

OUR FIRST EMPLOYER-PRESIDENT

A LABOR VIEW OF HARDING

BY HAROLD LORD VARNEY



(C) Edmonston from International

PRESIDENT-ELECT HARDING AT WORK IN THE COMPOSING-ROOM OF THE MARION "STAR"

"I did not go to the famous house on Mount Vernon Street when I reached the candidate city. Instead I went to the less famous shop on Main Street, which proclaimed itself as the habitation of the Marion 'Star.' For it was here, among his fifty employees, that Warren G. Harding had written the indelible record of his labor personality"

TO many minds the chief significance of Warren G. Harding's election to the Presidency is not the political significance—stupendous though that may be. It is the labor significance. It is the significance of the fact that in this crisis of industrial unrest the voters have for the first time in the history of the Presidency chosen a practical employer of labor to the White House. At last we have a President who understands labor.

This labor significance of the man Harding was first borne in upon me when I visited the Marion Labor Day celebration in the middle of the recent campaign.

Since the Chicago Convention I had been among the skeptics. Like millions of others in the labor movement, I had been listening to the diatribes of Mr. Gompers and Mr. Morrison, and carelessly acquiescing. This obscure Senator, this backwoods printer—what did he know of the practical labor movement? Had he not always been numbered among the reactionary ones? Was there aught in his political record to indicate anything more than an opportunist's grasp of the myriad-patterned problem of labor?

And besides, I could not but ask myself humorously, could any National labor philosophy come out of Marion, Ohio?

Nevertheless I was willing to go to Marion to convince myself when opportunity arose on Labor Day.

I

I did not go to the famous house on Mount Vernon Street when I reached the candidate city. Instead I went to the less famous shop on Main Street, which proclaimed itself as the habitation of the Marion "Star." For it was here, among his fifty employees, in this shop where he had spent the thirty-eight years of his working life, that Warren G. Harding had written the indelible record of his labor personality. And it was here, I realized, that I must come to read it. What kind of an employer had he been? What kind of a shop had he established?

The Harding publishing plant, be it stated, is not an imposing building. Indeed, one would hardly suspect it of housing anything more than a corner grocery until one entered it. To describe it best one would say that it was a typical Marion building. A three-

story brick, a building whose counterpart greets one grayly in a thousand other monotonous county-seat towns of the Middle West.

In this unpretentious building are housed the journalistic activities of the Marion "Star" and the medical activities of lovable old "Pop" Harding.

Inside Elmer Blazer met me—Blazer, Harding's friend and long-time foreman; a simple yet strong-charactered man who greeted me with the "Howdy" cordiality which one meets only in the interurban belt of Ohio and Indiana. Certainly no one in Marion could have better served the purposes of my investigation than Elmer Blazer.

"What kind of an employer is Warren G.?" he repeated after I had explained my mission. "Well, I'm foreman. Don't ask me. Ask these boys." And he waved toward a long line of busy compositors and linotypers and pressmen. "See if you can find any kicks in *this* plant." He passed me down the line.

I didn't. What I did find was a loyalty and an affection for the absent Warren G. that burst spontaneously and eagerly from every man. If there was any concealed bitterness in this little shop, I would have detected it behind the protestations, for I plumbed for it. But it wasn't there. It was a one hundred per cent Harding shop.

With clumsy eagerness, each employee threw incident and assertion at me in quite bewildering profusion, bubbling with reminiscence, vociferous with enthusiasm—as though every man were anxious to cram me to overflowing with ammunition to be used in the cause of their idolized Warren G.

"If you want to know what Warren Harding's labor attitude is, you needn't go any farther than this room," asserted one of the linotypers, who was described to me as the oldest union man in the plant. "We've got our union and our closed shop and our union scale of wages here, but Warren G. goes us one better than the union even. Since the beginning of the European scrap he's been voluntarily raising our wages every time the high cost of living goes up—so that we can't even keep our union scale up with his raises. To-day every union man in the plant draws from \$778 to \$884 a year more than the contracted union scale. That's the kind of boss we've got."

"Did you ever have a strike in this plant?" I prodded.

