

AFD Ep 335 Links and Notes - William B. Wilson, The First Labor Secretary

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Bauchop_Wilson (born 1862)

- The Labor Secretary for all 8 years of the Woodrow Wilson administration
- a Scottish-born labor organizer (whose family had been displaced to the US during a coal strike there)
- became a union organizer in American mines at age 12 and became a top UMWA official (secretary-treasurer) before age 40.
 - Wilson worked as a “breaker boy” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breaker_boy

Until about 1900, nearly all coal breaking facilities in the United States were labor-intensive. The removal of impurities was done by hand, usually by breaker boys between the ages of 8 and 12 years old.^{[5][10][11][12]} The use of breaker boys began around 1866.^{[3][4]} For 10 hours a day, six days a week, breaker boys would sit on wooden seats, perched over the chutes and conveyor belts, picking slate and other impurities out of the coal.^{[3][5][10][11][13][14][15]} Breaker boys working on top of chutes or conveyor belts would stop the coal by pushing their boots into the stream of fuel flowing beneath them, briefly pick out the impurities, and then let the coal pass on to the next breaker boy for further processing.^{[9][16]} Others would divert coal into a horizontal chute at which they sat, then pick the coal clean before allowing the fuel to flow into "clean" coal bins.^[4]

*The work performed by breaker boys was hazardous. Breaker boys were forced to work without gloves so that they could better handle the slick coal.^{[10][11][13]} The slate, however, was sharp, and breaker boys would often leave work with their fingers cut and bleeding.^{[10][11][13]} Breaker boys sometimes also had their fingers amputated by the rapidly moving conveyor belts.^{[5][9][10][14]} Others lost feet, hands, arms, and legs as they moved among the machinery and became caught under conveyor belts or in gears.^{[5][9][10][14]} Many were crushed to death, their bodies retrieved from the gears of the machinery by supervisors only at the end of the working day.^{[5][9][10][14]} Others were caught in the rush of coal, and crushed to death or smothered.^{[5][9][10][14]} Dry coal would kick up so much dust that breaker boys sometimes wore lamps on their heads to see, and **asthma** and **black lung disease** were common.^{[3][5][9][10][13]} Coal was often washed to remove impurities, which created **sulfuric acid**.^{[17][18]} The acid burned the hands of the breaker boys.^[19]*

*Breaker boys were known for their fierce independence and rejection of adult authority.^[14] Breaker boys often formed and joined **trade unions**, and precipitated a number of important strikes in the anthracite coal fields of Pennsylvania.^{[23][24]} Among these were the strike which culminated in the **Lattimer***

***Massacre**^{[14][23]} and the **Coal Strike of 1902**.^[23]*

- He was elected in 1906 to the US House where he served 3 terms.
- As we discussed in our recent episode about the 1919 coal and steel strikes, as US Labor Secretary William B. Wilson clashed with the post-World War I Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who was anti-labor. Palmer was new to the administration in 1919, succeeding Thomas Watt Gregory who had been there for the rest of the administration and who had also tried to suppress domestic opposition to the war. (We can probably get to him in another episode.) In 1919, the Labor Department recorded 3,374 labor strikes.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00236567508584359?journalCode=clah20>
- During his time as Labor Secretary, Congress passed the Keating-Owen Child Labor Act of 1916 to massively restrict the use of children as workers for companies doing

interstate commerce, which was to have established the Labor Department's authority to make surprise inspections of mines and factories and other work sites, but the Supreme Court struck it down 5 to 4 within a year as part of the Lochner Era.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keating%E2%80%93Owen_Act Had the law survived, it would have banned interstate sale of goods by companies employing children at night or for more than 8 hours of the day, or employing children under 14, or in the case of mines children under 16. William Wilson had been a 12 year old mine worker when he became a union organizer. Public pressure campaigns, compulsory education laws, and technological capital investment ended up mostly eliminating breaker boys from mines by the end of the Wilson years anyway.

