# Managing the Means of Destruction: Tripartite Labour Relations in the Cold War Military-Industrial Complex

*Hanna Goldberg, CUNY Graduate Center, New York City, USA*

## ABSTRACT

This article contributes to a reassessment of the long-held linkage of militarism and the interests of the working class. Over the Cold War and today, politicians have sold massive investment in armaments production to the public with the promise of good, union jobs and broad economic prosperity. US unions were deeply embedded in the military-industrial complex since its inception, and labour leaders supported the expansion of military production industries, expecting substantial benefits to emerge from state-mediated labour relations, for both unions and workers. Examining the distinct institutional, legal and structural dynamics of labour organising in armaments industries over the Cold War decades, this article suggests that state intervention in war-production industries curtailed the exercise of free collective bargaining, and the war context has posed substantial challenges to union organising, weakening unions in their long-term contestation with capital.

## KEYWORDS

war, labour, unions, military-industrial complex, strikes

## Introduction

In recent years, escalating global militarism has prompted a wave of reinvestment in arms production industries, with 2024 seeing the largest increase in world military expenditure since the Cold War (SIPRI, 2025). Politicians pitch such massive investments in military capacity to the working class with the promise of a return to early Cold War conditions: the "golden age" of good, unionised jobs and broad economic prosperity. Recent contributions to the growing scholarship on the political economy of military production cast doubt on the reliability and desirability of such promises. Studies have shown that expanded investment in neoliberalised, capital-intensive contemporary weapons production no longer guarantees increased bargaining power among unionised workers (Payne, 2020, 2023; Barnes, 2023), provides fewer jobs than would comparable investment in infrastructure and social programmes (Garrett-Peltier, 2014), and may jeopardise economic stability (Elveren, 2019; Roberts, 2019; Goldberg, 2025).

This article contributes to that reassessment of the purported linkage of militarism and working-class prosperity through a fresh look at arms industry unionism in the United States at the peak of both Cold War militarism and union density, from the late-1940s to 1970s. Drawing on a systematic review of union archives, contracts, Department of Labor reports, executive orders, and newspaper

archives, it undertakes an in-depth analysis of distinct legal, institutional, and structural barriers to labour organising in the war context, arguing that these set limits on what unions could accomplish in both nuclear and traditional armaments industries. The findings here demonstrate a substantial gulf between labour leaders' expectations and the realities of unionism in the military-industrial complex. The point is that understanding both those expectations and the failure to achieve them hinges on the extent and nature of state intervention in armaments industry labour relations.

As the Cold War dawned, and the first successful Soviet nuclear test solidified both the global struggle for hegemony and nuclear arms race between the world's two superpowers (see Gordin, 2009), US union leaders aligned their interests with the country's burgeoning military-industrial complex.[1] Scholars offer various explanations: unionists embraced the expansion of state military investment to boost domestic prosperity and employment (Brenes, 2020; Barker, 2019) while also supporting anticommunist foreign policy (Wehrle, 2005; Schuhrke, 2024). Most pertinent here, in war-related industries, they saw an opportunity to influence labour policy through a close relationship with the state (Wehrle, 2011). This support was influenced by and attempted to reconstitute the state-mediated labour relations of World War II. Then, unions leaders tamped down on rank-and-file militancy, exchanging cooperation in uninterrupted war production for union recognition and participation in formal tripartite bodies to negotiate labour disputes, composed of representatives from labour, industry, and the state.[2]

That wartime consolidation of interests is credited with securing the institutionalisation of postwar collective bargaining rights and cementing the New Deal coalition (Seidman, 1953; Cowie, 2016; Schatz, 2021). It has also been described as a Faustian bargain, in which the voluntary abnegation of rank-and-file militancy spelled the union movement's postwar demise (Lichtenstein, 1982; Davis, 1986; Moody, 1988), and this pattern of opting for cooperation and state intervention over militant organising persisted into the postwar decades. The revival of tripartism in military production industries also unfolded on an altered terrain, in the wake of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act — which amended the 1935 National Labor Relations Act and curtailed labour rights — and a wave of antilabour sentiment.

Unions representing armaments workers recognised their failure to secure gains and averred the absence of free collective bargaining in military production industries but tended to attribute these to inherently unfavourable conditions. There was some truth to this, and abrupt contract cancellations and shifting political winds introduced an element of precarity. As this article explores, that terrain was also made unfavourable precisely because state intervention in war industries curtailed labour rights.

The discussion below examines the dynamics and tripartite character of armaments industry labour relations, beginning with a brief survey of the development of tripartism within and alongside the military-industrial complex. It then turns to an in-depth exploration of the ramifications of the Taft-Hartley emergency injunction and other limitations on the strike in military industries, drawing on newly compiled data on war-related injunctions. Finally, it evaluates the effects of those obstacles

[1] For broad discussion of labour's Cold War politics, see Stromquist (2008) and Cherny et al. (2004).

[2] While distinct dynamics and relationships emerged in the late-1930s and early-1940s, much of the historical precedent establishing labour's role in and orientation towards military production preceded the World War II mobilisation. For a discussion of labour unions and policies in World War I armament production, see Dubofsky (1969), Montgomery (1987), and Koistinen (1997).

and tripartism generally on wage rates and movements, rights, and benefits for workers across Cold War armaments industries central to the missile race and US nuclear arsenal.

