How's it going, Captain?" inquired Vergil Gunch.

Vergil Gunch: influential coal dealer and businessman in Zenith; president of the local Boosters' Club

"Oh, we got 'em stopped. We worked 'em off on side streets and separated 'em and they got discouraged and went home."

"Fine work. No violence."

"Fine work nothing!" groaned Mr. Drum. "If I had my way, there'd be a whole lot of violence, and I'd start it, and then the whole thing would be over. I don't believe in standing back and wet-nursing these fellows and letting the disturbances drag on. I tell you these strikers are nothing in God's world but a lot of bomb-throwing socialists and thugs, and the only way to handle 'em is with a club! That's what I'd do; beat up the whole lot of 'em!"

Babbitt heard himself saying, "Oh, rats, Clarence, they look just about like you and me, and I certainly didn't notice any bombs."

Drum complained, "Oh, you didn't, eh? Well, maybe you'd like to take charge of the strike! Just tell Colonel Nixon what innocents the strikers are! He'd be glad to hear about it!" Drum strode on, while all the table stared at Babbitt.

"What's the idea? Do you want us to give those hellhounds love and kisses, or what?" said Orville Jones.

"Do you defend a lot of hoodlums that are trying to take the bread and butter away from our families?" raged Professor Pumphrey.

Vergil Gunch intimidatingly said nothing. He put on sternness like a mask; his jaw was hard, his bristly short hair seemed cruel, his silence was a ferocious thunder. While the others assured Babbitt that they must have misunderstood him, Gunch looked as though he had understood only too well. Like a robed judge he listened to Babbitt's stammering:

Library of Congress

Cincinnati, Ohio, between 1910 and 1920

"No, sure; course they're a bunch of toughs. But I just mean—strikes me it's bad policy to talk about clubbing 'em. Cabe Nixon doesn't. He's got the fine Italian hand. And that's why he's colonel. Clarence Drum is jealous of him."

"Well," said Professor Pumphrey, "you hurt Clarence's feelings, George. He's been out there all morning getting hot and dusty, and no wonder he wants to beat the tar out of those sons of guns!"

Gunch said nothing, and watched; and Babbitt knew that he was being watched.

III

As he was leaving the club Babbitt heard Chum Frink protesting to Gunch, "—don't know what's got into him. Last Sunday Doc Drew preached a corking sermon about decency in business and Babbitt kicked about that, too. Near's I can figure out—"

Babbitt was vaguely frightened.

IV

He saw a crowd listening to a man who was talking from the rostrum of a kitchen chair. He stopped his car. From newspaper pictures he knew that the speaker must be the notorious freelance preacher, Beecher Ingram, of whom Seneca Doane had spoken. Ingram was a gaunt man with flamboyant hair, weather-beaten cheeks, and worried eyes. He was pleading:

"—if those telephone girls can hold out, living on one meal a day, doing their own washing, starving and smiling, you big hulking men ought to be able—"

Babbitt saw that from the sidewalk Vergil Gunch was watching him. In vague disquiet he started the car and mechanically drove on, while Gunch's hostile eyes seemed to follow him all the way.

V

"There's a lot of these fellows," Babbitt was complaining to his wife, "that think if workmen go on strike they're a regular bunch of fiends. Now, of course, it's a fight between sound business and the destructive element, and we got to lick the stuffin's out of 'em when they challenge us, but doggoned if I see why we can't fight like gentlemen and not go calling 'em dirty dogs and saying they ought to be shot down."

"Why, George," she said placidly, "I thought you always insisted that all strikers ought to be put in jail."

"I never did! Well, I mean—some of 'em, of course. Irresponsible leaders. But I mean a fellow ought to be broad-minded and liberal about things like—"

"But dearie, I thought you always said these so-called 'liberal' people were the worst of—"

"Rats! Woman never can understand the different definitions of a word. Depends on how you mean it. And it don't pay to be too cocksure about anything. Now, these strikers: Honest, they're not such bad people. Just foolish. They don't understand the complications of merchandising and profit, the way we businessmen do, but sometimes I think they're about like the rest of us, and no more hogs for wages than we are for profits."

"George! If people were to hear you talk like that—of course I *know* you; I remember what a wild crazy boy you were; I know you don't mean a word you say—but if people that didn't understand you were to hear you talking, they'd think you were a regular socialist!"

"What do I care what anybody thinks? And let me tell you right now—I want you to distinctly understand I never was a wild crazy kid, and when I say a thing, I mean it, and I stand by it and—Honest, do you think people would think I was too liberal if I just said the strikers were decent?"

"Of course they would. But don't worry, dear; I know you don't mean a word of it. Time to trot up to bed now. Have you enough covers for tonight?"

On the sleeping-porch he puzzled, `"She doesn't understand me. Hardly understand myself. Why can't I take things easy, way I used to?

"Wish I could go out to Senny Doane's house and talk things over with him. No! Suppose Verg Gunch saw me going in there!

"Wish I knew some really smart woman, and nice, that would see what I'm trying to get at, and let me talk to her and—I wonder if Myra's right? Could the fellows think I've gone nutty just because I'm broad-minded and liberal? Way Verg looked at me—"

Myra: Babbitt's wife

In the next chapter we learn that "the great strike was over, the strikers beaten. Except that Vergil Gunch seemed less cordial, there were no visible effects of Babbitt's treachery to the clan." Gunch later initiates a boycott against Babbitt's real estate firm, lifted only when Babbitt sequesters his liberal views to be welcomed back into the camaraderie and business dealings of the city leaders.