

AMERICAN SOCIAL HISTORY PROJECT  
UNDER THE DIRECTION OF HERBERT G. GUTMAN

# WHO BUILT AMERICA?

WORKING PEOPLE & THE NATION'S  
ECONOMY, POLITICS,  
CULTURE & SOCIETY

VOLUME ONE

FROM CONQUEST & COLONIZATION THROUGH  
RECONSTRUCTION & THE GREAT UPRISING OF 1877







12

# INDUSTRIAL LABOR AFTER THE WAR

**IN 1876** America celebrated the hundredth anniversary of its independence. At a gala Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, Americans marveled at the wonderful new inventions of the industrial age: Thomas Alva Edison's "multiplex" telegraph, which could transmit several messages on one line, Christopher Schole's typewriter, and Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. At the center of the exposition stood the huge eight-thousand-horsepower Corliss steam engine, a fitting symbol of the nation's spectacular industrial growth.

Railroad-riot extra:  
The Pittsburgh  
railyards aflame.  
From  
*Frank Leslie's  
Illustrated  
Newspaper,*  
August 4, 1877.

But beneath the optimistic symbolism of the centennial lay a more disturbing reality. In 1876 America was in the fourth year of the worst economic depression it had ever experienced. The nation was overrun with unemployed workers, thousands of whom tramped through the countryside looking for work.

The depression also brought a wave of bitter industrial conflicts. The climax came a year after the centennial, when railroad strikes erupted in dozens of towns and cities across the country, resulting in the loss of over a hundred lives and the destruction of millions of dollars' worth of property. Federal troops were called in to suppress the strikes, and to prevent what many businessmen and press commentators feared was an imminent revolution.

How had the nation, buoyed by the decisive northern victory in the Civil War and the political and economic possibilities it inaugurated, once again reached the point of open warfare? How had the optimism of the 1876 celebration of the nation's unity and independence degenerated so quickly into the brutal conflict of the 1877 railroad strike? The answers to these questions lay in the extraordinary economic and geographical expansion of the nation that followed the war and the challenge that expansion posed to political and philosophical ideals of independence and equality long cherished by most Americans.

### RAILROADS AND THE WEST

The rapid opening of the West was the most important economic development in the years just after the Civil War. When the war began, American settlement extended from the Atlantic seaboard to the tier of states west of the Mississippi River and from the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range to the Pacific Coast. The vast expanse of land between these areas was occupied primarily by American Indians. This situation changed rapidly after the war. Hastened by railroad construction, the discovery of mineral resources, and the final defeat of Indian resistance, the vast lands west of the Mississippi River were largely settled in the twenty-five years between 1865 and 1890.

The railroad turned the dream of western settlement into a reality. Between 1867 and 1873, railroad companies laid 35,000 miles of railroad track in the United States—as much as was built in the three decades before the Civil War. The crowning achievement was a line that spanned the continent, linking the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. In 1862 Congress had chartered the Union Pacific and Central Pacific corporations to construct a line between Omaha, Nebraska, and Sacramento, California. Seven years later the line was completed. A golden spike—hammered into place with great ceremony at Promontory Point, Utah, in 1869—marked the climax of the transportation revolution that had begun early in the nineteenth century.

The largest government subsidies in American history financed this railroad boom. Government support for internal improvements was not in itself new. Canals and turnpikes had been heavily subsidi-



to claim 160 acres of public land for a \$10 fee; final title to the land would be granted after five years of residence. Such a law had long been a demand of the urban labor movement, and its supporters heralded it as the salvation of the laboring man. "Should it become a law," wrote the Radical Republican George Julian before it was passed, "the poor white laborers . . . would flock to the territories, where labor would be respectable, [and] our democratic theory of equality would be put in practice."

A vast expansion of farming in the West in fact followed closely on the heels of the railroads. In the ten years after the transcontinental line was completed, Kansas attracted 347,000 new settlers, with similarly dramatic increases in the other Plains states. All in all, more land was put under cultivation in the thirty years between 1870 and 1900 than in the previous two hundred and fifty years of American history.

Only about a tenth of the new farms in these years were acquired under the Homestead Act, however. Despite the claims of its supporters, the act did not go nearly far enough in encouraging settlement of the Great Plains by urban workers. The land was free, but a city laborer, making perhaps \$250 a year, could not even pay the entry fees to file a claim, let alone raise the substantial funds necessary to buy farm equipment and move to the West. More importantly, large mining and lumber companies quickly took advantage of a provision of the law that allowed a homesteader to obtain full title to his land by paying \$1.25 or \$2.50 an acre for it. Large companies paid individuals to stake claims, and quickly acquired huge tracts of land at prices well below their actual value. Later amendments to the act (particularly the Desert Land Act of 1877) made the acquisition of western land by large companies even easier. George Julian's vision of a West settled by poor urban laborers seemed to be undercut by the actual workings of the Homestead Act.

The rapid expansion of the mining frontier in these years also undermined the hopes of workers. By the mid-1850s the California gold rush had come to an end and little opportunity remained for the independent prospectors who had panned for gold in the state since 1849. Major discoveries of silver and gold in Colorado and Nevada in 1858 and 1859 drew these independent miners to the Rockies and eastern Sierras, where boom towns like Virginia City sprang up in mountainous canyons almost overnight. The 1860s and early 1870s witnessed further discoveries in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and the Black Hills of Dakota.

But mining here was very different from that in California. The mines of Colorado and Nevada (often three thousand feet deep or more) required much more capital and technology than had been necessary in California. As a result, the individual prospectors who dis-

covered veins of precious metals like Nevada's spectacular Comstock Lode were rapidly displaced by large mining companies. Eastern and European investors provided the capital to buy heavy machinery, and the companies employed large numbers of wage-earning miners in impersonal (and often unsafe) settings. The industrialization of hard-rock mining, the emergence of powerful mining syndicates, and the movement of independent prospectors into the ranks of wage-earning employees stood in stark contrast to the dream of a free and open West.

The cattle industry also grew rapidly in this period. A tough breed of cattle called longhorns, introduced by the Spanish, had long roamed wild on the plains of southern Texas. After the Civil War, enterprising men realized that they could buy cattle for as little as \$3 or \$4 a head in Texas and sell them in northern markets for \$25 to \$50 a head. It was then a matter of driving the cattle across the plains to the new railhead cattle towns such as Sedalia, Missouri, or Abilene, Kansas. The famous "long drives" of the 1860s brought tremendous profits to a number of Texans, turned Abilene and Sedalia into thriving boom towns, and gave the cowboy a permanent place in American mythology.

But this period of the cattle industry was short. The high profits brought a flood of capital from England, Scotland, and the East that turned cattle-raising into a large-scale business. And as cattlemen began raising stock closer to the railroad lines in Kansas and Missouri, the romance of the long drives came to an end. The cowboy's more demanding tasks were eliminated and he became simply a cowhand—a wageworker on horseback—who lived on a ranch and sorted the cattle to be shipped to market.

The rapid settlement of the Plains and Far West, greatly speeded by the building of the railroads, led to violent conflict between the settlers and the American Indians of the region. Miners quickly dispersed and destroyed the peaceful tribes inhabiting the mountains of California, Utah, and Nevada. The conflict on the Great Plains was more protracted. In treaties signed in the 1830s, the United States government had solemnly pledged much of the Great Plains region to American Indians. The non-Indian settlement of the West led the government to break these treaties and to declare a new policy in 1867. Indians would thereafter be concentrated on two reservations in Dakota Territory and in Oklahoma Territory.

Although a number of tribal leaders were persuaded to accept the new terms, a good many other Indians resisted the drastic reduction of their lands and (what was even worse) the destruction of their nomadic culture by the boundaries of the reservation system. Between 1869 and 1876, these "nontreaty" Indians carried out guerrilla warfare against white settlers and United States troops throughout the

West. The warfare reached its climax in 1876, when the powerful Sioux nation moved into open rebellion in response to the movement of miners into the Black Hills of the Dakota reservation. Led by Chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, the Sioux won a major victory when they annihilated the troops of General George A. Custer at the Little Big Horn River in southern Montana. But the victory was short-lived. A shortage of supplies and overpowering odds led to the defeat of the Sioux by the fall of 1877.