## Tripartite Labour Relations in the Military-Industrial Complex

US military production was not always the highly privatised affair that it is today, nor were permanent military production industries a normal feature of the economic landscape. Up until and even during World War II, much of production took place in government-owned or -run facilities and was episodic in nature. Military spending was slashed at the close of the war but rebounded in the late-1940s, spurred by the US entry into the Korean War and policy shifts signalled by the top-secret National Security Council paper 68 (NSC-68) supporting massive expansion of domestic armaments industries.[3]

In this newly forged military-industrial complex, procurement developed along the model favoured by the Air Force, reliant on private contractors and negotiated or competitive contracting (Bright, 1978: 55). The tendency over the latter half of the twentieth century was towards simultaneously increasing privatisation and centralisation. The Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 granted the Secretary of Defense extensive authority over procurement, not fully exercised until former Ford executive Robert McNamara took office in 1961. McNamara and his team of "Whiz Kids"[4] attempted to increase competition between defense contractors and phase out government-owned, contractor-operated (GOCO) facilities and cost-plus contracts[5] (Bright, 1978; Fox, 1988; Wilson, 2016).

No matter how "marketised" military procurement became, the state's reliance on commodities produced in war-related industries to perform one of its essential functions guaranteed some level of state intervention in production. The formality of this arrangement varied across industries and labour disputes, but in some cases, the "[g]overnment participated in the tripartite structure as an equal partner. It *was not* an arbiter or a ghost at the bargaining table," as the Executive Secretary of the Missile Sites Labor Commission described in the early-1960s, as discussed below (quoted in Price and Behr, 1964: 539). Labour leaders welcomed this state participation and supported military spending in the explicit hope that a well-funded, "semipublic defense sector economy" would provide for postwar tripartism and a seat at the policymaking table (Wehrle, 2011: 98).

Labour leaders' Cold War efforts to channel the exigencies of war into broad political influence were largely a disappointment, and formal tripartite bodies such as the Korean War-era wage

[3] The Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan ended the "idle dream" of demobilisation in 1947, "but Truman and his advisors still did not have the money to fund a far-flung global effort; the defense budget was steady-state in the late 1940s, hovering around $13 billion" (Cumings, 2009: 213). It took the start of the war, and with it NSC-68's inauguration of a new Cold War anticommunist militarism, to bring defence spending into alignment with those objectives.

[4] The "Whiz Kids" moniker had originally been used to describe McNamara's band of statisticians in the Army Air Corps and then at Ford, but also came to include his cohort of young, Ivy League strategists at the Pentagon. Many were associated with the RAND Corporation, a military nonprofit and think tank funded by Air Force contracts, with which McNamara became familiar when he took office (Kaplan, 1983/1991: 52–62, 248–257). For a firsthand account, see Ellsberg (2017).

[5] Guaranteeing coverage of all production costs plus a negotiated rate of profit. The duration of contracts has varied dramatically by project and over time.

stabilisation board were short-lived and dominated by the interests of capital (Stieber, 1980; Wehrle, 2003). Unionists had some successes in directing military spending to labour surplus areas, but these were generally modest and similarly short-lived. In 1952, labour representatives helped draft and lobby for Defense Manpower Policy No. 4 (DMP4), which directed procuring agencies to give consideration to regions with high unemployment rates. However, DMP4 faced stiff resistance, both from the Department of Defense, which ignored its recommendations, and from Congressional representatives from Southern and Western states that stood to lose out on contracts (Lotchin, 1992; Wehrle, 2011). The effort was briefly revived under Kennedy's Operation Booster, but Kennedy and McNamara quickly moved away from the imposition of policies in conflict with their effort to subject defence industries to direct market competition (Wehrle, 2003).

Within defence production, the issue was less that capitalists or state managers resisted state intervention than that continuous state intervention in labour relations did not, as labour leaders had hoped, work to the unions' advantage. In war-related industries where the state was inclined to assume the greatest control over labour relations, unions argued that free collective bargaining simply did not exist. And this was because their most vital weapon, the strike, was severely blunted.

### *The Strike*

In contemporary labour analyses and activism, the strike is often considered the *sine qua non* of labour militancy and potency. Periods of unusually high levels of strike activity, such as the 1930s in the United States, are looked to as high water marks, while the decline of strikes in the latter half of the twentieth century is linked to unions' overall decline. Wars appear to exert an exogenous pressure on patterns of global labour militancy, prompting waves of militancy that secure institutional reforms favourable to the working class (Silver, 2015).

That said, the war context also produces de-mobilising countertendencies that operate during and long after periods of mass mobilisation, significantly curtailing unions' ability or willingness to utilise the strike. This situation is especially acute in directly war-related industries, where the interruption of production threatens the provision of commodities vital to the state's capacity to levy coercive force. Assessing the organising terrain in aerospace over the 1950s and 1960s, United Auto Workers (UAW) organisers argued that workers had "been denied free use of their collective bargaining power," and "penalized because their work [was] essential to national security" (UAW, 1962).

