

Harry S. Truman (1884-1972)

Radio Address to the American People on the Veto of the Taft-Hartley Bill

given on June 20, 1947

My fellow countrymen:

At noon today I sent to Congress a message vetoing the Taft-Hartley labor bill. I vetoed this bill because I am convinced it is a bad bill. It is bad for labor, bad for management, and bad for the country.

I had hoped that the Congress would send me a labor bill I could sign.

5 I have said before, and I say it now, that we need legislation to correct abuses in the field of labor relations.

Last January I made specific recommendations to the Congress as to the kind of labor legislation we should have immediately. I urged that the Congress provide for a commission, to be made up of representatives of the Congress, the public, labor and management, to study the entire field of labor management relations and to suggest what additional laws we should have.

10 I believe that my proposals were accepted by the great majority of our people as fair and just.

If the Congress had accepted those recommendations, we would have today the basis for improved labor-management relations. I would gladly have signed a labor bill if it had taken us in the right direction of stable, peaceful labor relations—even though it might not have been drawn up exactly as I wished.

I would have signed a bill with some doubtful features if, taken as a whole, it had been a good bill.

15 But the Taft-Hartley bill is a shocking piece of legislation.

It is unfair to the working people of this country. It clearly abuses the right, which millions of our citizens now enjoy, to join together and bargain with their employers for fair wages and fair working conditions.

Under no circumstances could I have signed this bill.

20 The restrictions that this bill places on our workers go far beyond what our people have been led to believe. This is no innocent bill.

It is interesting to note that on June 4, Congressman Hartley on the floor of the House of Representatives, made the following statement, and I quote: "You are going to find there is more in this bill than may meet the eye."

That is a revealing description of this bill by one of its authors.

25 There is so much more in it than the people have been led to believe, that I am sure that very few understand what the Taft-Hartley bill would do if it should become law.

That is why I am speaking to you tonight. I want you to know the real meaning of this bill.

We have all been told, by its proponents, that this is a "moderate" bill. We have been told that the bill was "harsh" and "drastic" when it was first passed by the House of Representatives, but that the Senate had persuaded the House to drop out the harsh provisions and that the final bill—the bill sent to me—was "mild" and "moderate."

30 But I found no truth in the claims that the bill sent to me was mild or moderate. I found that the basic purpose and much of the language of the original House of Representatives bill were still in the final bill. In fact, the final bill follows the provisions of the original House bill in at least 36 separate places.

35 We have all been told that the Taft-Hartley bill is favorable to the wage earners of this country. It has been claimed that workers need to be saved from their own folly and that this bill would provide the means of salvation. Some people have called this bill the "workers' bill of rights."

Let us see what this bill really would do to our workingmen.

The bill is deliberately designed to weaken labor unions. When the sponsors of the bill claim that by weakening unions, they are giving rights back to individual workingmen, they ignore the basic reason why unions are important in our democracy. Unions exist so that laboring men can bargain with their employers on a basis of equality. Because
40 of unions, the living standards of our working people have increased steadily until they are today the highest in the world.

A bill which would weaken unions would undermine our national policy of collective bargaining. The Taft-Hartley bill would do just that. It would take us back in the direction of the old evils of individual bargaining. It would take the bargaining power away from the workers and give more power to management.

45 This bill would even take away from our workingmen some bargaining fights which they enjoyed before the Wagner Act was passed 12 years ago.

If we weaken our system of collective bargaining, we weaken the position of every workingman in the country.

This bill would again expose workers to the abuses of labor injunctions.

It would make unions liable for damage suits for actions which have long been considered lawful.

50 This bill would treat all unions alike. Unions which have fine records, with long years of peaceful relations with management, would be hurt by this bill just as much as the few troublemakers.

The country needs legislation which will get rid of abuses. We do not need—and we do not want—legislation which will take fundamental rights away from our working people.

We have been told that the Taft-Hartley bill is a means by which the country can be protected from nationwide strikes
55 in vital industries. The terms of the bill do not support this claim.