Even more important than government policy and military action was the destruction of the buffalo between 1867 and 1883. The bison that roamed the West in giant herds provided both food and shelter for the Plains Indians (the skins were used for tents and robes), essential for their nomadic life. In the late 1860s "sportsmen" killed many of the buffalo on the northern plains, as did railroad crews in search of meat; they were joined by professional hunters after a Pennsylvania

tannery discovered in 1871 that buffalo hides could be used for commercial leather. Using powerful, long-range rifles, and shooting from railroad cars or from horseback, these hunters rapidly slaughtered millions of the beasts: once numbering over 13 million, buffalo had all but disappeared from the Great Plains by the mid-1880s. With the buffalo gone, American Indians had little choice but to move to the new federal reservations. Though cultural resistance to the reservation system would continue, culminating in the rapid spread of the Ghost Dance religion among the Sioux in 1890-91, by the late 1870s direct physical resistance by American Indians had come to an end.

Now a vast network of railroad lines crisscrossed the Plains where Indians had once hunted the buffalo. But the railroads did more than settle the West with white farmers, ranchers, and

#### "THIS WAS TO BE OUR LAND FOREVER . . ."

*Iron Teeth, a Cheyenne woman, provided a vivid account of the conflicts that arose in the 1870s between federal troops and the Indian tribes they were trying to relocate.*

SOLDIERS BUILT FORTS in our Powder River country when I was about thirty-two years old. The Sioux and the Cheyennes settled at the White River agency, in our favorite Black Hills country. This was to be our land forever, so we were pleased. But white people found gold on our lands [in 1874]. They crowded in, so we had to move out. My husband was angry about it, but he said the only thing we could do was go to other lands offered to us. We did this.

Many Cheyennes and Sioux would not stay on the new reservations, but went back to the old hunting grounds in Montana. Soldiers went there to fight them. In the middle of the summer [1876] we heard that all of the soldiers [led by General George A. Custer] had been killed at the Little Bighorn River. My husband said we should go and join our people there. We went, and all of our people spent the remainder of the summer there, hunting, not bothering any white people nor wanting to see any of them. When the leaves fell, the Cheyenne camp was located on a small creek far up the Powder River.

Soldiers came [on November 29, 1876] and fought us there. Crows, Pawnees, Shoshones, some Arapahoes, and other Indians were with them. They killed our men, women, and children, whichever ones might be hit by their bullets. We who could do so ran away. My husband and my two sons helped in fighting off the soldiers and enemy Indians. My husband was walking, leading his horse, and stopping at times to shoot. Suddenly, I saw him fall. I started to go back to him, but my sons made me go on, with my three daughters. The last time I ever saw [my husband], he was lying there dead in the snow. From the hilltops we Cheyennes saw our lodges and everything in them burning.



Ride the Train and Shoot a Buffalo! One of the short-lived attractions of western railroad travel was the opportunity to join a buffalo hunt—often without having to leave the comfort of your railroad carriage. In this 1870 promotional photograph, the official taxidermist displays his wares outside of the Kansas Pacific Railroad's general offices.

miners. They also began to transform the very fabric of American economic life. Through its large subsidies to the railroads, the federal government helped to create extremely powerful corporations, which became America's first big businesses. The Pennsylvania Railroad, then the nation's largest single business enterprise, employed over 20,000 workers by the early 1870s. And the railroads' tremendous need for capital led them to adopt and popularize a variety of modern managerial methods, including the limited-liability corporation. The number of railroad stockholders expanded, and large boards of directors—usually including several powerful bankers—replaced the old-fashioned individual entrepreneurs who had both owned and managed their own concerns. This new separation of ownership and control gave the railroad corporation a permanence and impersonality unknown in antebellum times.

The railroads were also the first businesses to face the problem of economic competition in all its severity. This was the result of two interrelated factors. First, the railroads had extremely high fixed expenses, which they had to meet even if they were not operating. These expenses included not only the maintenance of equipment and tracks but also the regular payment of interest on the bonds used to finance their construction. These constant costs encouraged railroads

to continue operations even during bad times, when rates could fall to very low levels.

Second, railroads had a strong incentive to utilize as much of their capacity as possible. Since it was nearly as expensive to haul empty cars to a point where they were needed as it was to haul the same cars loaded with freight, railroads were willing to offer extremely low rates to shippers of goods. In areas where two or more lines competed for the same traffic, the result was a series of disastrous rate wars.

The combination of high fixed costs and an incentive to utilize maximum capacity left the railroad industry in a state of chaos. In some areas of the nation, some railroads went bankrupt while others emerged as monopolies. In other areas, railroads formed "pools" that tried to end cutthroat competition by setting rates and dividing up traffic. From the standpoint of railroad managers, such practices seemed essential to survival. But the railroad pools undermined the "free competition" constantly lauded as the key to American prosperity and virtue.

"The American Frankenstein." Inspired by Mary Shelley's novel about a man-made monster who turned upon its creator, this cartoon depicts the railroad trampling the rights of the American people. "Agriculture, commerce, and manufacture are all in my power," the monster roars in the cartoon's caption. "My interest is the higher law of American politics."



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Railroads also created a small group of extremely wealthy entrepreneurs who became known as the Robber Barons: Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, Jim Fisk, and Collis P. Huntington all built immense personal fortunes through railroad promotion and consolidation. When Vanderbilt died in 1877, he left his son William a fortune of \$100 million, a figure unheard of in earlier times. By way of comparison, a decent annual wage in 1877 for ten to twelve hours of labor, six days a week, was \$350.

These railroad men rapidly translated their economic might into political power. They hired armies of lobbyists whose activities in Washington and in state capitals gained the corporations even more subsidies and land grants and protected them from regulation and taxation. "The galleries and lobbies of every legislature," observed a Republican leader, "are thronged with men seeking . . . an advantage" for one corporation or another. Railroad promoters, managers, and financiers began to form the basis of a powerful new political elite.

The pattern of development in the 1860s and 1870s made many Americans doubt the future of their nation. A civil war fought to destroy the power of one ruling class (the southern slaveholders) seemed to be producing another—even more powerful—oligarchy. And this oligarchy was emerging in part as a result of the rapid and uncontrolled development of the West, the very region where the dream of a free and open republic should have been fulfilled.

## INDUSTRY AND WORKERS

The pace and intensity of industrialization accelerated dramatically after the Civil War. Cities grew rapidly. New immigrants flooded into them. As a result, the number of workers in manufacturing and construction leapt from two million in 1860 to over four million in 1880. In 1860 there were about as many self-employed people as wage-earners. Twenty years later, far more people relied on wages. The ideal of economic independence and self-sufficiency became less and less possible for most Americans to attain.

The most dynamic industries were those involved in processing the natural resources of the rapidly developing West. Meat production, for example, was transformed. Before the 1870s, cattle were driven on hoof to towns and cities throughout the nation, where local butchers slaughtered them and prepared the beef. The refrigerated railroad car in the early 1870s transformed this system. Gustavus Swift, a New Englander who came to Chicago in 1875, realized that cattle could be slaughtered and packed in huge packing houses there, and then be shipped ready for market to cities throughout the nation. In 1878 Swift started what soon became one of America's largest companies; things would never be the same for the local butcher.



"Pork Packing in Cincinnati." An 1873 promotional lithograph diagrams, bloodlessly, assembly-line meatpacking, from slaughter to preserving.

Oil-refining was another large new industry. In 1859, Edwin Drake drilled America's first oil well in Pennsylvania. The lucrative business of refining the oil grew up in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Cleveland, attracting many businessmen and leading to a period of intense competition similar to that which plagued the railroads. John D. Rockefeller, whose Standard Oil Company dominated the Cleveland petroleum business by 1871, saw this competition as the main problem facing the industry. Rather than supporting price-fixing pools, which he referred to as "ropes of sand," Rockefeller brought pressure on other oil refiners to sell out to him. By the late 1870s Standard Oil was a virtual monopoly, controlling about nine-tenths of the nation's oil-refining capacity.

But such large-scale processing industries were just the tip of the iceberg. A wide variety of both old and new industries grew tremendously in the decades after the Civil War, many of them spurred on by all the railroad construction. Railroads needed enormous amounts of stone, iron, and lumber, and thus directly stimulated those industries.

