

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

December 27, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about how Americans can bring peace abroad if Americans constantly argue amongst themselves. In the interview segment, ER interviews reporter Malcolm Johnson about his book *Crime on the Labor Front*.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Elliott Roosevelt, Malcolm Johnson

[ER:] Well, what's the question today?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, the question today is from Mr. Eric Miller of uh Roslindale, Massachusetts. He says, "I go to work as a cook in a well known hotel and watch the fighting, bickering, back-stabbing, inconsiderate [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] behavior of Americans amongst themselves and then drive home at night and am pushed and cut-off and snarled at and I wonder if we're not just festering hate and war right in our own hearts. How can we sincerely fight for peace in the world if we cannot be at peace with our own flesh and blood and our own neighbors?"

[ER:] I think you've said something which is absolutely true. It takes a great deal of self-control and of feeling that you have to begin in your own heart to build peace in the world. And therefore you have to begin in your own environment. And uh unless we come to that realization, uh we're not going to build peace in the world, we're going to build exactly what you say, war and hate. It has to begin at home. (1:25)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, well going on that premise, isn't our political system at fault? Because all that we do in our political system is to name call, uh is to bring out all of the bad features about our opponents in our political system and we-we dig up all the nasty things in the personal lives of our candidates. Isn't there something then that is fostering and building up uh an antagonistic attitude toward life in the very democratic system?

[ER:] I don't think that's the system. I think that happens to be um what you might call the degeneration of campaigning. The really good people who campaign, and campaign the most successfully, are the people who sometimes hardly ever mention their opponents, uh but really campaign on what their own program is and what they intend to do to meet the problems as they see them. They're the successful campaigners-- look at, well look at Senator Lehman. He certainly made the--a really constructive campaign, and-and I think that's what campaigning should be. I just think we degenerate every now and then.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, you say the Senator Lehman uh devoted his campaign to a constructive one, and yet there are backers of Senator Lehman uh who certainly were not constructive. They pointed out that uh poor Lieutenant Governor Hanley wrote a letter to a Mr. Macy and uh, and it was a letter that he claimed that he was offered jobs and so forth if he'd stop running for Governor and run for Senator, and according to most of the political analysts, it played a considerable part in his defeat. And yet uh actually, I doubt very seriously whether uh Lieutenant Governor Hanley uh had really intended to do anything wrong when he wrote the letter to Mr. Macy. (3:47)

[ER:] Well, some people would say it was a mistake in politics to write letters. But [ER laughs] I really think the truth of the matter is that um people who run political campaigns have come to feel that things such as this uh do help in a campaign. I question greatly how much they help. Uh I think they make a-a

mistake when they begin to think of these things as being vastly important. I do think that when an attack is made, you have to now and then answer an attack in a campaign, you can't leave it unanswered if it is uh an attack that uh looks as though people might believe it or-or you really feel there's some justification for answering. But I think the more a campaign can be run on the basis of issues and methods of meeting the issues and attacking the issues, I mean in-in another way, a--and attacking the methods and the records on issues, the better it is, both for the people who've got to do the voting and for the candidates. (5:17)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] In other words, you would not go along uh with the type of campaigning that exists today, where uh so many of the people who campaign against each other uh go out to smear the-the personal integrity of those people?

[ER:] I don't think it even pays out, I think it's just uh nonsense to do it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, what about the person that--well let's go to the California campaign, where in the last election--where uh the now Senator Nixon was running against Helen Gahagan-Douglas, uh and he accused her of being, not a communist but soft in her treatment of communists, and therefore probably, uh in his implication, a fellow traveler. (6:18)

[ER:] Well he rode a wave of what one might call McCarthyism, which is really nothing but um a period of fear, which this country, because it doesn't understand communism, because it is afraid without really having uh any sense of how to meet a menace. Therefore, or--the mere accusation uh was enough to shake people's um feeling of security, a-and Representative Nixon rode that wave that happened to be in the ascendancy in this country. It won't always be. We learn what communism is, we learn to understand it, we learn to be alert to it, and we'll cease to be afraid. But for the moment, we are afraid. And, um I-I think that that was, from my point of view, because I thought that we really needed Helen Gahagan-Douglas in the Senate, it was unfortunate. But, um, I-I think that sometimes happens, and that's all you can say. (7:38)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, but uh often times the real issues uh become hidden, uh for instance, uh-uh there are people who run for public office who uh we'll--we'll say, uh present to the American people, "Why should you be bothered uh with all of the weight of other people's problems? Why not think of your own problems?" And the candidate running against them is advocating, we'll say, great aid to other people outside of this country, and uh what happens is that uh the candidate who attacks it on a personal basis, "I'm for you, I'm not for the other feller, I don't wanna help the other feller, I want you." "The isolationist" he's called in this country. Uh, the non-thinking voter says, "Gee that's for me." (8:45)

[ER:] Well after all Mr. Taft said the other day that no one but an, I think he said "an idiot," would be an isolationist.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mr. Taft said that?