Obstacles to the use of the strike in military-related industries have operated through both informal coercion and explicit institutional barriers. To the former, labour leaders continued to offer up concessions in war-related industries during the Cold War, tamping down on rank-and-file militancy and embracing war productivism. Unions again agreed to no-strike pledges in the nuclear industry until 1953 and the missile industry in 1961. In another echo of World War II, both pledges were implemented under Democratic administrations, and in the nuclear industry unions rescinded the pledge shortly after President Eisenhower took office (No-Strike, 1953).

The pressure to avert or end strikes often came directly from Cold War presidents, and unions tended to comply.[6] In 1953, IAM aircraft locals ended strikes at Lockheed and Douglas at the behest of President Truman, and this likely played into the major losses suffered across aircraft unions in the

[6] The 1950 Defense Production Act authorised presidents to force settlements in labour disputes, but this section of the Act was terminated in 1953.

1952–1953 round of bargaining (Aircraft Strike, 1952; Levinson, 1966: 35–37). In October of 1963, President Kennedy intervened to stop a strike at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, citing in his communication to the union and company the "personal duty and responsibility" to avoid imperiling the "defense posture" of the nation, and to "maintain the status quo without interruption of production" in nuclear (Kennedy, 1963).

The most substantial institutional barrier to the strike was the emergency injunction enshrined in the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act (see Table 1). Presidents can invoke the national emergency provision under Taft-Hartley when a strike, threatened or already underway, will affect an entire industry *and* "imperil the national health or safety." Though the injunction is commonly described as relating explicitly to national security or defence, "national health and safety" has also been more broadly interpreted, and in the first year of the Act's implementation strikes were enjoined in the meatpacking and telephone industries. These proved to be exceptional; a cross-referencing of Department of Labor Reports, executive orders, and archived news articles reveals that of the thirty-two invocations of the injunction over the Cold War,[7] approximately 50 per cent were in war-related industries, with the imperiling of national defence cited as explicit justification. The remaining approximately 50 per cent were in industries vital to the country's logistics or energy infrastructure.[8]

Once invoked, injunctions are a multistep process, requiring the president to appoint a board of inquiry to report on a labour dispute before requesting that the relevant district court issue the formal injunction, kicking off an 80-day cooling off period for negotiations with government mediation. After 60 days, a secret poll is conducted to gauge workers' opinions on a proposed settlement. While union leaders historically complied with injunction processes and tended to accept the recommendations of boards of inquiry, in no injunction have rank-and-file workers voted to accept the final settlement (Gross, 2005: 316–317).

[7] This discussion excludes the single post-Cold War Taft-Hartley injunction in 2002.

[8] In two cases, a relationship to military production or military activities is likely, but unverified. In 1948, President Truman enjoined a strike in the maritime industry affecting the US Merchant Marine, which threatened the provision of US foreign aid under the Marshall Plan (Rap Taft-Hartley, 1948). It is unclear whether President Kennedy cited national defence in his injunction of the 1962 maritime strike, but that had been his explicit justification for an injunction in the maritime industry the previous year (Taft-Hartley Act, 1961).

**Table 1. Taft-Hartley Emergency Injunctions by Industry and Military Justification, 1948–2002**

| Year | Industry | Military Justification |
|---|---|---|
| 1948 | Atomic Energy | Nuclear weapons/energy |
| 1948 | Meatpacking | |
| 1948 | Bituminous Coal | |
| 1948 | Telephone | |
| 1948 | Maritime (All Coasts) | *Possible* |
| 1948 | Bituminous Coal | |
| 1948 | Longshoring (Atlantic) | |
| 1949–1950 | Bituminous Coal | |
| 1951 | Nonferrous Metals | Key metals for Korean War defence production |
| 1952 | Fabricated steel & Atomic Energy | Military vehicle and nuclear weapons |
| 1953 | Longshoring (Atlantic) | |
| 1954 | Atomic Energy | Nuclear weapons/energy |
| 1954 | Atomic Energy | Nuclear weapons/energy |
| 1956–1957 | Longshoring (Atlantic/Gulf) | |
| 1957 | Atomic Energy | Nuclear weapons/energy |
| 1959 | Longshoring (Atlantic/Gulf) | |
| 1959 | Basic Steel | Steel supplies for military production |
| 1961 | Maritime (All Coasts) | Military cargo deliveries |
| 1962 | Maritime (Pacific) | *Possible* |
| 1962 | Aerospace (Republic Aviation Corp.) | Military aircraft production |
| 1962–1963 | Longshoring (Atlantic and Gulf) | |
| 1962 | Aerospace (Lockheed Aircraft Corp.) | Missile and military aircraft |
| 1962–1963 | Aerospace (Boeing Co.) | Missile and military aircraft |
| 1964–1965 | Longshoring (Atlantic/Gulf) | |
| 1966 | Aerospace (General Electric) | Military aircraft engines |
| 1966 | Nonferrous Smelting (Union Carbide) | Steel production for military aircraft components |
| 1966–1967 | Shipbuilding | Vessels used in war transport to Vietnam |
| 1967 | Aerospace (The Avco Corp.) | Military aircraft engines |
| 1968–1969 | Longshoring (Atlantic) | |
| 1971 | Longshoring (Chicago) | |
| 1971 | Longshoring (All Coasts) | Military shipments (disputed) |
| 1978 | Bituminous Coal | Military shipments |
| 2002 | Longshoring (Pacific) | Shipments to armed forces |