"Never!" came the reply. "We never needed to. Warren G. has always granted every demand the union has made. Why, it was he who urged us to form

the union, seventeen years ago. He gave us a hall to meet in, rent free, and he has been like a big brother to the union through all these years."

"Tell him about the guy that ran off with the funds," broke in one of the pressmen, who had been hovering near.

"Oh, yes," resumed my informant. "There was a time a few years ago when a dirty rat skipped with all our union funds. We didn't have our treasurer bonded in those days, so the loss broke us all up. Some of the boys wanted to bust up the union altogether. And what do you suppose Warren G. did? He came forward and advanced us the full deficit. And that saved the union. You couldn't strike against a boss like that, could you?"

The logic of the incident was unescapable. Could this be the Harding whom the leaders of the A. F. of L. had stigmatized as a foe of labor-unionism? I asked myself. Already I found myself reconstructing my point of view—losing the doubts which I had brought with me to Marion.

The closed-shop character of the Harding shop I found to be all the more significant from the fact that Marion is an open-shop town. The large industrial plants in Marion have long been bitterly hostile to unionism. While in Marion I heard whispered tales of scores of men discharged and starved out of town from one of the large plants when it was discovered that they had formed a union. And yet in this atmosphere Warren G. Harding has unwaveringly upheld a régime of closed-shop unionism in his plant, and has found it strikeless. Was not the loyalty which burst so spontaneously from his men as I interviewed them that morning the best testimony to his wisdom?

Blazer told me other things. No man had ever been discharged from the Harding shop. To land a job with Harding was to be certain of employment as long as one was able to work. I met one old fellow past eighty years old who had been with the Marion "Star" for forty years. Another one informed me that he had been with Warren G. for thirty-three years, another twenty-eight years, one twenty-seven years, another twenty-six years. The "kid" of the plant among the printers, in point of years of service, had been in the composing-room for fifteen years.

"And many of these men are stockholders," Blazer added.

I caught him quickly on the statement—I had heard vaguely that the Senator was an advocate of profit-sharing. Here was a hint of another very significant phase of the Harding character.

To my surprise, I learned that many years ago Mr. Harding had introduced one of the most generous systems of profit-sharing among his employees.

"It was when he was elected to the Senate," Blazer explained. "Warren G. felt that some incentive ought to be given to his employees to manage the plant and assume the responsibilities during his absences. And so he capi-

talized at \$80,000 and distributed \$30,000 of the stock among the employees at par, to be paid for on easy installment terms. But as it worked out the stock cost us nothing at all. The earnings on the stock during the long period granted us equaled the original cost and repaid it, so that the \$30,000 turned out to be a virtual gift. None of the balance of this stock was offered to the public for sale.

"The result of this profit-sharing system has been to make every employee firmly loyal to the interests of this concern. And perhaps that also explains why you find us all enthusiastic Harding boosters in this campaign. The Senator has been a true friend to all of us."

I wonder how many other employers have tried the Harding method of generosity to their employees and been repaid, as he has, in dividends of loyalty. Certainly the profit-sharing movement in America ought to find a great impetus from this Harding example. There is significance in the fact that our first employer-President should also be of the school of the profit-sharers.

I left the Harding shop with a clearly defined image of the man Harding in my mind. And it was not the image that I had carried with me when I went there. Here was no bungling, benighted labor tyrant, such as one might have expected. Here was a man who had written all over his shop the evidences of the highest genius of labor management. Here was a man who, in his limited field, had solved all the practical problems of an employer. And yet there was something more which I had still to learn.

II

Concede that the President-to-be was a model employer. Concede that he had found the ideal relationship between himself and the men to whom he paid wages. Was there a comprehensive labor philosophy behind all this? Did he have a vision for National labor, as well as for Marion labor?

For remember, it was not merely the employer that I had come to study—it was the employer who was a candidate for President of the United States.

He was to enter an office where all the snarling waves of Nation-wide industrial hate were to be dashed against him to still. Had he the National vision? Had he the coal-mine vision, and the Detroit vision, and the roaring, black-skied Pittsburgh vision, the vision of men laboring on wharves and in ships upon the sea, the vision of the cotton-mill hand in New Bedford, just as truly as that of the lumberjack camp on the desolate northern Kootenai—indeed, the vision of all that far-flung empire of toiling men and clashing dreams that makes up the living stuff of our American industrial problem? Would he carry with him to Washington a practical Marion-learned solution?