What with the railroads' demand for rails, locomotives, and bridges, the output of pig iron tripled, from under a million tons in 1865 to almost three million tons in 1873. At the same time, the size of iron-producing firms increased dramatically. In 1862, for example, the Cambria ironworks in Pennsylvania was a small and inefficient firm. Seven years later the company owned 40,000 acres of land, four blast furnaces, and forty-two puddling furnaces, and it employed 6,000 workers. This trend toward concentration continued through the next decade. Between 1869 and 1879 both the number of workers and the amount of capital investment in iron nearly doubled, while the number of firms remained about constant.

The growing iron industry needed more and more coal. As a result, coal production leapt from under 17 million tons in 1861 to nearly 72 million tons in 1880. In some regions, such as Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, which produced as much soft coal as the rest of the nation combined in 1869, individual mining companies remained relatively small. The sixty-six mines in this region averaged less than 100 miners each. In newer areas of coal production, such as northern Illinois, however, large companies quickly emerged. By 1873 the Chicago, Wilmington, and Vermillion Coal Company employed 900 men in the new town of Braidwood—half the miners in the area. Many of these newer, larger mines and coalfields were in fact developed and owned by railroads, guaranteeing adequate supplies—and control over an industry essential to railroads' survival.

Railroads provided more than a demand for specific products such as coal and iron. They also created the rapid, reliable shipping needed for a truly national market. This in turn encouraged manufacturers to produce in larger quantities and to experiment with low-cost mass-production methods. Small producers who had once dominated local markets now faced competition from products made in distant factories and hauled—by the railroads—to every area of the United States. "Of the nearly three millions of people employed in the mechanical industries of this country, at least four-fifths are working under the factory system," the pioneer statistician Carroll D. Wright estimated in 1880. In the production of carriages, wagons, furniture, and other wood products, the factory rapidly replaced the home and the small shop as the center of work.

Large numbers of sewing women continued to labor under the old outwork system, producing clothing in the tenements of New York and Boston. Feathers, paper flowers, and buttons were also made by women outworkers, and many male tailors worked at home. But the vast expansion of the market brought about important changes in outwork. In clothing, for example, it encouraged contractors, who provided women with raw materials and paid them for their finished product, to seek out ways of increasing output. Between 1860 and



A group of immigrants pose beside a Central Pacific train stopped at Mill City, Nevada, en route to California in 1880.

1880 they began to introduce the newly invented sewing machine to meet the higher demand. Now sewing women working in their own homes, who already had to foot the bill for heat and light, had to either buy or rent sewing machines. And contractors lowered the prices paid to women for their piecework, to take advantage of the greater speed at which they worked. The effect of these changes on sewing women's income was disastrous. "I have worked from dawn to sundown, not stopping to get one mouthful of food, for twenty-five cents," reported one woman tailor in 1868.

Yet it was the factory, not the outwork system, that represented the wave of the future. The history of shoemaking in Lynn, Massachusetts, was typical. By 1855 the once-proud craft of shoemaking had already been subdivided into less skilled tasks. This increasingly complex division of labor had been accompanied by the growth of outwork—Lynn, the largest shoe producer in the United States, sent work out to women throughout New England. But as the national market expanded along with transportation and population, the outwork system looked less and less efficient to manufacturers. They

had to transport raw materials and finished products back and forth as far as 150 miles; the resulting delays kept Lynn manufacturers from competing as effectively as they might in this new national market.

Their problems were resolved with the invention of the McKay stitcher (an adaptation of the sewing machine) in 1862. The stitcher allowed manufacturers to end outwork, employ more male workers, and centralize production in large factories in Lynn itself. The factory represented a turning point in the history of the shoe industry, because it allowed for the first time the direct supervision of workers by employers and their foremen. Now discipline became tighter and work was performed more steadily. "The men and boys are working as if for life," observed a visitor to a Lynn factory.

Factory cities like Lynn were extremely dynamic in this period. Between 1850 and 1873, for example, Paterson, New Jersey, grew from a market town of 11,000 people to a sprawling city of over 33,000, with many of its residents laboring in the new locomotive, iron, machinery, and textile industries. In the late 1860s industry grew faster in cities like Lynn and Paterson than in large cities like New York and Boston.

But the growth of the large cities was also impressive. By 1880 more than 4 million Americans were living in cities larger than 250,000; forty years earlier, only one city had been that large. No longer was urban growth confined to the eastern seaboard. Chicago, which had 30,000 people in 1850, had become, a mere forty years later, the sixth-largest city in the world, with a population of over a million. Linked by the spreading railroad network, cities like St. Louis, Cleveland, and San Francisco also grew tremendously. The modern American city emerged in the first decade after the Civil War: urban services, including professional fire and police protection, rudimentary sanitation and health facilities, and public transportation (in the form of streetcars) were instituted in these years.

And large cities, with their expanding services and job opportunities, attracted the most immigrants. In 1880 nearly 90 percent of Chicagoans were immigrants or their children; in Milwaukee, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, San Francisco, and St. Louis the proportion was almost as high. The massive influx of Europeans had powered the first spurt of industrial growth around 1850, for they, along with New England farm women, had constituted the first American wage-earning class. The years of economic depression and war from 1857 to 1865 greatly slowed the pace of immigration. But after the Civil War, immigration picked up again—and this time on an even more massive scale: about 5 million people entered the United States between 1815 and 1860, but more than double that figure came between 1860 and 1890.

As before, most immigrants came from northern and western Europe, where agricultural crisis prompted them to leave home. The combined effects of the railroads and cargo steamers brought large areas of the world (particularly Russia, India, and the United States) into competition with the traditional wheat-producing regions of Sweden, England, and eastern Germany. As wheat prices fell, tens of thousands of farm people in these countries emigrated to the New World rather than face continued hardship at home. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire officially granted the right to emigrate in 1867, Bohemians and Moravians (from what is today Czechoslovakia) joined their ranks.

Not all the immigrants of this period were from the countryside.

Britain and Germany, in particular, contributed a large number of immigrants from urban and industrial backgrounds. Coalminers from Durham, Scotland, and Wales and iron puddlers from England's Black Country brought crucial skills to the most dynamic sectors of the American economy. German immigrants became both laborers and artisans in more traditional handicrafts, such as baking, brewing, and upholstering, and made up the majority of craftsmen in St. Louis, Chicago, and a number of other large cities.

Most immigrants ended up working in the least-skilled sectors of the workforce. They hauled goods on the docks and in warehouses, built roads and streetcar lines, and labored at building sites. Most importantly, it was overwhelmingly immigrants who built America's railroad network—especially the Irish, in the East, and the Chinese, who worked on the Central Pacific's line from California through the Sierras to Utah.

Chinese immigration to the

### "PESTILENCE IN THE CIGAR"

*This 1874 article from the New York Sun describes the sort of conditions faced by immigrants in New York City. Employers had established tenement "factories" to undermine the control of skilled workers—in this case unionized cigar rollers and finishers—by eliminating centralized craft workshops, thus forcing workers to labor at home. By 1874, seven thousand Bohemian men, women, and children worked and lived in tenement factories, bunching, stripping, and casing cigars.*

THE BOHEMIAN QUARTER of New York is on the east side. . . . The [forty] cigarmakers' tenement [factories] are mostly within those limits. . . . These houses are usually twenty-five feet by fifty, and so the lighted rooms are as a rule ten by ten feet in area. The dark room . . . is barely six feet square at the utmost. . . . In these houses, when full, as they usually are, will be found at least 100 workers.

Entering the narrow hall, . . . the olfactories are at once startled by a pungent odor, so strong in some instances as to make a sensitive person sneeze "on sight," or rather "on smell." This is, of course, from the tobacco. . . . It was said that in cold weather the odor was so overpowering and pungent, doors and windows being closed, that persons unaccustomed thereto were compelled to shut their eyes in pain. Yet about four thousand people eat, cook, and sleep, as well as work, in these places. Young children fall asleep from the narcotic effects of the pervading odor. Women suffer greatly from it, especially in diseases peculiar to the sex. It is also a prolific source of eye diseases.

A number of principal cigar manufacturers have taken to hiring these tenements and subletting them to their employees, who are therefore compelled to live in the same place and atmosphere as that in which they work.

The occupation of tenements for this purpose began about three years ago, but until this year there were not over half a dozen so occupied. The system is growing rapidly. With employers merely governed by avarice, this is no wonder, when the profits are considered.



On Stampede Pass, after the blizzard. Chinese workers constructing a tunnel on the Northern Pacific Railway clear a switchback (a zig-zag, uphill road) in the Cascade Mountains of Washington in the 1880s.

