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The Preamble to the NLRA makes an economic justification in advocating for employees to have balancing negotiation power with their employers. When bargaining power is unequal, commerce is obstructed by strikes and the market tends to depress. Hence, employees must be able to exercise freedoms of association, organization, and fair representation.

In Chapter 10, “Victory”, of *Labor’s Untold Story*, Boyer and Morais illustrate the rise of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), which bloomed under the cause of organizing the unorganized. Through the persistent use of sit-down tactics and the unwavering support of the CIO leadership, labor became not only a cause for economic improvement, but a passionate belief in a way of life. Although corporations launched a plethora of propaganda to divide the CIO, policies of unity kept it together, raising worker wages and benefits.

I argue that undergirding the economic justification outlined in the Preamble to the NLRA is a “meliorist” Progressive perspective, as characterized by Shelton Stromquist. That is, it sought not to place radical amounts of power in the hands of workers nor the hands of employers, but instead was an attempt at establishing some semblance of “harmony” - or at the very least the absence of violence – between employer and employee. Most strikingly, the Preamble to the NLRA’s justification for the collective bargaining power of workers is curiously predicated on the well-being of “commerce”, not the employees. It does not make a justification for workers’ freedoms under the principles of providing all equal opportunity to better themselves. Instead, it is argued that the denial of the right to organize leads to “strikes and other

forms of industrial strife and unrest”<sup>1</sup>, which causes a variety of obstructions to commerce, as well as initiating and agitating business depressions. By highlighting the impact of strikes and other industrial strife on “commerce”, it implicitly does not point to either an employer or an employee as an affected group. When the employer suffers losses from strikes and unrest, it is “impairing the efficiency, safety, or operation of the instrumentalities of commerce.”<sup>2</sup> When the worker’s wages are diminished, it “disrupt[s] the market for goods flowing... into the channels of commerce.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, free-flowing “commerce” represents some economic ideal made possible only by equal bargaining power between employers and employees – the Progressive dream. It appeals both to milder forms of industrial capitalism and upholding the conditions and freedoms of workers. Hence, as with many Progressive initiatives, the bargaining rights of workers and the protection of “flow of commerce” was a vessel through which the goal of repairing class relations and reducing industrial strife could be pursued. However, perhaps ironically, this Progressive attempt at addressing class conflict was ‘flipped’ by workers: equal bargaining rights for workers were obtained by *more*, not less, industrial strife and conflict. Laborers took the NLRA as justification for striking and disrupting commerce in the name of workers’ freedoms, under the belief that employers would only obey the unprofitable act if it were forced to do so by the threat of strong unions<sup>4</sup>. That the “meliorist” Progressive vision underlying the NLRA needed to be reappropriated and industrial strife exacerbated to obtain what Boyer & Morais argue was a successful result further points to contradictions and complications to that Progressive ideology, as suggested in lecture and by Shelton Stromquist.

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<sup>1</sup> Congress, “Preamble to the National Labor Relations Act” (Library of Congress, 1935).

<sup>2</sup> Congress, “Preamble”.

<sup>3</sup> Congress, “Preamble”.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Boyer, Herbert Morais, “Labor’s Untold Story” (United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America New York, 1955), 291.