[ER:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I know but uh he has a number of colleagues, Republican colleagues and some Democratic colleagues, who don't agree with him, and uh those people have campaigned because they called they-their opponents extravagant, wasteful, uh in many cases uh pro-communist, uh because by their wastefulness they were destroying the American system and they were therefore inviting communism, and you get right back into a name-calling contest.

[ER:] Well, I think the only thing that you can do in a situation of that kind is to sit down quietly and think out the issues. Uh you have to look at the world. You have to decide what has to be done on a long range program. Peoples in the world who are miserable have to be made less miserable, or we ourselves are going to suffer in the long-run. And I think you just have to give the facts to the people and uh eventually they learn. (10:15)

(Break 10:15-10:29)

[ER:] Labor unions, and more specifically, the decisions of labor union bosses, affect the lives of millions of people--the families of workers, as well as the workers themselves--sometimes, unfortunately, adversely. To give us a picture of labor unions today, my guest is the distinguished journalist and Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, Mr. Malcolm Johnson, whose book, *Crime on the Labor Front*, was recently published. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Mr. Malcolm Johnson.

[Malcolm Johnson:] Thank you very much, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] It's very good of you to be with us. My first question, Mr. Johnson, is perhaps obvious but certainly pertinent. Are you in favor of labor unions?

[Malcolm Johnson:] I most certainly am, Mrs. Roosevelt. I'm a union member myself.

[ER:] Well so am I, for that matter. [ER laughs] [ER clears throat] Well, that starts us off very straight then. Do you believe that despite crime in labor the worker has, on the whole, benefited from labor unions? (11:39)

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes, yes, I do. I don't think there's any question about it, and despite abuses, the workers as a whole have benefited-- a great deal.

[ER:] Well now that-that's a question--an answer that I am very glad to have because I've always been interested in labor questions and always been interested in various labor groups, and um that question has often bothered me, whether perhaps, um-- when you did find things going wrong, um whether it-it counterbalanced the good.

[Malcolm Johnson:] Well I think that that is undoubtedly true, Mrs. Roosevelt. I would even go so far to say that, in my opinion, that it's almost better to have a racket union than no union at all, because with a racket union, as bad as it is, you at least have the machinery there, and the hope and the possibility of reform.

[ER:] Well that's very good. Um, do you think that labor unions today have gained too much power? Uh by that, I don't really mean that I think the workers themselves have too much power but do you think that um their leaders, uh perhaps uh where they are not really able people, uh have an opportunity for doing great harm? For instance, um an unthinking and not too intelligent labor leader could um pretty well starve this country if he chose to do so, or freeze it [ER laughs], or uh even, in time of-of crisis, uh might slow up very much needed preparation for um defense. (13:34)

[Malcolm Johnson:] That unfortunately is true. Uh I do not, uh-- my own case, quarrel with the power that these labor leaders have, but I say that with that power, there must be responsibility. And unfortunately we do have a certain type of labor leader, I hope they're in a minority, who does not meet those responsibilities and who does not seem to take the enlightened view that these things should be done, primarily both for the benefit of the rank and file in the union and for the benefit of the public.

[ER:] I've-I've known some of the younger labor leaders quite well, and I have a great admiration for some of them. Some of them, I think, are among the most intelligent people in looking at problems in the country. Eh, I have a great admiration for Walter Reuther, I think he has uh a grasp of um business which is as good as many businessmen I know. Um and I know one or two others that I think are coming on with a great deal of education and knowledge, and um are valuable. But I do also realize that um a bad labor leader can have a pretty bad [ER laughs] influence that makes it rather--

[Malcolm Johnson:] That-that-that is true.

[ER:] Difficult. Now in your book, you deal with several examples of la-labor gangsterism, in which ruthless warfare is described, even to homes being dynamited, businesses, business establishments bombed and so on. Ah, are these isolated cases or do they happen a great deal? (15:20)

[Malcolm Johnson:] Uh no, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'm afraid they happen a great deal. Uh, I don't think I would have written a fair book, and I hope I have, if I had merely chosen a few isolated cases. It is true I have chosen some very flagrant cases, some outstanding cases of gansterism in labor. There are others, uh I have no personal acquaintanceship, as a reporter, with all of these other instances, but I know there are others, and unfortunately these instances are the ones that so much of the public will remember, rather than the good things that other unions are doing, the honest unions are doing.

