

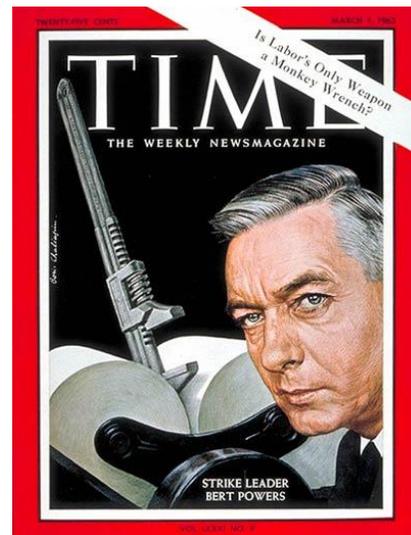
Mitchell's Musings 2-25-13: JFK's Striking Intervention

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From time to time in these musings, we have gone back in time – often via secret White House recordings – and examined the past relationship between presidents and organized labor. Presidents are apt to become interested in labor disputes only when they have potentially far-reaching economic effects. Nowadays, with unions in a diminished condition, the only industries in which a strike might provoke presidential interest are railroads and longshoring. Readers may recall that President George W. Bush intervened in a West Coast longshore lockout/dispute – using the Taft-Hartley's National Emergency Disputes provisions – in the early 2000s. That intervention was really the most recent presidential episode of intense interest in union affairs.

In earlier periods, when unions represented a much larger fraction of the private workforce than they do today, it was still the case the big disputes with economic ripple effects were the ones likely to be the target of presidential interest. Strikes or potential strikes in “key” industries such as steel or autos – as well as railroads and longshore – were seen as damaging to the economy. The damage might be from the halt in production and its direct and indirect impacts on other sectors. Or presidential interest might be triggered by fears that a union settlement might contribute to inflation.

One strike, however, deviates from these concerns. In 1962-63, there was a 114-day strike in the New York City newspaper industry. At that time, New York had five daily papers: The New York Times, the Daily Mirror, the Daily News, the New York Post, and the Herald-Tribune. The dispute involved money but also fears of what was then termed “automation.” In the newspaper industry, the fear of workers was the appearance of computerized typesetting on the horizon. The main union in this dispute was Local 6 of the International Typographical Union (ITU). The parent ITU had a very long history; in the 19th century, printers had a skill that was very helpful in organization and coordination: literacy. Local 6 by the 1960s had developed a tight grip on the newspaper industry in New York.



However annoying the prolonged strike was to newspaper readers in New York, it would be hard to view that local work stoppage as a national emergency. Nonetheless, 75 days into the strike, President Kennedy devoted a portion of a press conference to a strong statement urging some kind of third-party intervention in the dispute. In principle, President Kennedy could have been concerned about the eventual settlement of the strike as violating his voluntary anti-inflation wage-price guideposts program. But it does not appear that inflation was the reason for his interest, even though the settlement soon raised the cost of a paper from five cents to a dime.

Although the strike was local, it did affect the flagship newspaper in the country, the New York Times. So the dispute was more visible than it might otherwise have been. One can only speculate on the cause of Kennedy's interest. But by 1963, he surely was thinking ahead to 1964 and the re-election campaign that was impending. (Of course, he never got to run in that election because of his assassination.) The Democratic Party, as is still the case today, derived significant union support in election campaigns.

Kennedy had, in 1962, issued executive order 10988 granting limited collective bargaining rights to federal employees. The newspaper strike was bad press (pun intended!) for unions and bargaining, in part because of the personality of the key union leader involved, Bertram Powers, the president of ITU Local 6. Powers came across as intransigent and resisted pressures to settle, even from Elmer Brown, the president of his parent ITU. It may be that Kennedy feared that being seen in the 1964 election as being pro-union if unions were viewed by voters as misbehaving. The Kennedy people and other Democrats involved in the dispute – including New York City mayor Robert Wagner – were anxious to keep New York's Republican governor, Nelson Rockefeller, out of the dispute. Rockefeller might plausibly have been seen as a possible 1964 Republican presidential candidate. At that point, it was not evident that Republicans would shift sharply to the right with the Goldwater candidacy.

In any event, a recording is available of the Kennedy press conference of February 21, 1963 at which he called for some unspecified third-party intervention in the newspaper dispute. There are also recordings of phone calls between Kennedy and mediator Theodore (Ted) Kheel on March 2, Willard Wirtz (Secretary of Labor) on March 6, and Mayor Robert Wagner on March 8 (reporting a tentative settlement of the strike). I have posted these recordings on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW9ssApaxXg>. Apart from the presidential press conference, the recordings are from Dictabelts which produce background noise but are nonetheless audible. The individuals to whom Kennedy was speaking were unaware their conversations were being recorded.

Names of individuals referenced in the recordings - apart from President Kennedy and those mentioned earlier - are Harry Van Arsdale, President, New York City Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO; Phil Graham, publisher of Washington Post (who inserted himself into the process); William Haddad, Peace Corps official (it is unclear why he was involved); Jacob Javitz, Republican Senator from New York; Dorothy Schiff, publisher of the New York Post (who broke away from the other publishers during the strike and resumed publishing under a side deal with Powers); and Walter Thayer, publisher of the Herald-Tribune.

There is no deep lesson from this episode, other than the one noted in earlier musing on presidents and unions: When unions represented a much larger fraction of the workforce than they do today, their affairs and impacts were seen as important enough to warrant ongoing presidential attention. In 1963, while in retrospect it is now apparent that the erosion of private-sector union representation can be seen, it was not so evident then. Some academics were beginning to raise that question but even to the extent it was being raised, the issue was more whether unions had reached some kind of saturation point rather than whether they were on a long-term decline. If there is a deeper lesson, it may be that there are surely trends today that we have yet to recognize but which will have long-run consequences.