*Sources: LeRoy, M. H. and J.H. Johnson IV. (2001) Death by Lethal Injunction: National Emergency Strikes under the Taft-Hartley Act and the Moribund Right to Strike. Arizona Law Review, 43(1): 63-72; U.S. Department of Labor. (1969) National Emergency Disputes: Labor Management Relations (Taft-Hartley) Act, 1947-68, Bulletin No. 1633; U.S. Department of Labor. (1978) National Emergency Disputes Under the Taft-Hartley Act, 1947-1977, Report 542; and author's own research.*

The Taft-Hartley emergency injunction reflected the "intense regulation and state coercion" of the World War II mobilisation but had a key difference. During the war years, government intervention in labour disputes frequently resulted in state seizures of facilities and whole industries — a fact that contributed to business leaders' convictions that state regulation of wartime labour unrest favoured

the interests of labour (Wilson, 2016: 239). The Taft-Hartley Act, a product of intense lobbying from the National Association of Manufacturers, allowed the state to bring strikes to a halt but not to take over private enterprises (Harris, 1982: 122; *ibid.*). Thus, the injunctions can be seen as a reworking of the form of state intervention in industrial disputes that bent towards the interests of capital.

President Truman invoked the emergency injunction for the first time in March 1948 at a former Manhattan Project site manufacturing the raw materials for nuclear weapons. Workers at the X-10 plant at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, newly organised by the AFL's Atomic Trades and Labor Council (ATLC), voted to strike when new plant manager Union Carbide & Carbon Corporation attempted to eliminate the wage advantage X-10 workers maintained over other Oak Ridge production workers during the war years (Hall, 1948). The union complied with the Taft-Hartley proceedings but, when negotiations failed and with the 80-day cooling off period set to expire, asked for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to intercede. An ATLC spokesman said, "The only hope of averting the strike is for the Atomic Energy Commission to move in and take over labour negotiations from the Company and reach an agreement with the union" (Atomic Strike, 1948).

Labour leaders expected support from liberal AEC Chairman David Lilienthal but were sorely disappointed. In a visit to AFL President William Green, Lilienthal asserted that though "the commission favor[ed] arbitration," it would not "compel the company to accept it," even going so far as to state before Congress that strikes in nuclear "must be avoided, either by voluntary agreements or by 'force of law.'" To this, an AFL spokesman responded that Lilienthal's position created conditions of "virtual slavery" at X-10 (AEC Will, 1948; Hall, 1948). In public statements, Lilienthal was clear that the AEC's interest was in maintaining relations with an important contractor in the "fearful and important field" of nuclear production, suggesting that if Carbide & Carbon was to be expected to "give their best technical efforts," the state could not "take away… their managerial prerogatives" (A.E.C. Lets, 1948). If workers went on strike, he said, he would order the company to continue operating the facility (Oak Ridge, 1948).

By early June, the union recognised that the AEC would not help their cause, denouncing Lilienthal's "open support of a vicious contractor," which made clear he was "no longer the workers' friend." In a mass meeting, 500 members of the ATLC passed a resolution opposing the reconfirmation of Lilienthal and other AEC commissioners, condemning Lilienthal's "implied strike-breaking tactics" (*ibid.*). After workers overwhelmingly rejected Carbide & Carbon's "final offer," the injunction was dissolved and the ATLC threatened to strike within 24 hours (Court Dissolves, 1948). The union and company resumed negotiations and reached a settlement within days — with a wage increase, albeit one closer to the company's initial offer (Atomic Workers, 1948).[9]

In that first injunction, the union partly achieved its aim by threatening to resume its strike, thus pushing the contractor to return to the negotiating table and increase its wage offer. The ATLC's militancy was also informed by the intransigence of state managers. In subsequent emergency injunctions, unions tended to grudgingly accept the recommendations of governmental bodies appointed to mediate disputes, even when unfavourable. For example, unions in military-related industries never went back on strike once cooling-off periods expired, in contrast to those in non-defence industries, which resumed their strikes after injunctions in about half of cases (LeRoy and Johnson, 2001).

[9] For more discussion of the 1948 strike and other labour disputes at Oak Ridge, see Olwell (2004).

During the fractious 1962–1963 round of bargaining in aerospace, Kennedy invoked emergency injunctions thrice, in the first case during a strike at Republic Aviation. Unions responded by willingly withholding strike action at other contractors, including North American Aviation and Ryan Aeronautical, awaiting the recommendations of the Presidential Aerospace Board (Woodcock, 1962). After the Board sided with employers on the issue of wage increases that September, Walter Reuther made a public statement expressing dismay but affirming that because "aerospace workers" were "fully aware of the importance of uninterrupted production in the industry," the UAW would "reluctantly accept the Board's wage recommendations" (Reuther, 1962). However, he did not hesitate to point out that aerospace companies continued to take advantage of the constrained position of workers, whose access to "collective bargaining tools available to workers in other industries" was "restricted" because of the industry's relationship to national security (*ibid.*).