To know this, I told myself, I must see the man Harding himself.

I fell in with the crowds who seemed

to be all moving in one direction that day—to the Labor celebration in Lincoln Park. All Marion was turning out to hear the Harding message to labor.

This Harding Labor Day speech has been little noted, among the other and more partisan utterances of the campaign. Admittedly it was not Harding at his oratorical best. There was in it none of the finish of labored or scholarly preparation. It was spontaneous—homely. But for that very reason it gives us just the insight that we need into the fundamental labor principles of this future President.

Certainly to one who, like myself, sees the labor problem as the supreme political test of the coming four years, no other Harding pronouncement could ring with a tenser significance than this colloquial exposition of his labor creed, delivered that afternoon to his neighbors, employees, and lifelong fellow-workers of Marion, Ohio.

In the first place, it was a smashing reply to my Gompers-implanted doubt that this employer-candidate had a labor vision. And to that other doubt which I had wrestled with—the doubt whether, out of little bush-league Marion, Ohio, could come a National labor philosophy.

Surprisingly enough, that was just what Senator Harding proposed that afternoon for all the sedition-torn industries of America—a *Marion, Ohio, labor philosophy*.

There is a way to industrial peace—to the harmony of employer and employee, said the Senator. Our cold polyglot Pittsburghs haven't found that way. Our neighborly little Marions have. The great dehumanized ten thousand man power mills, where human beings are automatons and where toil is soulless and without inspiration, have strayed tragically from that way. But in the humble little fifty or one hundred man power workshops in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, or in Kokomo, Indiana, or in Marion, Ohio, where the man who represents capital is still John or Bill or Warren, as the case may be, to his overalled neighbor who represents labor—the *way of industrial peace has never yet been lost*.

And, generalizing upon the lesson of this contrast, Senator Harding has formulated his labor philosophy.

That philosophy is the philosophy of the little shop to be applied to the industrial problem of the big shop. Something is psychologically wrong with the labor relations which have grown up in our large city factories. Something is psychologically right in the industrial relations which have always obtained in our small neighborhood factories. Into the one has come anarchy. In the other there is still the sweet, sane Americanism that has been the glory of our past. And so, in the consciousness of this fact, Senator Harding urges for all America the industrial programme of the small shop.

Don't understand me as saying that the Senator presented his thought in just this sharpness or that he literally

drew this contrast. It was the implication that was there, not the statement. Remember that I had seen the shop on Main Street before I heard the speech at Lincoln Park, and so I could not but read the backgrounds in his conclusions. It was as though I recognized the laboratory in the idea.

And what is the application of this Harding philosophy? What is this labor gospel of the small shop?

In a phrase, I would call it *humanized industry*. It is to restore the human impulse to labor relationships.

The trouble with the factory to-day, says the Senator, is that it has become mechanical—soulless—automatic. And the result has made labor equally mechanical and disinterested. Gone is the old flesh-and-blood touch which once inspired the fine team-work of our industries. The worker to-day is shut out from the vision of industry as a whole. He can see industry neither as a person nor even as a process, but only as a monotonous, meaningless wage-job. How can we expect loyalty in such an atmosphere of aloofness?

Let us go back, then, to the spirit of the small shop and restore personal contact.

"When there was intimate touch in industry," said the Senator, "there was little or rare misunderstanding. I want that intimacy restored, not in the old way, but through a joint committee of employers and employees, not to run the business, but to promote and maintain the mutuality of interest and the fullest understanding. Herein lies the surest remedy for most of our ills. Nay, more, I will put it more strongly; I have spoken of the preventive—the understanding which prevents disputes or settles them on the spot."

It will be noted from this that the new President is in line with the "shop council" movement which is so strongly urged by many industrial students. But not with an ideal of "industrial democracy," as with so many of the shop councilites. Abstract motives have little place in the Harding beliefs. He is for a "joint committee" for its *practical*

possibilities—for the industrial understanding that it will bring, for the industrial team-work that it will inspire. On this, as on all other labor theories, Harding's attitude is always consistently the attitude of the practical employer, never of the mere idealist. And therein lies its value.