- William B. Wilson tried to run for US Senate from Pennsylvania as a Democrat in the 1926 midterm election but his Republican opponent (Congressman William Scott Vare) tried to steal the election, the then-governor refused to certify the results, and the US Senate refused to seat the opponent, so ultimately 3 years later the seat was simply declared vacant and eligible for appointment by the next Republican Governor.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Scott_Vare#Senate_scandal_and_end_of_career
 - In 1926 Vare announced his candidacy for the United States Senate.^[6] Both the primaries and general election were mired in scandal.^[11] After Vare apparently won the election against [William B. Wilson](#), Governor [Gifford Pinchot](#), who had been beaten by Vare in the primary, refused to certify the election. In January 1927, Pinchot testified before the Senate, producing several thousand illegal paper ballots. Wilson alleged that voter fraud in the election included padded registration lists, phantom voters and voter intimidation.^[12] In August 1928, Vare was partially paralyzed by a stroke brought on by the stress of the Senate investigation.^[10]
 - In December 1929, the Senate voted fifty-eight to twenty-two to deny the senate seat to Vare. While agreeing that he had won the seat, the reason given for denying him the seat was that he had spent excessively to win the nomination.^[13] Pennsylvania Governor [John S. Fisher](#) appointed [Joseph Grundy](#) to the senate seat.^[2] However, Vare took it to mean that he was being denied the seat because of Pinchot's charges. As a result, in the 1930 gubernatorial primary, Vare supported Democratic nominee [John Hemphill](#), who lost to Pinchot. At this point a palace coup emerged at the Republican City Committee, where he was ousted and replaced by Secretary of Labor [James Davis](#).

<https://millercenter.org/president/wilson/essays/wilson-1913-secretary-of-labor>

- In his 3 terms in the US House, serving as a Democrat in a Republican district, he was *chairman of the Committee on Labor, the Committee on Mines, and the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries*
- He was 30 when he first ran for Congress in 1892, but he was 44 when he was successfully elected in 1906
- The Labor Department was separated out from the Commerce Department by an Act of Congress authored by Representative William B. Wilson, but he lost his seat in the 1912 election, so Woodrow Wilson appointed him to be its first secretary.

<https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/wilson>

- *Appointed by Woodrow Wilson (no relation). Secretary of Labor when there were 2,000 DOL employees, and when there were four bureaus Children, Immigration, Naturalization, and Labor Statistics and a Division of Conciliation. With World War I, he put the Department of Labor (DOL) on the map. Many current DOL activities, except the regulatory work that later became so important, trace back to that period employment services, employment of women, fair employment for minorities, labor-management*

relations. DOL helped much in winning the war by mobilizing an effective workforce for defense production.

<https://www.iup.edu/archives/coal/unions-and-mining/umwa-marker-honors-mine-workers/>
[passing mention]

<https://www.woodrowwilson.org/blog/2019/9/27/strikes> [passing mention]

<https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/labor/u-s-department-of-labor-history/>

- William B. Wilson was the first US Labor Secretary. The Department was signed into law on Inauguration Day 1913 as one of the final actions of President Taft.
- *In his first annual report Secretary Wilson enunciated a philosophy, echoed by many Secretaries since, that the Department was created “in the interest of the wage earners”, but must be administered in fairness to labor, business and the public at large. Under Wilson’s early leadership the Bureaus functioned fairly autonomously and the Department focused most of its remaining resources on the USCS [U.S. Conciliation Service mediators]. He also set up a national employment service within the Bureau of Immigration.*
- *The Department assumed the major responsibility for implementing the nation’s war labor policies, which included recognition of the right of workers to bargain collectively, establishment of machinery to adjust grievances, and an 8-hour workday. The War Labor Administration, headed by Wilson, was placed in charge of most of the government’s labor programs. Its principal component was the War Labor Board, which adjudicated labor disputes not resolved by the USCS.*
- *When the war ended, an upsurge in labor-management conflict resulted in an alarming strike wave that threatened to paralyze the rebounding post-war economy. At the same time, a nationwide “Red Scare” led to a series of government raids resulting in the arrests of thousands of “dangerous” aliens. The Justice Department demanded that the Bureau of Immigration deport them all, but the Department insisted on observing strict legal standards and it dismissed most of the charges. Only 556 proven Communists were deported.*
- William B. Wilson put his stamp on the office in 8 years but was succeeded by the awful James J. Davis who served for nearly 11 years under 3 Republican presidents and also significantly influenced the direction of the department. The department didn’t return to pro-labor hands until Frances Perkins, who would serve for the entirety of FDR’s tenure.