[ER:] Well that of course is always the way, it's the bad things that are always thought of. [Malcolm Johnson: That's right.] At first, they're news, and the other things are not news.

[Malcolm Johnson:] That's right. We don't read about the pensions and the uh other benefits is-- in such sensational fashion as we do the abuses in labor unions. (16:15)

[ER:] Well now, would you say that the majority of the unions are dishonest?

[Malcolm Johnson:] No, I do not believe so. I believe-- I hope that the majority of the unions are honest and I know, uh you've mentioned one or two yourself, I know of my own knowledge that some of them I think are well conducted unions and honest leadership whose concern is primarily for the-the men and the women in the union.

[ER:] Well, that's a satisfaction anyway. Um, but uh I'm afraid that leads me to something which also troubles me, namely that perhaps the press um plays up the criminal activities, um and doesn't tell us very much about anything else that's being done. (17:03)

[Malcolm Johnson:] Well I think that is only true in part, Mrs. Roosevelt. I uh must defend the press to a certain extent here. Uh, it is true though, as you uh mention, that that old business of man bites dog-- uh we notice that the press will naturally uh play up instances of violence, murder, and extortion, whereas the other instances, which are good, are just simply not as sensational and not as likely to attract as much attention as these [unclear].

[ER:] Well I can remember years ago, um because of course I am a very old woman, and I can remember um trying to get uh some point of view that was held by labor uh into the newspapers, and oh this is twenty years ago, thirty years ago, and having a very hard time to get even three lines! But nowadays, I don't think that's quite true any longer, do you think it is?

[Malcolm Johnson:] No it is not true, Mrs. Roosevelt. I remember also that period. I've been a reporter for some twenty-five years now and I remember when it was very difficult to get anything favorable about a labor union, or organized labor as a whole into the newspapers, but for better or for worse I think that the

uh majority of the press in this country uh recognize uh labor's place in our community, and I believe that they are now more than willing to give labor a voice in the newspapers, in its editorial columns and in its news columns.

[ER:] Well, that's a step forward. In in really--[Malcolm Johnson: That is a step forward and labor has earned that.] And I-I think it's a step forward-- [Malcolm Johnson: Right.] in- in our protection against dishonest unions too because--

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes, I-I-I think you're quite right on that.

[ER:] It makes that possible. Now, the other thing I've often wondered was whether there was anything employers could do to protect their workers against dishonest unions (19:04).

[Malcolm Johnson:] Well [ER coughs] under our current setup Mrs. Roosevelt, I don't see very well how the employers can do that. Uh they're pretty well, they're um rather helpless in a situation where you have a racket safe-- a racket controlled union. They have no power to-to oust these dishonest leaders. They might uh-uh help publicize the fact that these leaders are dishonest, but then they're always in the position of being accused of fighting labor unions for selfish purposes, to beat down the workers uh in their desire to get better working conditions and higher wages. (19:36)

[ER:] So they'd have to have an awfully good reputation with their workers or exposing uh the um leaders wouldn't do them any good, they wouldn't be believed.

[Malcolm Johnson:] That is quite true.

[ER:] You'd really have to have um a pretty good um uh-- you'd almost have to have an employer that was completely trusted by his employees, and he would have to have um an outlook on uh labor relations which is not frequently eh-uh existent [ER laughs] in businesses--[ER and Malcolm Johnson speak over each other] which is more than they choose to be--

[Malcolm Johnson:] That is true--

[ER:] but even now--

[Malcolm Johnson:] That is true. and not only that he must be uh be careful to obey the law, you know the law will not allow him to interfere [ER: No.] as an employer, in the operations of the unions. Especially-- [ER: Yes, but--] the unions that he is having to negotiate with.

[ER:] Oh yes that's true, he can't um--

[Malcolm Johnson:] He can't interfere--

[ER:] can't step in can he and do--

[Malcolm Johnson:] Uh he can't interfere nor can he put on a campaign even though he may be sin-- he sincerely believed that this union is bad or rather its un-it's leadership is bad. But that's why I say that he is helpless in this particular position. So I think that the remedy must come uh from government sources and from the rank and file of the unions themselves.

[ER:] Government sources? How-how--what could government do?