It is clear from their diverging reactions that unions and employers recognised the direction in which the injunctions tipped the scales. After Kennedy invoked the emergency injunction following a two-day strike at Lockheed Aircraft Corp., a spokesman for the IAM noted that the union "would have much preferred to slug it out with the company without the government's interference" and union president David J. McDonald referred to conditions in the industry as a "police state." Meanwhile, the chairman of Lockheed's board welcomed the injunction, describing it as "in the best interest of all concerned," and expressed his hope that all parties would now be able to "arrive at an agreement" (U.S. Moves, 1962). When President Johnson invoked the Taft-Hartley injunction in 1967 after a one-day strike at the Avco Corporation, which manufactured military helicopter engines used by US troops in Vietnam, the UAW's general counsel said the union did not oppose the injunction because it was legal, but "certainly object morally and philosophically," accusing the company of paying substandard wages while hiding "under the umbrella of national defense" (U.S. Judge, 1967).

Further, unions were grappling with the implications of the injunction in their work beyond the defence industries. In 1967, Walter Reuther announced at a special collective bargaining session that the UAW would strategically avoid strike action at any of its defence plants to eliminate the possibility that a Taft-Hartley injunction could affect striking auto workers. Unlike in the UAW's defence plants, Reuther said, "no one can make a national emergency out of the fact that somebody driving a 1967 Cadillac is an emergency situation because he can't get his 1968 Cadillac for a few months" (Bernstein, 1967). In 1971, striking longshore workers attempted to circumvent the Taft-Hartley injunction by continuing to move *only* military cargo to Vietnam, but the effort failed (Everett, 1971).

In the nuclear industry, where Taft-Hartley was invoked five times, unions faced further constraints on the strike. Secrecy was a special concern in the industry and unions were not allowed to organise all nuclear production facilities until 1948 and operated under a no-strike pledge until 1953. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, labour-management relations in nuclear were governed by a series of labour-management panels under the AEC, which held varying positions on the strike over those years — at times insisting on the importance of free collective bargaining in nuclear, and at others asserting that a strike in the industry would be "unthinkable" (*ibid.*: 40). As a UAW research report on the nuclear industry noted, "The government has concerned itself with the continuity of operations free from the interruption of strikes" (Atomic Energy, 1963).

Despite that acknowledgement, state intervention was still the preferred solution of some union leaders. Studying the problem of organising workers in war-related industries, UAW organisers recognised the double bind they faced: "interruption in production or services" was intolerable to "the

public," but even when workers did strike, cost-plus contracts meant employers had "nothing to lose" in "holding an obdurate position." The only way to balance the scales, argued an economist whose study the UAW cited, was through tripartite bodies such as the nuclear industry labour boards (*ibid.*). The irony of that position is made evident by the extremely harsh conditions faced by unions under the AEC, as discussed below.

### *Wages*

Cold War defence (especially aerospace) workers are typically thought to have enjoyed exceptionally high wages provided by generous contracts and a lack of real concern with costs from the Department of Defense (see Levinson, 1966; Erickson, 1994; Koistinen, 2012). However, aerospace unions over the 1950s and 1960s made a different argument before presidential boards and in public statements that aerospace workers lacked "economic parity" with workers in other industries. The IAM and UAW attributed this to the diminished bargaining power caused by the curtailment of the strike (IAM, 1962; UAW, 1962).

While workers in aerospace, the largest defence industry, did out-earn manufacturing workers on average, unions believed the exceptional profitability of the aerospace companies made most interindustry comparisons inappropriate. Throughout the Cold War, they made frequent appeals to the war profiteering of the aerospace firms, spoils they did not think were accruing to ordinary workers. A Government Accounting Office study (1984) would later lend credence to this view, finding that while factory pay for aerospace workers in 1982 was only 8 per cent higher than the BLS average, executive pay was 42 per cent higher. The widening gulf between labour and capital in war production made any payoff for the former questionable.[10]

Unions making the case for a wage lag in aerospace over the 1940s through to the 1960s preferred a comparison to the auto industry. This move was partly rhetorical (and high wages in auto gave unions ample incentive to link the industries), but not without historical precedent. Auto firms entered aircraft production during the World War II mobilisation, and while they ultimately struggled to compete with the historic airframe manufacturers, some companies remained in the aerospace industry into the Cold War, a legacy that helped propel the UAW into position as one of the two dominant aerospace unions. Unions also pointed out that workers in the airframe industry were often performing the same jobs as those in auto for lower rates, and in an essential and highly unstable industry (UAW, 1962: 2–4).