Many people are under the impression that this bill would prevent or settle a strike in the coal industry. I sincerely trust that the coal operators and the miners will soon come to an agreement on the terms of a contract and that there will be no interruption of coal mining. But if the miners and the operators do not reach agreement, and if this bill should become law, it is likely that the most that could be accomplished under the complicated procedures of the bill
60 would be postponement of a strike from July until October.

Under this bill a work stoppage in the coal mines might be prevented for 80 days and then, if agreement had not been reached, the miners would be free to strike, and it would be mandatory for the President to refer the whole matter to Congress, even if Congress were not in session.

Postponing a strike in the coal industry until the approach of winter, when our need for coal is acute, is certainly not
65 the way to protect the Nation against the dangers of a shortage of coal.

The bill would not aid fair and early settlements of disputes in vital industries.

We have been told, by the supporters of the Taft-Hartley bill, that it would reduce industrial strife.

On the contrary, I am convinced that it would increase industrial strife.

The bill would soon upset security clauses in thousands of existing agreements between labor and management. These
70 agreements were mutually arrived at and furnish a satisfactory basis for relations between worker and employer. They provide stability in industry. With their present types of agreements outlawed by this bill, the parties would have to find a new basis for agreement. The restrictions in this bill would make the process of reaching new agreements a long and bitter one.

The bill would increase industrial strife because a number of its provisions deprive workers of legal protection of
75 fundamental rights. They would then have no means of protecting these rights except by striking.

The bill would open up opportunities for endless law suits by employers against unions and by unions against employers. For example, it would make employers vulnerable to an immense number of law suits, since grievances, however minor, could be taken into court by dissatisfied workers.

Insofar as employers are concerned, I predict that if this bill should become law they would regret the day that it was

80 conceived. It is loaded with provisions that would plague and hamper management. It is filled with hidden legal traps that would take labor relations out of the plant, where they belong, and place them in the courts.

Another defect is that in trying to correct labor abuses the Taft-Hartley bill goes so far that it would threaten fundamental democratic freedoms. One provision undertakes to prevent political contributions and expenditures by labor organizations and corporations. This provision would forbid a union newspaper from commenting on candidates
85 in national elections. It might well prevent an incorporated radio network from spending any money in connection with the national convention of a political party. It might even prevent the League of Women Voters—which is incorporated—from using its funds to inform its members about the record of a political candidate.

I regard this provision of the Taft-Hartley bill as a dangerous challenge to free speech and our free press.

One of the basic errors of this bill is that it ignores the fact that over the years we have been making real progress in
90 labor-management relations. We have been achieving slow but steady improvement in cooperation between employers and workers.

We must always remember that under our free economic system management and labor are associates. They work together for their own benefit and for the benefit of the public.

The Taft-Hartley bill fails to recognize these fundamental facts. Many provisions of the bill would have the result of
95 changing employers and workers from members of the same team to opponents on contending teams.

I feel deep concern about what this would do to the steady progress we have made through the years.

I fear that this type of legislation would cause the people of our country to divide into opposing groups. If conflict is created, as this bill would create it—if the seeds of discord are sown, as this bill would sow them—our unity will suffer and our strength will be impaired.

100 This bill does not resemble the labor legislation which I have recommended to the Congress. The whole purpose of this bill is contrary to the sound growth of our national labor policy.

There is still time to enact progressive, constructive legislation during the present session. We need such legislation to correct abuses and to further our advance in labor management relations.

We seek in this country today a formula which will treat all men fairly and justly, and which will give our people
105 security in the necessities of life.

As our generous American spirit prompts us to aid the world to rebuild, we must, at the same time, construct a better America in which all can share equitably in the blessings of democracy.

The Taft-Hartley bill threatens the attainment of this goal.

For the sake of the future of this Nation, I hope that this bill will not become law.
(1790 words)

Quelle: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12676>