Pacific Coast began in the 1850s, when famine in China triggered an exodus to gold-rush California; by 1860 nearly one Californian in ten was Chinese. When the Central Pacific began to build its end of the transcontinental line in the 1860s, however, it recruited laborers directly from China. Its agents paid an individual's outfitting and passage in return for a \$75 promissory note, the debt to be repaid within seven months of beginning work on the railroad. Eventually, over ten thousand Chinese laborers found their way to the grading camps and construction crews of the Central Pacific.

Here they found the most brutal conditions of work known in America. In the winter of 1866, heavy snows covered the Chinese encampments in the Sierra Nevada mountains. The laborers had to dig chimneys and air shafts through the snow and live by lantern light. Yet, under orders from Charles Crocker, who directed labor

for the Central Pacific, construction continued. On Christmas Day, 1866, a local newspaper reported that "a gang of Chinamen employed by the railroad were covered up by a snow slide and four or five died before they could be exhumed." Even when not facing such dangers, the Chinese labored for ten grueling hours a day at roughly two-thirds the wages paid to whites. The experience of the Chinese in America was harsher than that of any other immigrant group—partly because they were "contract laborers," recruited on a basis much like the indentured servitude of the colonial period.

A labor law, passed by Congress in 1864 as part of the Republican Party's program of economic development, permitted employers to recruit contract laborers abroad, though they rarely did it in these years. Nonetheless, the contract-labor law was now opposed by many working people, who felt that it symbolized the undermining of the free-labor society that had abolished slavery by force of arms. And contract labor was not the only challenge to the values of a free-labor society. The dramatic increase in wage labor and the enormous expansion of wealth—direct results of the spectacular growth of industry following the Civil War—also raised fundamental questions about the survival of traditional American ideals and values.

Business leaders and their intellectual supporters tried to create a rationale for these vast new changes in American economic and social life. They did it by combining two concepts: "laissez-faire" in economics and "Social Darwinism" in social and political relations. The theory of laissez-faire (roughly, "leave it alone" in French), rested on a belief that economic growth could result only from the free and unregulated development of the market, governed entirely by laws of supply and demand. The theory maintained that any attempt by government or unions to interfere with industry would have a disastrous effect on prosperity. Social Darwinism, the application of British scientist Charles Darwin's ideas about animal evolution to social relations, argued for a similar hands-off approach to problems. Sociologists and economists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner took Darwin's concept of "the survival of the fittest" and used it to explain the economic success of the few capitalists ("the strong") and the increasing impoverishment of many workers ("the weak") in the new industrial age. They argued that this process resulted in society's continuing improvement; to deny this basic "law" was to violate nature. Sumner, for example, used Darwinian concepts to justify the existence of the wealthy:

Millionaires are a product of natural selection. . . . It is because they are thus selected that wealth—both their own and that entrusted to them—aggregates under their hands. . . . They may fairly be regarded as the naturally se-

lected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society.

Not all Americans could agree with such formulations, however. Even the generally conservative *New York Times* expressed concern in 1869 when it noted that little workshops were "far less common than they were before the war," and that "the small manufacturers thus swallowed up have become workmen [for] wages in the greater establishments." This descent of the once proud and independent mechanic to the level of a dependent wage-earner had profound implications. According to the *Times*, it was producing "a system of slavery as absolute if not as degrading as that which lately prevailed [in] the South." In the South, of course, wealthy white planters had been the masters and African-Americans had been the slaves. But now in the North, the *Times* noted, "manufacturing capitalists threaten to become the masters, and it is the white laborers who are to be slaves." More than any other single fact, this development lay behind the rapid growth of the American labor movement in the years after the Civil War.

### WORKERS' STRUGGLES

The years from 1866 to 1873 marked a new stage in the development of the American labor movement. Although the actual number of workers in labor organizations would rise to higher levels later, a greater proportion of industrial workers joined trade unions during these years than in any other period in the nineteenth century. By 1872 there were thirty national trade unions in the United States and hundreds of local ones. Together these organizations embraced over 300,000 workers.

Trade unions emerged out of a series of intense struggles with employers over wages, hours, and working conditions. The struggle to limit the length of the workday to eight hours was especially important and triggered union organization in a number of trades. Workers' ideological traditions also helped to spark the labor upsurge, as they had the movement that had existed before the Civil War. Native-born workers, white and black, drew on the egalitarian ideals and the republican traditions of the American Revolution in building their individual unions and the labor movement as a whole. And German, Irish, and British immigrants carried with them new, often radical, political ideas about collective action and distinctive forms of struggle and organization, including socialism and anarchism. The melding of these two traditions shaped the politics and ideology of the postwar American labor movement.



"Serenading a 'Blackleg' on his Return from Work." Jonathon Lowe of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* sketched coalminers and their families harassing a scab during a strike in the Cherry Valley region of Ohio in 1874.

The National Molders' Union had been founded in 1859 and had grown in strength during the war, becoming one of the most important of the new unions. The power of the molders lay in their possession of valuable skills in an industry that was expanding rapidly. But they were also deeply committed to the egalitarian legacy of the American Revolution. "We assume to belong to the order of men who know their rights, and knowing, dare maintain them," proclaimed a molder in Troy, New York. This defiant egalitarianism underlined the efforts of iron-molders as they built one of the strongest unions America had ever seen. Their president, William H. Sylvis, was a tireless worker for the union cause and one of the most able men in the labor movement. As we will see, he would later help found and lead the first national organization of American workers.

Molders in the rapidly growing city of Chicago stood in the forefront of the organization; at the giant McCormick reaper works they had organized a local during the inflation-ridden Civil War. Through a series of successful strikes between 1862 and 1864, the McCormick molders managed to maintain their real wages and obtain wage increases for the unskilled workers in the plant as well. The molders'

local continued to gain ground after the war ended, and by 1867 stood at the head of local efforts to shorten the working day to eight hours.

Manufacturers across the nation were unified in their opposition to the eight-hour day. "As long as the present order of things exists, there will be poor men and women who will be obliged to work," noted one employer who wanted to maintain a ten-hour workday, "and the majority of them will not do any more than necessity compels them to do." Concerned with its effect on their profits, manufacturers vowed to fight the eight-hour day with a vengeance.

### "EIGHT HOURS AND NO SURRENDER!"

*The following description of Chicago's May 1, 1867, parade, taken from the next day's Boston Daily Evening Voice, conveys not only a sense of the workers' elation at winning passage of a state law mandating the eight-hour workday, but also a feeling of how momentous the victory seemed. The parade is reminiscent of similar parades of workers in support of the U.S. Constitution eighty years earlier.*

#### MAGNIFICENT DEMONSTRATION BY CHICAGO'S WORKERS! MOTTOES AND SLOGANS ON THE BANNERS. THE MASS MEETINGS.

The Eight-Hour Bill became law yesterday, and to celebrate, the workers of the city turned out by thousand with bands, banners, and the badges of their trades. The demonstration was grandiose and impressive.

The procession . . . , extending for more than a mile, made a deep impression on the thousands of onlookers who had gathered in the streets. . . . They covered the stairs, the windows, and even the roofs of the houses where the procession passed by. An almost countless number of banners, flags, slogans, etc. were carried by the marchers. Following are some of the mottos:

- "In God We Trust."
- "Eight Hours and No Surrender!"
- "To the Advantage of the Next Generation."
- "Illinois on the Side of Reform."
- "The Workers' Millennium. . . ."

The day laborers were represented by a four-horse wagon, on which rode several day laborers with their various tools.

The Molders' Union participated with an eight-horse wagon on which were displayed all the materials, tools, and machinery needed for molding. . . .

Next was a delivery wagon with a coffin bearing the inscription "Death and Burial to the Ten-Hour System. . . ."

Then another delivery wagon appeared, again with a coffin on which were inscribed the words "Death and Burial of the Chicago Times"; above the coffin hanging from a gallows was a dummy with a veiled head. . . .

Illinois presented a major test of the employers' resolve. The Republican-controlled Illinois legislature had passed a law declaring eight hours to be "the legal workday in the State," and the governor had signed it in March 1867. Employers were required to conform to the new legislation beginning May 1. Chicago workers, elated with the seeming victory, took to the streets on the day the law went into effect, in a spectacular parade that featured six thousand marchers, floats, and exuberant brass bands.

