

# THE WORKING CLASS HISTORY TEST

by Peter Kellman

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THE DOMINANT HISTORY taught in the United States today reinforces the notion that from 1776 to the present “We the People” have formed our own government, and this government has operated to protect and promote the interests of most of the people most of the time. Slavery and the denial of the right to vote for women are pointed to as exceptions that have been rectified through constitutional amendments.

Most working people today believe that the country is not run by We the People but by a small group of the very rich and powerful who manage large corporations. Many of us have in the back of our minds an image of this country, based on the history we have been taught, where the government was run to protect and promote the interests of most of the people. Therefore our vision of a better future is based on getting back to a time when things were better. The problem is that from its inception the United States government and economy have been run by and for the very wealthy.

If we are to build a society where the government is run to protect and promote the interests of We the People, we need to know the history of the elite who have always run this country, and the history of the working class that built it. The following test was put

together to bring out some of the history that we have been denied. It is this denied history that should form the image of the past we carry around with us because we need to have a truthful understanding of the past to create a vision of the future.

We need to be clear about what it is we want to go back to. Do we want to go back to the vision of President James Madison—a slave owner and “Master Builder of the Constitution”—or to the vision of the people who built the early Abolition, Suffrage, and Labor Movements? Do we want to go back to the vision of President Hayes—who used Federal troops to break strikes, promote corporate interests and end Reconstruction—or to the Knights of Labor who demanded equal pay for equal work, and voting rights for all citizens regardless of race or gender?<sup>1</sup>

## THE TEST

Try the test. Answers at the end.

- I. It is easy for citizens of the United States to form a corporation but very hard to form a union. Name three countries where it is as easy for workers to form a union as it is in the United States for investors to form a corporation.
2. In 1770, what percentage of the colonial population lived in slavery?

3. At the time of the War of Independence, what percentage of the people who made up the colonies of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia were or had been indentured servants?
4. Who was the richest man in America at the time of the Revolution?
5. What percentage of We the People couldn't vote in 1776?
6. Who said, "The people who own the country ought to govern it."
7. What great American document was written behind closed doors in a meeting held in 1787, the minutes of which were only made public 53 years later?
8. What great American "told a British visitor shortly after the American Revolution that he could make \$257 on every Negro in a year, and spend only \$12 or \$13 on his keep."
9. What were the demands of the Labor Movement in 1830?
10. The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified after the Civil War in 1868 to extend due process and equal protection of the law to African Americans. In the first 50 years after its adoption what percentage of the cases brought under it were on behalf of African Americans, and what percentage of the cases were brought on behalf of corporations?
11. The Supreme Court ruled in 1872 that women do not have the right to vote under the Fourteenth Amendment. What year did the Supreme Court rule "Corporations are persons within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States"?
12. How can five people amend the Constitution?
13. Whose election to the presidency of the United States was determined by a special commission, controlled by the CEO of the Pennsylvania Railroad, made up of Supreme Court justices and members of Congress? In what year did that president pull the last of the Federal troops from the south ending Reconstruction and use those troops to put down the first national labor strike in the United States in which over 100 strikers were killed?
14. In 1886 the largest labor organization in the United States was the Knights of Labor. What issues did they advocate and fight for?
15. When was the labor movement politically powerful enough to prevent the Governor of Michigan and the president of the United States from sending troops to break up a strike in which workers were occupying corporate property?
16. Which president (John Kennedy, Franklin Roosevelt or Herbert Hoover) signed into law an act which included the following: it is necessary that he have full freedom of association, self-organization, and designation of representatives of his own choosing; to negotiate the terms and conditions of his employment; and that he shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor, or their agents, in the designation of such representatives or in self-organization or in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.

17. In many countries workers have benefits like paid maternity leave, maximum hours of work, health care, paid holidays and vacations—defined by law. What do workers in these countries have that they don't have in the United States?

### ANSWERS

1. Sweden, Germany, Italy, Japan, Belgium, Ireland, and more.
2. 20%
3. 75%
4. According to historian Charles Beard in his book *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, George "Washington of Virginia, was probably the richest man in the United States in his time, and his financial ability was not surpassed among his countrymen anywhere."
5. 75%
6. John Jay, first president of the Continental Congress and first chief justice of the Supreme Court.
7. The Constitution.
8. "Master Builder of the Constitution" and fourth president of the United States, James Madison.
9. The 10 hour day and public education.
10. African Americans 0.5% (one-half of one-percent), corporations 50%. Also of the 307 Fourteenth Amendment cases brought before the U.S. Supreme Court between 1890 and 1910, 19 dealt with the rights of African Americans and 288 dealt with corporations.
11. 1886
12. They become U.S. Supreme Court Justices.
13. Rutherford B. Hayes, 1877.
14. They advocated the creation of producer, consumer and distributive cooperatives; the prohibition of child labor; equal pay for equal work between the sexes and races; universal suffrage; the eight-hour day. And they opposed the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, reasoning that as long as a few people controlled most of the wealth they would use their economic power politically to prevent the creation of a real democracy.
15. 1936-37
16. Norris-LaGuardia Act of 1932 was passed by Congress and signed into law by Herbert Hoover.
17. Strong working class political parties. ■

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Still, most "traditional" histories show events punctuated not with the actions of the ordinary but with the acts of the powerful: landed, privileged,

and in control. One noted exception is Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States: 1492 to Present*. —Ed.