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The Hesitancy of Progressivism

Emerging from an era of profound class conflict, Progressivism in the early 19th century promised to use the state as a mechanism to engineer a more inclusive society. By supporting workers' welfare and rights within an industrial capitalist framework, many Progressives sought to establish class harmony by appealing to both employers and workers. However, as discord continued to erupt between the classes, the Progressive movement underwent tremendous turbulence as it struggled to find a balance between placing too much and too little power in the hands of workers. New Deal liberalism emerged as a revival of Progressivism – offering the state as a tool to foster social harmony but inheriting its hesitancy¹. Despite the refusal of many Progressives to adopt a radical labor ideology, this hesitancy was a departure from the early 1900's corporate-dominated violence significant enough to score successes for labor.

This struggle of Progressivism is manifested well in the Wagner Act – part of a slew of New Deals passed by Roosevelt, which instituted bargaining power for workers as the law of the land. Instead of making a justification for workers' freedoms under the principle of their welfare, it is predicated on protecting the “flow of commerce”². Crucially, smooth “flow of commerce” is an ideal made possible only by harmony between the employer and the employee – the Progressive dream. Disruption to the “commerce” caused by inadequate workers' rights, the Act reads, both diminishes workers' wages and aggravates business depressions, and thus its protection was argued to be in the interest of all. The Act's justification struggles to... [etc.] Workers' bargaining rights were employed as a tool to protect this ideal of commerce, the goal being to reconcile between labor and capital by instituting greater industrial democracy³.

Despite Progressive intensions of unity, the Wagner Act introduced yet another source of brutal conflict between employer and employee. Powerful corporations, insistent on bargaining as least as possible, clashed against workers emboldened by the state-backed act that would materially benefit them. After William Knudsen of General Motors refused to bargain on a nationwide level, John L. Lewis turned to the law for justification, declaring that “collective bargaining is the law of the land.”⁴ With the backing of this, Lewis and the CIO stood in strong support of a wave of sit-down strikes that gripped multiple GM plants, but most notably of Flint, Michigan. As armed militias and the police were sent into Flint, many politicians advocated for the sit-downers to be forcefully removed from the plants⁵. These calls echoed the conflicts of the late 1800s – Haymarket, Homestead, and others – in which state and federal force was unequivocally called in to quell strikes, resulting often in their defeat⁶.

However, Progressivism questioned the effectiveness of using such a force in restoring their vision of harmony. Amid the growing GM crisis, Progressives, including Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, the Secretary of Labor, urgently attempted to negotiate with GM to establish reasonable workers’ rights while maintaining flow of production⁷. In Flint, Michigan, the Democrat Governor Frank Murphy feared that the conflict would soon break out into bloodshed. Murphy stood in a precarious position between GM and the overwhelming call to protect private property, and Lewis and the strikers, adamant on cementing corporate recognition of the Wagner Act. After weeks of fruitless attempts to arrive at a mutual agreement, Murphy drew himself to order the National Guard to clear the plants. Upon hearing this, Lewis exploited the anxious desire for restfulness in Murphy’s Progressivism by guaranteeing blood would be shed if the National Guard were ordered; afterwards, Murphy never made the call⁸. Murphy’s hesitancy and desire for harmony – and that of Progressive figures broadly – in standing between two invigorated sides, allowed workers’ actions to inflict a larger impact on corporations.

Soon after, GM surrendered from the heavy loss continued striking would pose⁹. This tremendous victory for laborers was a corporate calculation of loss and gain, one altered by the hesitancy of Progressivism in a way the calculation of the late 1800s was not. Despite the Wagner Act instituting workers’ bargaining powers as an attempt to decrease violence, labor advocates appropriated it as

justification for more vigilant and strong resistance. Trapped between two emboldened sides, Progressivists struggled but nevertheless diminished the immediate use of the state as a tool to quash strikers. Their vision of negotiation and reconciliation moved in tandem with workers' determination to attain the successes of the 1930s.