The workers' celebration, however, was to prove short-lived. Chicago employers simply refused to obey the new law. The employers' resistance had been encouraged by the failure of state legislators to incorporate a penalty for noncompliance into the new law. Chicago workers once again took to the streets, but this time in a massive city-wide work stoppage, demanding that the new law be enforced. The iron-molders led the way, followed by German and native-born machinists; Irish workers

shut down nearly all of the packinghouses and rolling mills in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood. On May 6, a crowd of strikers estimated at 5,000, many of them armed, marched through the city's industrial areas, closing factories and battling police.

But the strike never became general and was badly weakened by hostility from the same politicians who had passed the law. Calling for liberation of Chicago from "the riot element," Illinois Republicans united behind the mayor when he called out the Dearborn Light Artillery to suppress the strikers on May 7. Republican hostility to the demands of Chicago workers occurred at the same moment when the national party had taken the bold step of passing the Reconstruction Act, guaranteeing the right to vote for recently freed slaves by creating military governments across the South. The guarantee of rights in the Republicans' free-labor ideology apparently did not extend to support of the eight-hour day. Chicago workers bitterly denounced Republican politicians for deserting their cause, but little could be done. By the middle of June most workers, including the molders, had gone back to work on a ten-hour basis.

#### "MONEY MONOPOLIES"

*In a speech given to the September 1868 Labor Reform Party Convention, one of several alternative labor parties that sprang up in this period, Iron Molders' president William Sylvis railed against the power of "Money monopolies" and implored workers to use their vote to regain their rights and restore the virtue of the American republic.*

MEN TALK TO me of our independence and boast of our constitutional government, and all that it guarantees to us; but with these spread-eagle gentlemen I do not agree. These things will do very well for Fourth-of-July orations, but not for everyday life. Workingmen do not live in imagination, but upon cold, practical facts; and the facts are, that the workingmen of this nation are oppressed more than the same class in any other country. It is true, we have no king—no political king—but here we have monopolies, banking monopolies, railroad monopolies, land monopolies, and bond monopolies, that supply the place of kings, dukes, lords, etc., and their rule is getting to be more intolerable than is found anywhere else. If we have no political king, we have money kings, and they are the worst kings in the world. We, by our labor, have been putting into motion millions of little streams of wealth, and a false financial and money system has been directing them into the pockets of a few individuals, while we remain poor and powerless. No, not powerless, for we have yet one way of escape: The ballot-box is still open. We in this State have yet no law allowing the Legislature to do our voting for us. If we will use the ballot effectively, we will soon be freed from the golden rule that now crushes the vitality out of the industry of the whole nation. This we are now trying to do. This is the object of the Labor Reform Party; and we are ready to make common cause with any other party or people who will adopt our principles and get on our platform.

Even this defeat, though, did not set back the city's iron-molders too far. The union began to grow again after 1869. Although molders lost a strike at one large Chicago foundry in 1872, almost all of the McCormick molders were enrolled in the union by the next year.

Coalminers also built powerful unions in this period, particularly in the hard-coal region of eastern Pennsylvania. Conditions in the region were very harsh, "little better than semi-slavery" according to one mining clerk. Miners were paid only for the coal they extracted; they worked long hours under extremely hazardous conditions. Mining accidents took the lives of over six hundred workers in a seven-year period in the region. On top of this, miners were frequently cheated out of their rightful earnings—both when

company "weighmen" short-weighted the coal they had dug and when they had to pay exorbitant prices at company-owned stores.

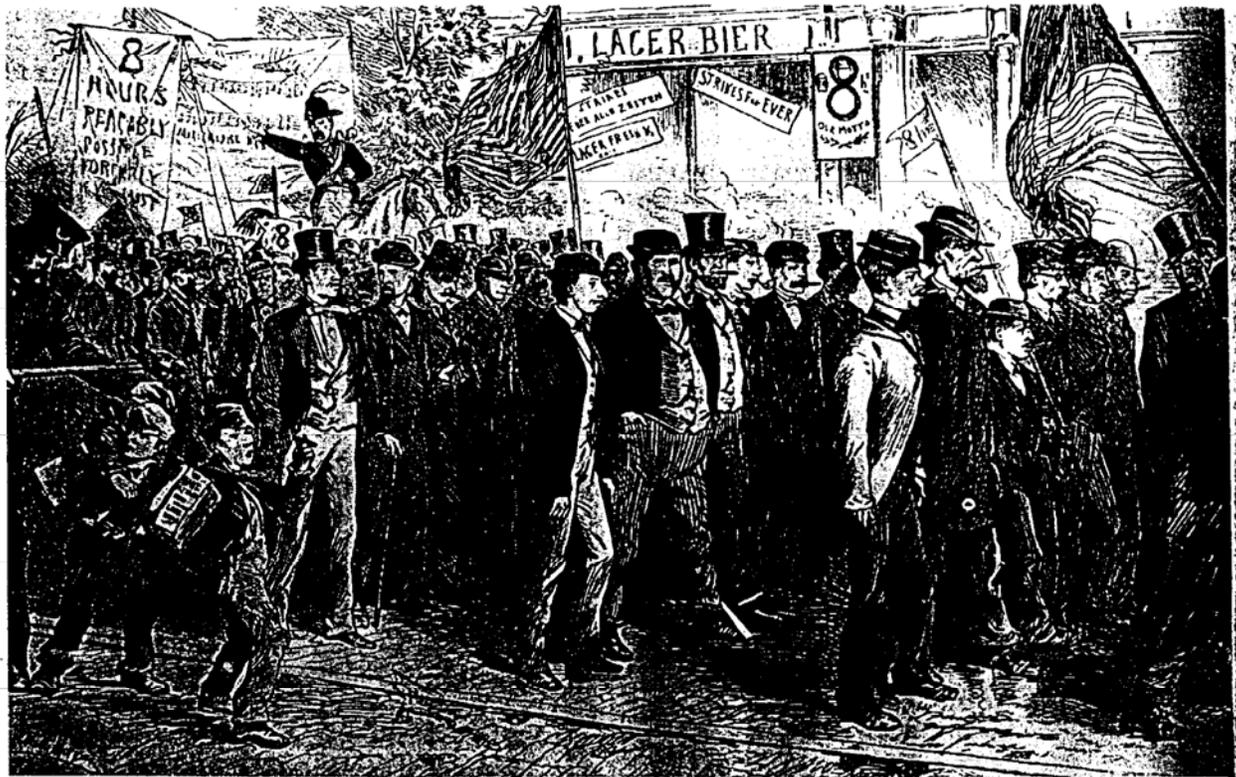
By the end of the 1860s, miners had organized an effective trade union, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA), under the leadership of John Siney. Born in Ireland, Siney had been raised in the textile region of Lancashire, England, where he had imbibed the spirit of trade-unionism. In 1867, he led a successful strike of four hundred miners against a wage cut, and in the following year he organized the WBA. By 1869 the organization had a membership of over thirty thousand.

Part of the WBA's strength lay in the highly competitive structure of the mining industry, which prevented employers from uniting against their men. But more important was the WBA's policy of unionizing workers throughout an entire industry. Rather than organizing each category of worker in separate "craft" unions, the WBA merged skilled miners and unskilled surface workers into the same union; it also brought together Irish Catholics, the native-born, and British Protestants in one organization. The WBA thus presented employers with a united front they could not afford to ignore.

The achievements of the WBA reflected Siney's experience with the British trade-union movement. In 1870, after a bitter six-month strike, the WBA forced Pennsylvania mining operators to accept the principle of a "sliding scale." This principle, by which wages would rise or fall according to the market price of coal, had long been an established practice of British coal unions. The WBA also successfully lobbied the Pennsylvania legislature for a mining-inspection law similar to the one in England. The law helped win better and safer working conditions for Pennsylvania miners.

Soft-coal miners in northern Illinois, many of them Scottish immigrants who carried with them a strong trade-union tradition, also organized in this period. In 1873, the Miners' National Association was formed, with Siney as its president, to organize all American mineworkers in one great industrial union.