"The need of to-day," continues the Senator, "is the extension by employers of the principle that each job in the big plant is a little business of its own. The reason men in modern, specialized industry go crazy from lack of self-expression is that they are allowed to be mere mechanical motion-makers. They ought to be taught by employers the significance of the job—its unit costs, its relations to other operations, the ways to its greater efficiency. In a word, the employer owes it to his men to make them feel that each little job is a business of its own. In that way, as some one has said, the job stops being an enemy of the man and becomes his associate and friend."

Cannot one trace the origin of this creed of the Senator's to that little Harding print-shop where I had found that every "job" was a proud little business of its own?

With this regeneration of the job spirit, the Senator looks for a revival of the sterling old American philosophy of *work* and its Nation-needed resultant, *increased production*.

"Let no one beguile you with dreams of idleness," he cries. "Life without toil, if possible, would be an intolerable existence. Work is the supreme engagement, the sublime luxury of life."

Again and again, this thought rings passionately through his speeches—*work!* It is his unquestioned solution of the labor problem. Work, that to the employer means increased production and mightier National bounty. Work, that to the employee means an antidote to the seditious dreams of idleness. Here we have touched the very heart of the Senator's personal as well as public philosophy.

One can never listen to a Harding

eulogy of "work" without thinking of that youth who, thirty-eight years ago, on a borrowed hundred dollars, bought a bankrupt country paper. Of the labor—the devoted, unsparing labor—that has filled these years since. The eternal struggle toward that so-distant star that Warren G. Harding must have seen sometimes in his dreams even then—the glittering star of the Presidency. The hopelessness of it all, the grim toilsomeness of it! And yet to-day that Marion boy has reached that incredible height. Is it surprising that he should cry devotion to that spirit of "work" which has lifted him to such a destiny?

There is no cant in this Harding philosophy.

III

I shall not try to trace the labor programme of the new President through each of the specific current labor problems. In his speech of acceptance he covered most of them. In his Labor Day address we can read the others. And the survey which I have already given of his own shop and employees is more informative than any words of his attitude on the greatest question of all—the trade-union question.

What I have tried to do in this article is to give a picture of the Senator himself and of his fundamental labor motives; to picture the Harding approach to labor problems; to set down the basic spirit of the man as I have read that spirit in this and later contacts.

For myself, I was satisfied that first day of one thing—that I had been all wrong in my previous estimate of the man. I found that he *had* a labor philosophy. I found that he *had* a National vision which was all the more valuable because it was personal. I found that he *had* a sympathy for the workingman that was deeper and sincerer than the sympathy of any of his more recent predecessors in the Presidency. And I found that, despite the legend, he was not without honor in his own country. And perhaps this is the greatest tribute of all to the sincerity of a man.

THE UNPROGRESSIVE PRISON

BY B. OGDEN CHISHOLM

HALF of one per cent of our population spends part of each year charged with some form of criminality—that is, one man in every two hundred. Yet we continue our worn-out methods.

Prisoners should be producers, not consumers only, fed, clothed, and amused at the expense of the public. As it is now, no effort is made to have the lawbreaker provide practical demonstration of his ability to maintain himself and support his family. It is illogical and invites disaster. The

longer the sentence, the greater the harm.

A judge recently criticised our prison system, and doubled the sentence of an old offender as an example to others, adding these words, "Prison years must be made years of suffering." If this pronouncement were intended as a remedial measure, it is a sad commentary upon our laws aiming to dispense justice. Much more would be accomplished if "prison years were made years of restitution and awakening."

It is unfortunate that the spirit of revenge should so cloud our intelligence as to compel a system so utterly indefensible, resulting in groups of inefficient men sent from our prisons handicapped, weakened in will power and physical resistance, unable to meet the problems of life. At a time when there is a cry for production the hands of prisoners are misdirected to fatten the purse of a rich contractor, or their work is carried on with little forethought to benefit them or the State. Half a million men pass yearly through