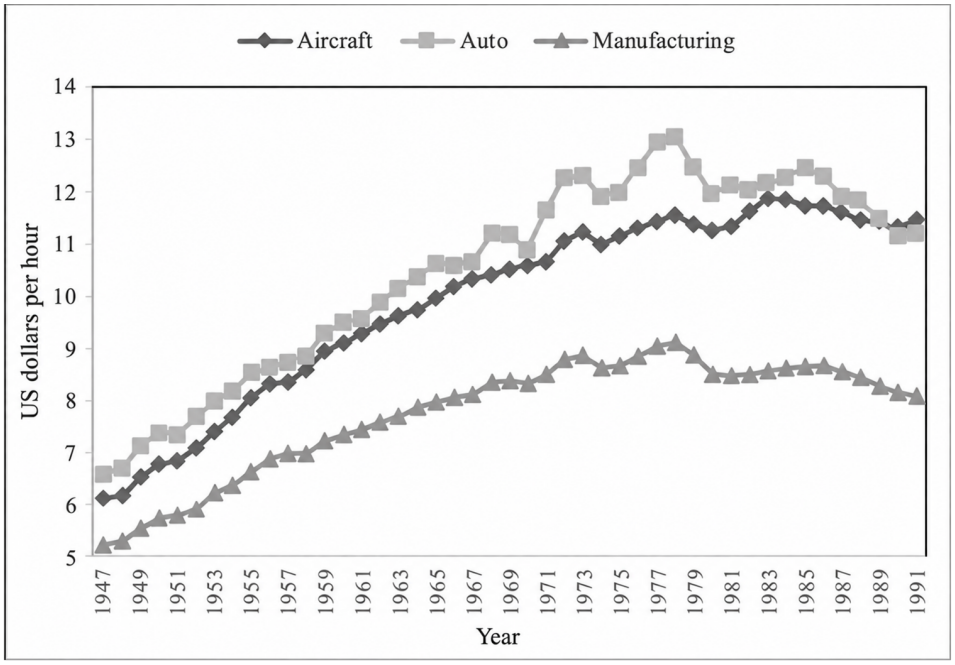
These factors informed the long-running objective of aerospace unions to establish an interindustry bargaining pattern between auto and aerospace, especially after aircraft wages fell behind the national wage pattern in the late-1940s. There was some progress: in the UAW 1950 contract at North American Aviation, the UAW won a wage increase, GM modified union shop clause and GM cost-of-living formula (Levinson, 1966: 49–50). Two years later, an arbitration panel appointed under the wartime Wage Stabilization Board supported the contention that wage rates and movements in auto should be relevant to the determination of those in the airframe industry (UAW, 1962: 2). However, the 1952–1953 round of negotiations in aerospace were a failure for the unions, who were unable to close the wage gap or secure union shop across aircraft companies. Truman's halting of

[10] For a discussion of the wage lag among California's aircraft workers, and structural obstacles to organising, see Seth (2012).

aircraft strikes in 1952 contributed to a weakened bargaining position (UAW, 1962; Levinson, 1966: 35–37).

A decade later, aerospace unions were again embroiled in contentious negotiations with intransigent contractors, and after President Kennedy invoked the emergency injunction, made the case for wage increases and union shop before the Presidential Aerospace Board. In their reports to the Board, both unions linked the wage struggle to the curtailment of the strike, arguing that just when aerospace workers' bargaining power should be at its peak, due to rising demand and profits, they were prohibited from striking. The IAM's report on wages drew on BLS data showing that aerospace workers' wage increases were substantially lower than those of most workers covered by major collective bargaining agreements in 1960–1961 (IAM, 1962). Ultimately, the Board sided with the companies on wages, and unions reluctantly accepted the settlement. Aerospace wages did not reach (and then surpass) those in auto until the late-1980s (see Figure 1), by which point the pattern had been abandoned and the American auto industry was in crisis, while aerospace was buoyed by rising defence budgets under the Reagan administration (Erickson, 1994).

**Figure 1: Real Average Hourly Wages, 1947–1991**




*Source: BLS "Employment, Hours, and Earnings".*

The state funds wages as a portion of total contracting costs and the level of scrutiny to which those costs are subjected is a historical and political question.[11] When cost-plus contracting predominates, as it did in the early decades of the Cold War, the pressure to cut labour costs may be reduced. But even

[11] Under certain circumstances, state managers may have been *more* concerned with wage rates than were contractors. A 1985 Army Procurement Research Office report noted, "Contractors are vigorously opposed to wage suppression policies. They believe that as part of the contract, the government is purchasing management judgement. Trying to control employee compensation, in their opinion, undermines a company's ability to manage and interferes with managerial discretion" (Lawrence and Mandler, 1985: 13).

in those early decades, with defence spending on the rise, the state sometimes took a keen interest in the determination of wage rates. In 1961, President Kennedy convened the Missile Sites Labor Commission (MSLC) to oversee labour relations at the country's growing missile and rocket launch sites in response to Congressional concerns about labour unrest and so-called "uneconomical practices." The Commission arbitrated disputes and set labour policies, including weighing in on wage rates and benefits negotiated between unions and contractors. The IAM and UAW responded by calling for "drastic action" should any company cooperate with government abrogation of "benefits negotiated at the bargaining table"[12] (Price and Behr, 1964: 526, note 28).

Conditions were similar in the early postwar nuclear industry, where the AEC and nuclear contractors jointly opposed wage increases for nuclear production workers in the first round of contract negotiations in the industry between 1946 and 1948 (Olwell, 2004: 112). A full decade later, IAM organisers at the Union Carbide-operated X-10 plant at Oak Ridge complained that they could not tell, in their negotiations, if they were bargaining with the company or the AEC (IAM, 1958).