Although their unions were new, miners and iron-molders could build upon traditions of organization and struggle with deep roots in the early nineteenth century. This was also true for the shoemakers, who built the powerful Knights of St. Crispin (named after the patron saint of shoemakers) after the Civil War. The focus of their protest was the new factory system. The onetime artisans who entered the large new factories, like those in Lynn, Massachusetts, had been accustomed to making their own day-to-day decisions about production and setting their own work pace. Now they found themselves working under a new order wholly under the control of the manufacturer, subjected to a work pace determined by machines. In combatting this new regime, shoemakers could build on a long tradition of artisanal



"The Eight-Hour Movement."

Workers demonstrate for the eight-hour day along New York's Bowery in June, 1872. The production of cigars (much in evidence in this engraving) was one of the city's major industries, undergoing rapid change in the 1870s as production moved from craftwork in small shops to manufacture in factories and tenement houses.

struggle and belief in "equal rights" that had culminated, as we have seen, in the great shoemakers' strike of 1860.

The shoe-factory workers organized the Knights of St. Crispin in 1867. Through a series of successful strikes, the organization grew rapidly and by 1870 had a membership of nearly fifty thousand—making it the largest labor union in the nation. Women shoe workers also organized in this period, forming the Daughters of St. Crispin to fight what they called "the unjust encroachments upon our rights." And defying the wave of anti-Asian feeling sweeping the nation, the Crispins organized a local of Chinese workers who had been brought to North Adams, Massachusetts, to break a shoemakers' strike in 1870. One of the first organizations of factory workers, the Crispins practiced solidarity as well as preaching it.

Organization of particular racial and new-immigrant groups into separate unions was common in the postwar period. Concentration in particular industries or workplaces as well as language and cultural differences proved difficult obstacles for unions to overcome, assuming they were willing to make the effort in the first place. But, as we

will see, while the chance to be in labor organizations with their fellow countrymen initially attracted some foreign-born workers to unions, it was not at all clear whether or how the postwar labor leaders would build bridges from these ethnic organizations to the larger labor movement.

The organization of German immigrants—who established separate craft unions, trades councils, and political organizations in this period—followed this pattern. As the major port city, New York was a particularly important center of German-American activity. Under the leadership of Adolph Douai and Friedrich Sorge, German tailors, cigarmakers, and twenty-one other unions founded the New York Arbeiter-Union, a German trades council, in 1868. But many German workers believed that organizing trade unions was simply the first step in a much broader social transformation. They ultimately sought the abolition of private ownership of production and its replacement by a socialist system in which workers themselves would hold political power and run the nation's industries in a democratic fashion. These beliefs led Douai and Sorge to establish a section of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) in New York in 1868.

Founded by the German revolutionary Karl Marx in London in 1864, the IWA held that "the final object" of the labor movement was "the abolition of all class rule."

By 1872, there were twenty sections of the IWA in New York City. German-American socialists played a leading role in the great eight-hour-day strikes of that year. Nearly a hundred thousand workers went out in the spring of 1872, seeking the enforcement of an eight-hour-day law passed in 1867. As in Illinois five years earlier, New York employers resisted the strikes, pointing to the role of the German-American workers as a sign that the strikes were motivated by "a spirit of communism . . . entirely foreign to the disposition of our industrial population." American employers, like their European counter-

#### THIS DEMON OF PRIVATE RICHES"

*In his January 6, 1877, editorial in the Labor Standard, a New York City newspaper, Joseph McDonnell, an Irish immigrant and IWA member, likened the capitalist system to a savage killer who slowly destroys his victims.*

THERE IS NO lion, no tiger, no anaconda so cruel as capital is. . . . [Animals] kill because they act in self-defense from starvation. . . . They kill and that is the end of it. But the capitalistic system kills by inches; it takes hold of the poor child and works him slowly to death within one or two dozen years; it takes hold of poor defenseless women and leaves them no choice but either to go speedily down by prostitution and self-contempt, or by excruciating work for a starving family; it takes hold of the proud, but poor [Negro] freeman, and gradually, almost insensibly reduces him to voluntary slavery, or to the worship of Mammon—the sole God of nowadays. It kills mind, morals, and body; it kills intelligence, reason, virtue, and health. . . . It destroys freedom and humanity wherever it sets its foot. And the worst feature about it is that the poor victims rarely perceive what is the cause of all this; or when they are aware of it, are already too far gone to help themselves. No republic, no constitutional liberty in all the world's history was proof [against] this demon of private riches; and our own proud democratic republic is already by it reduced to the mere semblance of its former self. The cathedral, the pulpit, the stage, the press, and the school are its salaried servants . . . and the state and respectable society applaud it.

parts in the same period, had been terrified by the collective spirit and militant action demonstrated in 1871 during the Paris Commune (thus "communists"), when workers took over and ran the city in the midst of war between France and Germany. "Anticommunism" on the part of American business and governmental leaders would grow dramatically throughout the 1870s. Yet, despite such opposition, the eight-hour strikes were partially successful, and organized socialism continued to grow in these years.

Many native-born workers shared the German immigrants' distrust of industrial capitalism and the wage system, if not their more militant ideology. Some turned to cooperation as an alternative to capitalist competition. To circumvent the monopoly power of the railroads, cooperative distribution and purchase of agricultural products had been developed in the late 1860s by small farmers organized into local chapters of the Grange, or Patrons of Husbandry. Worker-run cooperative stores, mimicking the Granger co-ops, appeared all over the nation in the early 1870s, particularly in textile and mining towns. Cooperatively owned factories also sprang up between 1868 and 1873, mostly iron foundries and shoe companies. Members of the middle class hailed cooperation as an alternative to strikes and as a way of turning workers into procapitalist businessmen. But, though they usually failed from lack of funds and business experience, working-class cooperatives reflected a deep dissatisfaction with the unfettered individualism celebrated by industrial capitalism. Cooperation, argued one advocate, would make workers "independent of the capitalist employer," end "ceaseless degradation," and establish a new civilization in which "reason directed by moral principle" would prevail and universal brotherhood would flourish.

#### THE NATIONAL LABOR UNION

The resurgence of working-class militancy after the war was capped by the formation of a new federation of labor organizations, covering workers in diverse crafts and industrial occupations, the National Labor Union (NLU). Founded in Baltimore in 1866 and led by iron-molder William Sylvis until his early death in 1869, the NLU focused national attention on the demands of American workers. Larger and broader than its forerunner of the 1830s, the National Trades Union, the NLU marked a new stage in working-class organization, the emergence of a nationwide institution that linked wage workers together in a broad community of interest. The NLU's vision of this community was limited in crucial respects: reflecting the racism of most white workers, it condemned the Chinese, and it only gave lip service to the rights of African-American and women workers. Never-

theless, the organization represented the strongest statement to date of American workers' egalitarian and collective traditions.

The NLU focused attention on the central demand of workers in the period after the Civil War: the "all-absorbing subject of Eight Hours." The NLU's attempt to obtain a national eight-hour-day law for all American workers, however, ran up against intense opposition, not only from employers, but from leading ideologues of the Republican Party as well. Liberal Republicans like E. L. Godkin, who had used the free-labor ideology to oppose slavery and support Reconstruction in the South, might have called for shortening the hours in the workday. But their deep commitment to laissez-faire and the rights of private property prevented them from doing so. Godkin and other Republican intellectuals attacked the eight-hour day as if it challenged the very basis of civilization itself.

Ira Steward, a self-educated Boston machinist and a leader in the eight-hour movement, met this opposition head on. Steward maintained that the whole system of wage labor—and not reforms such as the eight-hour day—undermined freedom and civilization. He believed that the employer's profit was based on the exploitation of the worker and, as a veteran of the antislavery movement in Massachusetts, drew a comparison between northern industrial capitalism and southern slavery to make his point. Just as the motive for "making a man a slave was to get his labor, or its results, for nothing," Steward argued, so "the motive for employing wage-labor is to secure some of its results for nothing; and, in point of fact, larger fortunes are made out of the profits of wage-labor, than out of the products of slavery."

The eight-hour day, according to Steward, would totally transform this system. As hours were shortened and wages rose, profits would decline. In the end, this would lead to the gradual elimination of the capitalist "as we understand him." As the anachronistic wage system passed from the scene, replaced by one based on cooperation, the full dreams of an independent citizenry would be realized. The result would be "a republicanization of labor, as well as a republicanization of government." With this statement, Steward had taken a long step toward adapting the antislavery and republican traditions of thought to the new industrial age.

