

## HARRY TRUMAN AND STATE REGULATION OF LABOR RELATIONS IN THE USA IN 1945-1947

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the policy of the U.S. President H. Truman in the field of state regulation of labor relations in 1945-1947, identifies the factors that gave rise to its nature and assesses the results of the presidential course in this area. The authors consider the position of the U.S. labor union movement on this issue. The materials of the research are the American press, including labor union publications, published speeches and speeches of President H. Truman, documents from the Memory Archive of G. Meany. The paper proves that as early as 1945-1946 H. Truman actively supported the idea of reviewing the labor legislation of the "new deal", insisting on the creation of an emergency mechanism for regulating the relationship between labor and capital.

**Keywords:** the USA, labor unions, labor legislation, government, regulation, strikes, business.

### 1 Introduction

In 1945-1947, the American business which had strengthened its economic and political positions and restored the social reputation during the years of the Second World War, developed active fight for the revision of labor legislation of the "new deal" of F. Roosevelt which had been approved in 1935. The Statute on labor relations or Wagner's law which claimed the rights of the workers to collective agreement and strike were mainly attacked by the entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs drew ideological justification for their attack on the position of labor unions from the ideas of conservative etatism suggesting the use of the mechanism of state power to tame the labor union movement. In this struggle the success of business in the confrontation with organized workers largely depended on the position of H. Truman, the President of the country. The analysis of the policy of H. Truman in the field of state regulation of labor relations in 1945-1947, the identification of the factors contributing to its nature, the evaluation of the results of the presidential policy in this field, considering the position of the U.S. labor union movement on this issue, are the main objectives of the paper. The study of the proposed issues is undoubtedly of scientific importance, since the formation of the post-war labor course of the executive and legislative authorities of the USA actually laid the foundations of the policy of the American state in the field of labor relations for the entire subsequent period in the history of the country.

### 2 Literature Review

Despite the high scientific and political importance of this topic, there is practically no research devoted to its study in the Russian historical science. We can only highlight the work by V. I. Borisyuk (1982), in which he attempted to reveal the main directions of the formation of state regulation of labor relations in the U.S.A. in 1945-1950, touching upon the ideological and political position of the administration of H. Truman on the issue of the post-war working policy of the state.

In American historiography questions relating to the views and policy of H. Truman in the field of state regulation of labor relations are touched upon in the works of scientists such as A. McClure (1969), E. Lee (1966). However, these authors tend to use an unreasonably complementary approach to the evaluation of the position of H. Truman in the working terms, and their works lack in-depth analysis of the position of labor unions in relation to the working policy of the state.

Unfortunately, today, more than half a century later, it is difficult to find scientific research on such an important issue for the history of the U.S.A. in American historiography. This paper fills a gap in the development of this topic.

### 3 Research Methods

The materials of the research were the American press, including labor union publications, published speeches and speeches of President H. Truman, documents from the Memory Archive of G. Meany, which are today located in the library of the University of Maryland (USA) and sources from the Catholic University of America (USA). The research is based on the principle of historicism. Comparative-historical and descriptive methods were used to solve the objectives set by the authors.

### 4 Results and Discussion

The head of the American state H. Truman sufficiently clearly formulated his task in the field of labor relations in August 1945, stating the need to minimize labor conflicts and interruptions in production during the period of the reconversion, i.e. the transfer of the economy from the military to peaceful course of development. Fearing a powerful explosion of the post-war labor movement caused by the refusal of business to meet the fair demands of workers to increase wages which had been actually frozen by the state during the war (Koryakova, 2016), H. Truman (1961) thought it was necessary "to establish a mechanism for the peaceful settlement of labor disputes" (p. 220). To this end, the U.S. President artificially extended the "state of war" until December 31, 1946, in order to maintain the existence of the emergency labor relations regulation mechanism created during the war, including the Smith-Connolly Act aimed at banning strikes, which was characterized by workers as "malicious mockery of labor unions" (Address by J. A. Padway to the 65 Convention of the AFL, 1946). The law gave the President the right to take the striking enterprises under control. In this case, any assistance to the strike was declared a criminal offence. According to the provision on the duration, the Smith-Connolly Act was to remain in force for another six months after the end of the war, until July 1, 1947.

H. Truman actively used the possibilities of the emergency mechanism of labor relations regulation to restrain the strike movement in 1945-1947. Only from the moment of the end of the war to June 1946, the U.S. President authorized 9 "seizures" of striking enterprises, i.e. taking them under state control, thereby forcing workers to stop confrontation with business.