[Malcolm Johnson:] Well, I think a government could make studies uh where these abuses have been exposed or where they are suspected. In uh one case, for instance the New York waterfront, I think it's in crying need of some sensible government study rather than an investigation for punitive uh reasons, but to make a serious study of the problem uh that exists in this particular union I have in mind as an economic and a social problem, and to see if they can't recommend uh things that should be done to improve this situation. They can't--

[ER:] Now that's--

[Malcolm Johnson:] The government cannot do it alone. They would have to-- they would also have to have the cooperation and the willingness of the rank and file workers in this union, and I believe that they would get that cooperation. (21:40)

[ER:] Well now that's a very interesting suggestion.

(Break 21:42-22:01)

[ER:] Before we go on, Mr. Johnson, to your further explanation of the ills of labor unions, I think our audience would probably like to know something about you. Uh, a kind of passport, so to speak. As I said before, I know that you are a Pulitzer Prize winner and that you are now with the International News Service. What led you into your investigation of crime in labor unions? Did you go among the workers themselves?

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes I did go among the workers, Mrs. Roosevelt, but I have never considered myself primarily a labor reporter, nor do I so consider myself now. I've handled all kinds of assignments in the years that I've been a newspaper reporter. Uh I am one of the casualties of *The New York Sun*. I was on the staff of the *New York Sun* for twenty-one years, and when the *Sun* was sold to the *World Telegram*, I took a few months off to finish this book, and then I went to International News Service. Uh but I did work among the uh-uh the rank and file union people and the thing that started me in this was the routine assignment from my city editor, uh in the waterfront. And now the other instances that I've mentioned happened to be trials and similar cases, which I have had some experience as a reporter covering those trials. And so, uh that is how I started uh the assignment from the city editor was of a routine nature and neither he nor I dreamed at that time that we would come up with the material that we finally did achieve. (23:36)

[ER:] Yes. Well that's an interesting but a natural way to come into it. And in your book of course, there are many examples of gangsterism in labor unions. But I believe your expose of the New York longshoremen's union is perhaps the best example to bring out your points. First, what are the methods most often used by a dishonest union to rob its members and the public? (24:05)

[Malcolm Johnson:] [Malcolm Johnson clears throat] Well the methods most common have been illustrated um on the New York waterfront, and in uh some of the Chicago unions, which were dominated by members or former members of the Capone gangsters. Uh, one of the most effective ways is infiltration of these unions by professional criminals, uh out and out gangsters who certainly have no interest in the workers, and whose only interest in obtaining control of these unions is for what they can get out of it in money, either in extortion from their own members or extortion from the employers or by robbing the public. Uh, it's done also through rigged elections, through which various unions have managed to seize control of unions and place their own members, criminals, in key positions in these unions, and that is certainly true on the docks. Uh, I worked on that story regarding the docks for more than a year, and since then I've written some two hundred articles on it, and it was found that almost without exception, uh these gangsters and professional criminals--and they're the ones that I'm trying to

expose. Uh I'm very hopeful that this book will not be considered an anti-labor or an anti-union book. I did not intend it to be that, but rather a factual book of certain conditions which are detrimental to labor itself. (25:29)

[ER:] Well, of course, uh this seems, from what you say, to be tied up with crime, big crime probably, uh which is today uh under investigation by that Senate- by the Senate committee. And um won't it perhaps turn up that much of all of this that we're finding in pieces uh has a tie up somewhere--

[Malcolm Johnson:] Uh, yes that has already been developed, Mrs. Roosevelt. I-I have been covering some of the uh hearings of the Kefauver Committee both in New York, in Washington, Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City, and it is quite interesting and also terrifying to see the pattern that exists, to find the same names crop up repeatedly in these various cities, in connection with organized crime and in some instances with the labor unions.

[ER:] Now that's uh--would you say that back of this also there lies a certain encouragement on the part of um communist groups?

[Malcolm Johnson:] Well I'd-- frankly Mrs. Roosevelt, I didn't go into that situation, but I am sure that the communists would capitalize on anything that they thought would create disorder and unrest.

[ER:] Well that's why I asked you because of course this is such a good way to create the kind of confusion and um disorder and fear uh that they uh like as a rule to use. (26:58)

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes, that is true.

[ER:] And, and you think that might be possible too--

[Malcolm Johnson:] I think--

[ER:] That it's all woven in together in a--

[Malcolm Johnson:] I think that--

[ER:] In a pattern that is quite terrifying.

[Malcolm Johnson:] I think that is possible, uh however, in the cases where organized criminals, professional criminals have dominated, uh I haven't found so much of the communism there. Uh, the communism--the communists have infiltrated and dominated unions, other unions and for entirely different purposes--political purposes. (27:27)

[ER:] Yes.

[Malcolm Johnson:] Uh but the result is the same.

[ER:] {ER laughs} The result is just the same. Well now in your book you compare the shake up to conditions existing on the London docks nearly a century ago. Have they been abolished there?