Steward's reliance on this republican tradition gave his analysis tremendous popularity among working people who had only recently helped win a war against the southern planters. Workers quickly took up Steward's argument, stressing the comparison between southern slavery and northern "wage slavery." Only an eight-hour day would allow the worker to feel "full of life and enjoyment," asserted a Massachusetts bootmaker, because "the man is no longer a slave, but a man." "Eight hours a day, a legal day's work for Freemen," proclaimed

the masthead of Philadelphia's *Fincher's Trades Review*, the most important labor newspaper of the 1860s. Workers even referred to eight hours as a "jubilee," the word used by southern blacks to describe their newly won freedom; in the same vein, workers also adapted the Civil War song "John Brown's Body" to serve the eight-hour movement. When a Philadelphia labor newspaper defended the eight-hour day by declaring that "property is a tyrant and the people are its slaves," it carried the argument to its logical extreme.

Drawing this parallel, however, did not necessarily put northern white workers squarely on the side of black workers. While most of the political and economic struggles of Reconstruction centered around agricultural labor in the South, African-American workers in the region's cities and towns were also embarking on new paths of struggle in the late 1860s and early 1870s. The introduction of Radical Reconstruction in 1867 helped trigger the militant upsurge. Dockworkers in port towns led the way: in New Orleans, Charleston, Mobile, and Savannah, black longshoremen engaged in militant and often successful strikes for higher wages and elimination of discriminatory laws and employment policies. Black longshoremen in Pensacola, Florida, organized a Workingmen's Association by 1868 and through a series of strikes in the early 1870s managed to maintain their jobs against competition from emigrating Canadian dockworkers. The wave of labor militancy was not limited to the docks: African-American sawmill workers in Jacksonville, Florida, for example, organized a Labor League in the early 1870s to fight for a minimum wage of \$1.50 a day. And black wage laborers in small towns and cities in Alabama linked up with others on plantations to organize the Alabama Labor Union in 1870. Though blacks were also sometimes hired as strikebreakers, African-American workers were often militant in their struggle for unions.

Some leaders of the NLU, particularly the iron-molder William Sylvis and the ship-carpenter Richard Trevellick, argued for the need for white workers to support these struggles. At its first congress in 1866, the NLU had called on its constituent unions

to help inculcate the grand, ennobling idea that the interests of labor are one; that there should be no distinction of race or nationality; no classification of Jew or Gentile, Christian or Infidel; that there is but one dividing line—that which separates mankind into two great classes, the class that labors and the class that lives by others' labors.

To put the point more concretely, NLU leaders noted that "if these general principles be correct, we must seek the cooperation of the African race in America."

Many of the trade unions affiliated with the NLU, however, had policies that excluded blacks from membership, and in 1867 the organization came to a grinding halt on the question of pushing these unions to organize African-American workers. Sylvis took a pragmatic line, arguing that "if the workingmen of the white race do not conciliate the blacks, the black vote will be cast against them." But a committee assigned to study the question reported that "we find the subject involved in so much mystery, we believe that it is inexpedient to take action on the subject in this National Labor Congress." Unwilling to interfere with the exclusionist practices of the craft unions, the NLU began backing off from the entire issue, leaving black workers to fend for themselves.

In the face of this white working-class hostility or indifference, African-American workers set about creating their own labor institutions. Calling the exclusion of blacks from trade unions "an insult to God and injury to us, and disgrace to humanity," a national convention of African-Americans meeting in Washington in 1869 created the Colored National Labor Union (CNLU). Led by the onetime Baltimore caulker Isaac Myers, the new organization attracted the backing of prominent figures in the black community such as Frederick Douglass.

In some ways the CNLU was more conservative on questions of class than its white counterpart. "There is not a natural antagonism between capital and labor," declared Myers in his address to the organization's 1871 convention. "Their relationship and interest are mutual." Such beliefs were the result, at least in part, of actual experience. In 1865, Myers and other black craftsmen had been driven from the Baltimore shipyards by a strike of white workers opposed to the employment of African-Americans. White merchants in Baltimore helped the black workers establish a cooperative shipyard of their own, thus providing the basis for Myers's personal belief in the "mutuality" of labor and capital. In his convention address, Myers denounced strikes as the work of "brainless leaders" and called on black laborers to be honest, industrious, and frugal enough to become capitalists themselves. Yet Myers also realized that even industrious workers were often exploited by employers and must be guaranteed the right to organize labor unions. The Colored National Labor Union remained firmly committed to support for the Republican Party, and cooperation between the CNLU and the NLU—which wanted to form a separate political party of labor—broke down partly over this issue. Yet, in the long run, the discrimination practiced by the white unions had a far greater effect than political differences in hindering working-class solidarity across racial lines.

White workers were even less sympathetic toward Chinese workers. Almost every important labor leader opposed Chinese immigra-



Working-class racism is expressed in no uncertain terms on the cover of the *San Francisco Illustrated Weekly*, 1877.

tion, the labor movement was one of the strongest forces lobbying for a law to exclude Chinese. The primary argument was that "docile" Chinese labor would be used by employers to lower the standard of living of U.S. workers and take their jobs away.

The docility of the Chinese was largely mythical. In the spring of 1867, for example, Chinese railroad workers in the Sierra had gone on strike. Demanding higher wages and an eight-hour day, between three thousand and five thousand laborers put down their tools. The Central Pacific Railroad offered to raise their wages from \$31 to \$35 a month, but the strikers held firm, insisting on \$45 a month and a six-hour reduction in the working day. The Central Pacific management condemned the strike as a "conspiracy" and considered the possibility of transporting ten thousand southern blacks to replace the

Chinese. But Charles Crocker, who managed labor for the Central Pacific, developed a more powerful strategy to combat the strike: he cut off the workers' food supply, starving them into submission. "I stopped the provisions on them, stopped the butchers from butchering, and used [other] such coercive measures," Crocker bragged. The strike was broken within a week.

Despite such examples, white workers continued to argue for the exclusion of the Chinese on the grounds that they competed with whites for jobs. In fact such competition was largely illusory, since Chinese immigrants gravitated to the lowest-paying jobs at the bottom of the employment ladder, especially laundry work and unskilled labor, previously abandoned by whites. This fact mattered little, however, for underlying white workers' hostility to the Chinese was a deep belief in white racial supremacy. Labor newspaper editor John Swinton, an otherwise progressive and humane working-class leader, probably spoke for many workers when he argued that "the Mongolian blood is depraved and debased blood. The Mongolian type of humanity is an inferior type—inferior in organic structure, in vital force or physical energy, and in the constitutional conditions of development." Such racial classifications schemes were pervasive in the postwar period, when even educated middle-class Americans used pseudo-scientific theories (Social Darwinism being only the most obvious example) to justify their belief in the inevitability of their social and political dominance. But there were other grounds for bias, other labor leaders insisted that they opposed the Chinese because the corporations hired them as indentured, not free, labor. Richard Trevellick, for example, tried to avoid accusations of racism by saying he opposed "the importation but not the free immigration of the Chi-

nese," and Sylvis's silence on the question indicates that he was not happy with the anti-Chinese sentiment that was extremely widespread among the white workers and their leaders.

So was opposition to working women's struggle for equality. Wage-earning women—nearly one-quarter of the total nonfarm labor force in 1870—tarned to a variety of tactics to defend and improve their conditions and wages in this period. In 1869, for example, sewing women in Boston petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to provide them

with public housing. Although the legislature ignored the request, the petition broke new ground in demanding state intervention to remedy oppressive working conditions.

Working women in many occupations turned to trade-unionism to improve their working conditions and wages. Female cigarmakers, umbrella-sewers, and textile and laundry workers all formed short-lived local unions in these years. But they received little support from white male workers. There were thirty national unions in the early 1870s, but only two—the cigarmakers and the printers—admitted women into their ranks. Most organized working men believed that the presence of women in the paid labor force was either a temporary phenomenon or part of a strategy of employers to lower wages. Clinging to the myth that “all men support all women,” they kept women out of their unions in an effort to keep them out of their trades.

This opposition came to a head in 1869, when the NLU expelled

the feminist leader Susan B. Anthony. The conflict was complex, and stemmed in part from Anthony's efforts to train female workers to take the jobs of striking New York printers.