Being convinced of the need to create an anti-strike mechanism for the post-war period as well, on December 3, 1945, H. Truman approached the U.S. Congress with a special announcement, in which he proposed to develop and adopt legislation providing an appropriate mechanism for the settlement of labor conflicts. According to H. Truman, in order to repress the action strike, it was necessary to strengthen the powers of the President in the field of labor relations. H. Truman asked legislators to give him the right to establish special commissions for investigation of the causes of strike. These commissions, after reviewing the facts of labor disputes, were supposed to develop recommendations on the ways to overcome them. For the period of activity of these commissions, a 30-day "cooling period" was introduced when striking was forbidden. Thus, the parties to the conflict were obliged to agree to compulsory arbitration.

Democrats A. Ellender and M. Norton introduced the bills to the Senate and the House of Representatives on the basis of the President's proposals. H. Truman (1961) insisted the Congress should approve them as quickly as possible (p. 520).

Having put forward these legislative initiatives, H. Truman (1961) called for a revision of the fundamentals of labor legislation of the "new deal", for its review in the neoconservative spirit.

Labor unions united in both the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) did

not hide their resentment on the legislative initiatives of the President of the country, accusing H. Truman of betraying the "new deal", in "deviation from the policy of Roosevelt", evaluating them as definitely anti-labor (CIO News, 1945; Robinson, 1981, p. 141; Resolution of Local 1298, 1945; Minutes of the Meeting of the Executive Council American Federation of Labor, 1946, p. 3).

Despite the fact that the members of Congress did not approve the Norton-Ellender bill, relations between workers' associations and the government became even more strained in May 1946 during the labor conflict at the railway transport. Independent brotherhoods of railway workers concerned about the sharp decline in living standards after the Second World War brought reasonable demands to the railway owners for an increase in wages by an average of 30 cents per hour in July 1945. Such an increase in wages would compensate for the lag in the growth of hourly salary rates from the price increase that occurred during the war. Entrepreneurs eventually agreed to a salary increase of only 14-16 cents per hour and they clearly opposed the discussion of the problem of improving working conditions. From among 20 labor unions involved in the conflict, all but two workers' associations – conductors and drivers – agreed with the business proposals (Koryakova, 2013). They declared a strike which began on May 23, 1946, in which 250 thousand drivers and conductors participated. Almost all railway traffic in the United States was paralyzed. On May 24, only 50 passenger trains ran in the country instead of 17.5 thousand.

Enraged by the position of labor unions, H. Truman in his speech on the radio on the evening of 24 May, 1946 made unfounded accusations directed at strikers and their leaders. Speech by H. Truman actually meant the final transition of the Head of State to the position of supporters of restrictive course against labor unions. The President took a firm stance towards business.

The next day, on the morning of May 25, 1946, the heads of the railway brotherhoods Whitney and Johnston told Byrnes, the Secretary of State, reported the end of the strike. Nevertheless, knowing about the settlement of the labor conflict and the termination of the strike, which lasted only 2 days, in the second half of the day, H. Truman addressed a joint meeting of both houses of Congress harshly criticizing the strikers and urging the members of the highest legislative body of the country to approve legislation which is repressive in relation to labor unions and which provides extensive powers to intervene in labor conflicts for the Head of State. The President insisted on obtaining the right to carry out the "seizure" of enterprises (that is, to take control of the government) in the sectors of production the work of which was considered as particularly important for the maintenance of the national welfare of the country, if the labor conflict threatened to stop production. The strike was declared illegal in this case, and it was a punishable offence to hold a strike in the enterprises controlled by the government. Truman proposed to establish strict punishment for members of the union and its functionaries in case of violation of the proposed legislation – one year in prison or a fine of 5 thousand dollars, or both. Moreover, Truman demanded depriving the strikers of production experience and insisted on the right to declare the recruitment of the striking workers (Truman, 1962, p. 278).

Union members were indignant. Without exception, all the workers' associations condemned the President of the country. The head of the union of conductors of the railway transport Whitney denounced the legislative initiatives of Truman as "fascism" and promised to spend every last penny out of the treasury of his union to achieve the defeat of Truman in the elections of 1948 (Brody, 1980, p. 222). One of the prominent leaders of the CIO W. Reuther accused the Head of State of promoting a policy in the interests of "reactionary" entrepreneurs who wanted to establish a "fascist system of forced slavery" (United Automobile Worker, 1946).

Traditionally restrained in his speeches, the head of the American Federation of Labor W. Green assessed Truman's legislative initiatives as "slipping" into "fascist nationalization of production" and to "slave labor" (American Federation of Labor Weekly News Service, 1946).

Based on the ideas of Truman, the bill was not ultimately approved by Congress, and as a result, the country was "saved from the worst of proposals" (Nation, 1946, p. 680) of the Head of State.

However, in 1947 the entrepreneurs' attack on the position of the organized labor movement in the field of labor legislation continued. The American labor unions again strongly opposed any amendment to the Wagner Statute (Green, 1947; Steel Labor, 1947).