These may have been extreme cases, but DoD procurement policies called for evaluation of the "reasonableness" of compensation costs in all major weapons contracts. The Armed Services Procurement Manual (1963, section 15-201.3) defines a cost as "reasonable if, in its nature or amount, it does not exceed that which would be incurred by an ordinarily prudent person in the conduct of competitive business." In other words, DoD policy was to simulate the pressures of a "competitive business" environment in defence contracting. Contracting officers used BLS data to determine whether contractors' wages conformed to rates in nonmilitary industries. They also reviewed and commented on collective bargaining agreements, scheduling their reviews to coincide with the expiration of union contracts so findings could be considered during negotiations (DLA, 1986; GAO, 1990).

Over time, public and Congressional scrutiny of defence spending increased. The 1962 Truth in Negotiations Act and 1984 Competition in Contracts Act were both intended to cut procurement costs, and cost-plus contracting was significantly diminished by the early-1970s. In the early-1980s, media reports highlighting runaway defence costs prompted a series of GAO reports to Congress on worker compensation in aerospace firms (Fox, 1988: 33–34). Meanwhile, the DoD Defense Contracts Auditing Agency began to scrutinise labour costs, pressuring aerospace contractors during negotiations with unions and threatening companies whose wages were deemed "excessive" with loss of future contracts (Erickson, 1994: 109).

While a cursory look at wages in aerospace and other capital-intensive defence industries suggests that workers in these industries received a material payoff from US militarism, more careful examination tempers that assessment. As Cold War unions consistently argued, conditions in these industries made it impossible for them to achieve their goal — wage parity between auto and aerospace. They tied this failure to the lack of free collective bargaining, which primarily referred to the curtailment of their right to strike. But even beyond that major constraint, the state took a varying but keen interest in determining industry wages.

[12] This statement was issued at a joint bargaining conference in anticipation of an MSLC review of off-site pay premiums, which granted workers higher pay at field sites, including the far-flung missile bases (Price and Behr, 1964: 525–526).

Presidentially appointed labour boards, staffed by liberal labour relations specialists, may side with unions on the wage issue (yet they have not always done so, as detailed below). But the representatives of the state with the most sway in the determination of war industry labour relations were usually located in procuring or regulatory agencies, and in the war economy, their interests were most closely aligned with capital. All told, such alignments suggest less a conspiratorial military-corporate alliance than that in military industries, unions contended with not one but two powerful parties, each with its own interest in contesting labour's claim to a larger share of the value generated in arms production.

### *Rights and Benefits*

State intervention also led to the curtailment of labour rights and benefits beyond the wage in war-related industries. In much of Cold War-era defence production, work involved some degree of secrecy, and the security classification system prompted the development of expansive institutional machinery to govern the security clearance process in sensitive industries.

By the late-1950s, the jurisdiction of the DoD Defense Industrial Security Program spanned 22,000 plants and over 3 million workers.[13] Workers had little recourse in this process. They could not confront witnesses who provided evidence against them and the file compiled by the review board was classified (Beighle et al., 1958: 122–123). Employers were not obligated to fire workers denied clearance, only to exclude them from classified areas of plants or operations. In practice, denials were used as justification for dismissal and — both because the NLRB did not intervene in security cases and because security agreements were thought to supersede CBAs (Roberts, 1955) — unions struggled to challenge such cases. In the few grievances filed in relation to security clearance denials, unions objected to employers bargaining with a third party, the government and called firings discriminatory (Stein, 1963).

Nowhere were these security reviews more stringent than in the nuclear industry. Over the first two decades of its existence between the mid-1940s and the 1960s, the AEC's Personnel Security Review Board conducted about 717,000 investigations. It subjected employees of private contractors to in-depth security reviews investigating the "character, associations, and loyalty" of all personnel with access to classified AEC information. Any "derogatory information" — mental illness, "subversive" political activity, alcohol or drug use — could lead to a worker being branded a security risk (Green, 1964: 10–12). Unions viewed the investigations as "witch hunts"; a union member who sat in on the Board's proceedings called it a "kangaroo court" (quoted in Olwell, 2004: 107).

The state had a heavy hand in regulating labour relations during the early years of unionisation in the nuclear industry, and AEC officials reviewed the first nuclear contracts negotiated by AFL and CIO unions, sending them to labour experts for review. The labour relations specialists thought the contracts were too favourable to unions and that AEC security policies should be tightened and "permit firing of any workers suspected of subversion" (Olwell, 2004: 106). Language on security classification made its way into union contracts over the ensuing years. From at least the mid-1950s onwards, nuclear union contracts contained explicit "Protective Security" articles tasking the company *and* union with protecting classified information from those without appropriate clearance and

[13] This programme was specific to industrial contractors of the DoD. Separate security programmes existed to clear civilian federal employees, nuclear workers, and several other areas of government-related work (Beighle et al., 1958).

stipulating employment was contingent upon government approval. Any worker whose employment was deemed "prejudicial to Government interests" was to be fired (see for example Union Carbide, 1956).

Unions at the country's nuclear installations had an especially onerous challenge organising around health and safety issues. Nuclear production exposed workers to novel and unique risks, not widely understood in the early postwar years. The AEC played its part in obscuring these risks, denying workers and unions access to information, classifying important studies, producing "seriously flawed" counter studies in-house and objecting to negotiations over working conditions and sick leave policy (Olwell, 2004: 110–111, 117–130). To an extent, the state compensated workers for these exposures and for the sacrifice of civil liberties, with material incentives, but these benefitted the white-collar workforce of engineers and scientists far more than average production workers (see Brown, 2013).