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes they have. They-they have abolished the shape-up and they have instituted a more equitable system of hiring uh, which uh I'm told has greatly improved conditions on the London docks. Uh, by the very nature of longshoring work, it is casual, uh everyone admits that, agrees to that, and that there probably will never be a perfect system, but at least London and many other ports

throughout the world have done-- made great progress in improving conditions and reducing the casual nature of employment on the docks, which I think is one of the primary evils of our--

[ER:] It's one of, one of the har-hard things to regulate.

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes.

[ER:] Um, in the nineteen thirties I suppose uh this, this would have been, wouldn't it, um, the conditions in London.

[Malcolm Johnson:] In the nineteen-thirties?

[ER:] Would it have been--would it have been about that date?

[Malcolm Johnson:] Uh, no, it goes further back than that.

[ER:] It goes further back than that?

[Malcolm Johnson:] It goes back almost a century when they had uh the shape-up as comparable to the shape-up that is now practiced on the docks of New York. But in the nineteen thirties, uh they--I believe I cited one heartbreaking instance of where some thousand men were scrambling for a few jobs and their hiring boss uh at the shape-up where the men are selected singled out of groups and just in despair took the brightest checks which signified work and threw them into the air and let them scramble and fight for a half a day's work, um which uh, was a very eloquent instance it seems to me in-in highlighting the evils of the system of hiring. (29:22)

[ER:] Well now why should union leaders uh oppose a substitute for the shake up, because I understand they do.

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes they do and they give various reasons for it. They say that the shape-up is more efficient than the hiring hall or other systems that have been devised. Uh, I do not think that that is a sincere nor honest answer to it because uh people who are far more well informed than I and who've made studies of this thing over a period of many years agree that there's nothing worse than the shape-up as a system of hiring. Uh, I think it--the real reason that they favor the shape-up is that they aren't able to keep their men under control, they're able to discipline them better by simple uh device of saying whether they shall work or whether they shall not work. In other words, a man who doesn't knuckle under doesn't get the work and he soon realizes that he must obey and he--bow down to the system or he doesn't work and his family doesn't eat. (30:26)

[ER:] You know, that's strangely like what uh USSR says about their economic system as compared to ours. They say um, "There is no such thing as human freedom," this is in connection with the human rights uh work, "unless a man can work." Now of course there is some truth in that--

[Malcolm Johnson:] The point there--

[ER:] But you have to think of how that work is acquired, and under what conditions. But when they just blandly state that, there's very little you can say because it's quite evident that a man whose family can't eat and who can't eat himself is a slave.

[Malcolm Johnson:] He is a slave to some sort of system, which should be changed. But of course, the-the communists are using that as a part truth in their case.

[ER:] Oh of course they are, but it-it's just uh--it's just one of the things that has made me sometimes able to understand why they get the ear of certain groups of people, when-when you yourself wonder how it's possible that they can have persuaded them. Then you realize, well these people um were living under conditions which made-made this particular line have a great appeal. (31:59)

[Malcolm Johnson:] Yes that's one of the things that makes me as a citizen, uh and I feel that I'm a citizen before I'm a reporter, makes me very angry that by some of the abuses that we have in our labor unions and in other instances, actually give the communists ammunition for propaganda, propaganda against us--unrightfully so.

[ER:] Well of course, of course it does because these people uh, who are under these uh conditions in the union, have never known freedom from fear. They're always afraid.

[Malcolm Johnson:] They are always afraid.

[ER:] Now um, will the apprehension of these criminals eventually lead to an honest and well-run union?

[Malcolm Johnson:] No, Mrs. Roosevelt, I think the problem goes much deeper than that. Uh if we could apprehend some of the gangsters who are operating on the waterfront today and who are uh in a dominant position and various locals of this waterfront union, uh that would be fine. But unless we remove the basic cause of this condition, other criminals will immediately take their places and we'd have the same vicious circle again. I think that we must get--uh realize that it is fundamentally an economic and a social problem and approach it from that standpoint. (33:10)

[ER:] Well now you say something in the last sentence of your book that I'd like you to read, because I think it sums up what you believe in this.

[Malcolm Johnson:] [Malcolm Johnson clears throat] "The great majority of unions in this country are run intelligently and honestly. It will be a great blow to the nation if their work comes to naught because of the crime and corruption in a few."

[ER:] Well, now that I think is a message that we want to leave with people tonight, because I think our--as citizens, we can do something about the very conditions that bring about crime in the labor unions. And I want to thank you very much for being with me this--today and tell you how grateful I am for your coming.

[Malcolm Johnson:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt.

(34:09)

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