But the voice of the workers was not heard. Activities carried out by labor unions to protect the labor legislation of the "new deal" were ineffective (W. C. Hushing to W. Green, 1947; W. Green to L. Washburn, 1947). The business attack was a success. In June, Congress approved the Taft-Hartley bill, which caused sharp resentment of the organized U.S. workers (Koryakova, 2014; Address by G. Meany to the Opening Session of the 84<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the New York State Federation of Labor, 1947; W. Green to J. Beatty, 1947). When this bill came into force, it severely restricted the rights of workers' associations, placing significant obstacles to the unification of enterprises, limiting the possibility of strikes and prescribing bans on the political activities of labor unions. And when the June 9, 1947 the Taft-Hartley bill was sent to the President of the country for approval, the American labor unions launched a vigorous campaign to convince H. Truman not to sign the submitted bill. They sent letters and telegrams to the Head of State with a request to veto the bill (C. A. Fink to H. S. Truman, 1947; United Automobile Worker United Automobile Worker, 1947).

On June 20, 1947, H. Truman sent a message to Congress with a veto on the bill. He based his decision on the fact that the bill was "dangerous" and "non-working", as well as "discriminatory" against labor unions and if enacted, it deprived workers of real protection.

Truman's criticism of the Taft-Hartley bill was reasonable and justified, but his real desire to oppose the law's coming into force is questionable for many reasons. First, Truman fought hard for a revision of the labor legislation of the "new deal" in the neoconservative direction in 1945–1946 and did not hesitate to use harsh methods to suppress the labor movement in these years.

Second, almost for six months (January-June 1947), just when the hearings on the Taft and Hartley bills were held in Congress, the President of the country has not only remained silent on this issue, but also did not unite the democratic members of Congress to conduct a real fight against the Taft-Hartley bill in order to support its veto neither in the spring, nor in June of 1947 (Warne, 1949, p. 82).

Thirdly, as soon as the presidential veto on the Taft-Hartley bill was overcome and it finally came into force on August 22, 1947, a lot began to depend on how the Taft-Hartley Act will be implemented, and in fact, on the position of the President of the country, who received great powers to regulate labor relations (Rogulev, 1981, p. 30).

H. Truman stated that everyone should respect the new act, and that he as the President of the country will monitor its implementation (Lee, 1966, p. 103) and started to enforce it persistently and assiduously.

Undoubtedly, the main reason for the presidential veto was not the desire of H. Truman to oppose the adoption of anti-labor legislation, but his political motives. Quite rightly, the American researcher M. Dubofsky (1994) calls the presidential veto and his denunciation of the bill on the radio a "brilliant political

propaganda" (p. 205). H. Truman was rather guided by political advantage, particularly by the objective of keeping the unions within the bounds of the Roosevelt coalition on the eve of the electoral campaign of 1948. Otherwise, the Democratic Party was at risk of a cruel defeat in both the presidential and congressional elections. C. Clifford, a close political adviser to the president, made special effort to convince Truman to veto the Taft–Hartley bill (New York Times, 1947). C. Clifford had a fine political sense, understood that this step would help to bring the unions back to the coalition of the Democratic Party.

A number of American historians believe that the main goal pursued by H. Truman his in vetoing the Taft–Hartley bill was to unite the American labor unions to support his course of the "cold war". From their point of view, the Head of State was convinced that the confrontation with the Soviet Union was the central issue of that time, and that organized workers were a decisive element in supporting the policy of democratic administration (Zieger, 1995, p. 275; Dubofsky, 1994, p. 205; Gall, 1999, p. 214).

### 5 Conclusion

Therefore, a shift to the right in the working policy of President Truman, which emerged at the end of 1945 and most clearly manifested in 1946, is actually characteristic of the course he pursued in 1947. From January to June 1947, H. Truman, who was actually keeping silent on the adoption of the Taft–Hartley Act, did not unite the Democrats against its approval in Congress. The President's veto of the Taft–Hartley bill was dictated more by political motives, the main one being the desire to keep the labor unions within the Roosevelt coalition in order to win the 1948 elections. Thus, Truman undoubtedly took the position of business on the issue of state regulation of labor relations, acting as an active supporter of the revision of labor legislation of the "new deal" in the spirit of conservative etatism.

In contrast to the working policy of U.S. President F. Roosevelt in the 1930s, which was of a reformist-liberal nature, Truman's position on the labor issue was rather anti-union. Since the adoption of the Taft–Hartley Act, the state became a mechanism for supping the labor movement starting to openly play on the side of business. Further developments have clearly demonstrated that as a result, labor unions have been forced to defend the interests of workers in very unfavorable conditions for them, which undoubtedly reduced the effectiveness of their struggle to protect workers and eventually led to a crisis of the labor union movement in the U.S.A.

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