Leading labor

By PETER SHINKLE
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Labor unions in Louisiana started in New Orleans in the early 1900s, and nearly a century later, a union would have been reconstituted across the state, including in Baton Rouge.

The first union to be organized in Baton Rouge was founded in 1919 when the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers chartered local union No. 950, styled Louisiana AFL-CIO President John "Red" Bourg.

Over the next 45 years, labor unions drew little attention as they grew in number in Baton Rouge.

The most colorful period was an era in which Baton Rouge labor leaders clashed with national Teamsters leader Jimmy Hoffa, with one local labor leader even providing key trial testimony that led to Hoffa's imprisonment.

It also was a period in which a labor and management waged war over right-to-work legislation - the right of a worker to take a job without being required to join or pay dues to a union.

The battle, which featured now-retired AFL-CIO President Victor Bussie and business leader Ed Steimel, the now-retired president of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, ultimately resulted in a right-to-work law that has survived more than two decades.

Bussie and Steimel have said the law hamstring labor, making it too difficult for unions to maintain their membership and fight for good wages.

In fact, union membership in Louisiana, which rose from 40,000 in 1939 to 237,000 in 1975 (the year before the right-to-work law), stood last year at 135,000, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Yet that decrease cannot be blamed only on the right-to-work law, some say.

Ricky Russell, business agent for Baton Rouge's International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local No. 950, said the union itself is to blame for the decline of its membership from more than 1,000 in 1960s.

"My generation came in the boom time, and we just thought automatically all the work would be union," he said.

But that view caught up with Local 950 and others as industrial plants in the area pushed for nonunion workers - and got them, he said.

"Right-to-work hurt us, but it didn't hurt us as much as the plants say. They came in and said, 'Hey, we want nonunion.' " he said.

The union had lost its way, even talking on a sort of exclusivity, he said.

"We were prima donnas, wouldn't take people into the union," he said. "We didn't know that a union is supposed to be there to represent people, to represent the needs of the workers."

From then on, he said, the national union has sent officials to Baton Rouge to reinvigorate the local and help it sign up new members.

"We're having a resurgence of membership now because of our organizing efforts," Russell said.

Right-to-work was first signed into law in 1954 by Gov. Robert Kenna.

Quickly, organized labor threw into gear an effort to repeal the law. They backed pro-labor candidates for the state Legislature and supported Gov. Earl K. Long, who had espoused a populist pro-worker philosophy over decades in public life and two previous terms as governor.

In June 1956, Long signed a bill repealing right-to-work. It was a stunning victory for organized labor, and it introduced the state to the political skills of Bussie, the Shreveport firefighter who in the same year became the first president of the newly formed Louisiana AFL-CIO.

With a new right-to-work battle brewing in 1975 and after a year of discussion, the politically ineffectual Louisiana Manufacturers Association, the State Chamber of Commerce and the Louisiana Education Council merged to form LABI.

In 1976, LABI endorsed and heavily publicized a right-to-work bill that said forcing workers into unions to get a job was driving businesses out of the state. The Legislature passed the bill, and Gov. Edwin Edwards signed it into law.

In Louisiana, Bussie also oversaw an AFL-CIO lobbying effort that resulted in placing a worker's compensation system and unemployment insurance, and took on an array of issues ranging from workers' training to health care, civil rights and public education.

He also struggled to shed his image that unions were counter-productive or rife with crime, even waging battle with Hoffa, the Teamsters leader.

In 1989, Hoffa tried to woo an employee organization at the Esso refinery in Baton Rouge to join the Teamsters.

The AFL-CIO had earlier expelled Hoffa and the Teamsters from the union, accusing Hoffa of corruption. Hoffa's links to organized crime had surfaced in Congressional hearings in the late 1980s, led by then-U.S. Sen. John Kennedy and his brother Robert, an attorney for the committee that held the hearings.

"I will oppose with all the power and official strength at my command the efforts of this man to take over a Louisiana union ... and to subject that union to the chaos, havoc and corruption which seems to follow in his wake," Bussie said.

In the end, the Independent Industrial Workers Association union rebuffed Hoffa and emerged independent at Esso, which later became Exxon. The union is now called the Baton Rouge Oil and Chemical Workers Union.

Hoffa's life would be sharply changed by his dealings in Baton Rouge with Edward Grady Partin Sr., the now-deceased business agent for Teamsters Local No. 5.

In the mid-1960s, Partin took a leading role in labor struggles that unfolded as the city grew at a heady pace and the petroleum and chemical industries expanded along the Mississippi River.

But after a federal indictment on embezzlement charges and labor law violations in 1962, Partin reached out to the U.S. Department of Justice, headed at the time by Attorney General Robert Kennedy. In September 1962, Partin told an FBI agent that Hoffa had spoken to him about wanting to murder Kennedy, according to "The Fall and Rise of Jimmy Hoffa," a 1972 book by a former assistant to Kennedy.

Partin, who became an informant reporting almost daily to prosecutors, eventually played a crucial role by testifying in a case that resulted in Hoffa's conviction.

Hoffa faced charges he had tampered with a jury in a trial in Nashville, Tenn., involving a million-dollar payoff from a Michigan trucking company. It was Hoffa's first conviction in five federal trials since 1957.

Hoffa went to prison until President Richard Nixon pardoned him in 1971. Hoffa later disappeared, one of the more notorious mysteries of the century.

After Partin testified in the Hoffa case in 1964, federal prosecutors dropped the federal embezzlement charges.

He also escaped state battery and perjury charges that evolved from an altercation during one of the earliest local Teamsters strikes - Louisiana Creamply in Baton Rouge in January 1963.

But his legal problems would continue.

Partin saw two convictions reversed from a 1969 indictment on extortion and antitrust violations in an alleged scheme with a local businessman to monopolize the local concrete market. But more legal trouble followed from that case, with Partin eventually facing a 1975 trial, then a 1977 retrial, on a charge of conspiracy to obstruct justice that sent him to jail in 1980.

Throughout his years of legal trouble, Partin kept up a rough-and-tumble approach to labor organizing, declaring striking workers and picketing at the front of businesses.

One notable event included a 1967 Teamsters work stoppage at local sand and gravel pits, halting construction at plants and other sites throughout the Baton Rouge area for five weeks. And Partin led Teamsters organizing a union of city workers in 1978, and in supporting a strike by local public school teachers in 1979.

After he went to prison, local union members voted to continue paying Partin's salary.