This situation created stressful and uncertain conditions for workers, a primary concern for unions in the early decades of nuclear production. At a conference of the IAM's atomic lodges in 1955, a delegate from Los Alamos described the eeriness of production accidents, which were "kept very quiet; some [workers] are released and drawing salary as long as they live, but we don't know how long they will live." The meeting's chairman suggested finding an "eminent physician who has experience with radiation and other hazards," saying, "I don't want to create hysteria, but certainly our people should know" (IAM, 1955).

Matters improved somewhat when oversight of the nuclear weapons and energy industries shifted from the AEC to the civilian Department of Energy (DOE)[14] in the mid-1970s, but even as late as the 1980s unions faced hurdles bringing National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) inspectors into nuclear facilities. NIOSH struggled to get the DOE to release health and safety reports and one union leader accused the DOE of "monopoliz[ing] the regulation of the facility" and "erect[ing] the wall of national security for management to hide behind" (Huegel, 2025: 81). Further, the DOE continued to award production bonuses to nuclear plants with health and safety violations (*ibid*.: 91–92).

In this industry embedded in the missile race and the state's strategic nuclear posture, obstacles to unions' securing safe working conditions and health benefits were created by legislation, policy and federal agencies. As unions argued, national security could be wielded as a cudgel to erode labour rights, in turn characterising workers as a threat to national defence. While the curtailment of the strike had its effect across war-related industries, in the Cold War nuclear complex we see an extreme case of state-managed labour relations, to the detriment of workers' rights.

## Conclusion

The episodes recounted here suggest that far from a panacea, war production has posed distinct challenges to union organising and its benefits to workers are far from certain. Union leaders' initial support for the nascent military-industry complex was informed by "the heritage of labor's experience in World War Two" (Moody, 1988: 83). As in the broader postwar labour movement, they attempted to advance labour's aims via a close relationship with the state and particularly the Democratic Party.

[14] The AEC under Lilienthal was "one of the most secretive bureaucracies in US history" (Wellerstein, 2021: 179).

In war-related industries, state-mediated labour relations and even formal tripartism did persist into the postwar decades. However, these took on pernicious forms often hostile to workers' interests, a product of both the transformed political landscape and military context.

Labour leaders expected that the transformation of the labour-capital relation into a tripartite dynamic would allow them to advance their aims on a more even terrain; that the state's role would be that of neutral party or instrument. More often, direct state intervention strengthened the position of employers. That is not to say that there was a perfect alignment between defence industry capitals and state managers, but even where what Block (1977) calls a "division of labour" between the two persisted,[15] the overall tendency was towards a concordance of interests.

As Block also argues, state policies slanted towards the maintenance of "business confidence," ensuring a stable and reliable defence industrial base. An early edition of the DoD's Armed Services Procurement Regulation manual explicitly tasked contracting officers with creating "an environment in which industry can realize profits on defense business which are high enough to give reasonable assurance of long-term availability to DoD industrial support by the best companies" (quoted in Anderson, 1980: 29–30). Where labour rights impinged on these interests, they would be curtailed.

At this point, it would be helpful to revisit the way this article began. The titular "means of destruction" is a term Marxist theorists have used to collectively describe those capitalist industries whose only purpose is warfare, distinguishing them from the socially productive capital and consumer goods industries. Despite the hopes of labour leaders to the contrary, the primary interest of state managers in the military-industrial complex was in managing the state's warmaking capacity. When that aim necessitated concessions to workers, state managers recommended them. Often, both labour rights and worker rights ran contrary to the shared interests of capital and the state in uninterrupted production.

Though broad historical patterns demonstrate that wars contribute to upsurges of labour militancy that help to secure favourable institutional reforms (Silver, 2015), this detailed analysis of intra-industry dynamics shows that the war context can also mobilise countertendencies, which function to hobble unions. In the transformed, politically hostile landscape of the immediate postwar decades, with continued war production but no economy-wide war mobilisation, the benefits workers and unions gleaned from the military-industrial complex were never worth the loss of associational power for which they were exchanged. Such countertendencies also help to make sense of the long-term trajectory of defence unionism. In the latter decades of the Cold War and beyond, union density in military industries significantly declined (Barnes, 2023), while profits dwarfed those in other US industries (Wang and San Miguel, 2012).

In this sense, the collaborationist approach unions had developed during the World War II mobilisation rendered them especially unprepared to deal with the two-pronged adversary of state and capital in war production industries. The legacy of Taft-Hartley injunctions demonstrates this in a microcosm: when unions demonstrated a willingness to resume their strikes, as in the first injunction at Oak Ridge, they were more likely to win some gains. Compliance tended to yield contracts favourable to employers. Unions in the military-industrial complex found themselves reliant on a state

[15] Not explored here is the long history of total breakdown of that division of labour and the notorious "revolving door" through which individuals move between the military, contractors and federal agencies with relative ease.

whose interests were, in the making of the means of destruction, hostile to workers both within and beyond US warmaking industries.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

HANNA GOLDBERG is a PhD candidate in sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center. [Email: hgoldberg1@gradcenter.cuny.edu; ORCID: 0009-0007-3211-6816].