But many male workers opposed Anthony because her vision of total female equality—including women's right to vote—threatened traditional male domination. She and other leaders of the women's movement, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lydia Maria Child, argued that women had a right to all that men sought—“a chance to earn an honest living . . . sufficient to enable them to invest in building societies, and have houses and homes of their own, and make them just as independent as anybody in the country.” This was simply too much for many of the members of the NLU. “The lady goes in for taking women away from the washtub, and in the name of heaven who is going there if they don't?” asked one printer in arguing for Anthony's expulsion.

#### “HOW MUCH BETTER TO HAVE THESE GIRLS INDEPENDENT . . .”

*In a speech delivered on April 29, 1869, at a convention of Boston working women, a Miss Phelps described the plight of wage-earning women employed in unskilled and low-paying jobs.*

THERE ARE BEFORE me now women whom I know to be working at the present time for less than twenty-five cents a day. Some of the work they do at these rates from the charitable institutions of the city. These institutions give out work to the women with the professed object of helping them, at which they can scarcely earn enough to keep them from starving; work at which two persons, with their utmost exertions, cannot earn more than forty-five cents a day. These things, I repeat, should be known to the public. They do not know how the daughters of their soldiers fare. I do. They have a little aid, to be sure, from the state, but it is only a little, and they have today to live in miserable garrets without fire; and during the cold winters with scanty food and insufficient clothing, they go out daily to labor along these beautiful streets. Do not you think that they feel the difference between their condition and that of rich, well-dressed ladies who pass them? If they did not, they would be less than human. But they work on bravely and uncomplainingly, venturing all things for the hope of the life that is to come. Last winter many of them did not get work enough at even ten cents a garment to live upon, and were obliged to ask charity. They get it doled out to them, but at what a loss of self-respect, of independence! How much better to have these girls independent, earning their own living, enjoying their own homes, than that they should be compelled to go to station houses for soup! That is what many of them had to do last winter. The people have wondered how these girls live. Can you imagine how you should live upon twenty cents a day? Rent is one or two dollars at the lowest, and there is your clothes and your food. Count it up. Where does it come from?



"The Fifteenth Amendment Illustrated." A cartoon in the 1870 edition of *Die Vehme* (*The Star Chamber*), a short-lived St. Louis satirical weekly, supports woman's suffrage at the expense of African-Americans, Chinese, and illiterate immigrants.

"I believe in woman doing her work and men marrying them, and supporting them."

The experience of the young labor movement after the Civil War, then, was decidedly mixed. On the one hand, the many struggles waged across the land encouraged a sense of class awareness. The struggle for eight-hour-day laws focused this awareness of class and marked the labor movement's decisive break with the outlook of the Republican Party, while still deepening the broader antislavery tradition. On the other hand, class awareness and the demand for "equal rights" were sharply limited by the labor movement's discriminatory policies and actions against women and black workers and by its deep hostility to Chinese laborers. The post-Civil War labor movement's broad and encompassing vision of egalitarianism and commitment to mutuality and collective action was ultimately undermined by such racism and sexism. As a result, the labor movement remained limited, and in the end it proved unable to respond effectively to the challenge of the economic depression that began in 1873.

## DEPRESSION AND CONFLICT

The depression of 1873 brought the economic boom to an abrupt halt. The depression was triggered on September 18 by the collapse of Jay Cooke and Company, one of the country's great investment houses. In a matter of days panic led to runs on a number of banks across the



"Panic, as a Health Officer, Sweeping the Garbage out of Wall Street." Despite the ghastly appearance of the figure portraying financial panic, this *New York Daily Graphic* cover cartoon of September 29, 1873, subscribes to the belief that such financial "busts" cleanse the economy.

country, and the New York Stock Exchange shut down for over a week—the first time it had ever closed. The financial failures were followed by five years of serious deflation and the longest and severest industrial depression of the century.

Construction of railroads and buildings ground to a halt in 1873–74, and tens of thousands of businesses, large and small, went bankrupt. By 1876, half the nation's railroads had defaulted on their bonds and half the iron furnaces were silent. Prices of capital and consumer goods spiraled downward as surviving businesses engaged in cut-throat competition to keep customers.

The nation had experienced economic downturns and even depressions before: 1837 and 1857 were the most severe. But the depression that began in 1873 was different in both kind and degree. To begin with, it lasted fully sixty-five months, making it the longest period of uninterrupted economic contraction in American history.

Even more disturbing was the depression's human cost. The nation's wholehearted embrace of capitalist development after the Civil War had made many more Americans wholly dependent on industrialization for their basic survival. By 1874 fully a million workers were without work. In some cities, unemployment approached 25 percent of the workforce; New York counted some 100,000 unemployed workers in the winter of 1873–74. "The sufferings of the working classes are daily increasing," wrote one Philadelphia worker the following summer. "Famine has broken into the home of many of us, and is at the door of all." A New York labor paper reported that "thousands of homeless men and women are to be seen nightly sleeping on the seats in our public parks, or walking the streets," and predicted that "the suffering next winter will be tremendous."

Workers who lived in small towns could—and did—tend little garden plots or hunt as a way to survive the hard times. Workers in large cities were forced to go "on the tramp" to try to find work. The American countryside was suddenly flooded with men wandering from town to town in search of jobs—often using the very network of railroads that earlier had linked the nation in a single prosperous market. It was at this moment that the popular image of the rail-riding "tramp" was born.

In this context, the struggle

#### "A TRAMP AND VAGABOND"

*In a September 7, 1875, letter to the National Labor Tribune, an unemployed mechanic described his year-long search for work and the rejection he faced.*

TWELVE MONTHS AGO, left penniless by misfortune, I started from New York in search of employment. During this year I have traversed seventeen states and obtained in that time six weeks' work. I have faced starvation, been months at a time without a bed, when the thermometer was 30 degrees below zero. Last winter I slept in the woods, and while honestly seeking employment I have been two and three days without food. When, in God's name, I asked for something to keep body and soul together, I have been repulsed as a "tramp and vagabond."

for public relief and jobs became far more pressing than that for the eight-hour day. Mass meetings of workers in cities across the nation demanded jobs. New York labor leaders in the winter of 1873 demanded to know what would be done "to relieve the necessities of the 10,000 homeless and hungry men and women of our city whose urgent appeals have apparently been disregarded by our public servants." Rejecting what they called "the grudgingly given and debased bread of charity," they called on officials to create jobs financed by the sale of government bonds. Their request was denied, and subsequent meetings of the unemployed in New York were brutally suppressed by the police.

Socialists took a leading role in the movements of the unemployed that sprang up in Chicago, St. Louis, and several other large cities. As a result, socialism moved out of its relative isolation in German neighborhoods and began to build a larger following among native-born workers. When rival political factions in the movement put aside their differences and formed the Workingmen's Party of the United States in 1876, the socialist movement took a major step toward organizing all, not just immigrant, workers.

But the demand for jobs rarely brought results. Business leaders and editors were not even inclined to provide the "debased bread of charity," let alone embark on major jobs programs. The *Nation* magazine summed up this attitude best when its editor, E. L. Godkin, wrote in its Christmas 1875 issue that "free soup must be prohibited, and all classes must learn that soup of any kind, beef or turtle, can be



"The Red Flag in New York—  
Riotous Communist Workingmen  
Driven from Tompkins Square by  
the Mounted Police, Tuesday,  
January 13th, 1874." Demonstrations  
by workers and their allies  
demanding relief and job programs  
often were met with official  
violence—and were treated with  
hostility by the nation's press.



had only by being paid for." In Chicago, the Relief and Aid Society, which had been set up after the fire that devastated the city in 1871, refused to distribute the \$600,000 in its coffers to unemployed workers. Its superintendent maintained that any of the unemployed men "loafing around the streets" could find work "if they were not too lazy to look for it."

Businessmen and their supporters tended to use Social Darwinist theories to explain what was happening. They viewed the depression as a necessary, if painful, process that would weed out inefficient businesses and allow only the strongest and most creative capitalists (and, by extension, workers) to survive. Any action taken by the government to interfere with this "natural" process would violate laissez-faire ideals and thus damage the entire social fabric. The future progress and prosperity of the nation would thus be compromised.



"A Tramp's Morning Ablutions." An early morning scene in New York's Madison Square during the summer of 1877. To the annoyance of more affluent urban residents, city parks all over the United States served as homes for many of the country's unemployed.

Our NEW Model LONG RANGE Revolver.  
**"TRAMPS' TERROR."**

Price **\$3** INCLUDING 100 CARTRIDGES!  
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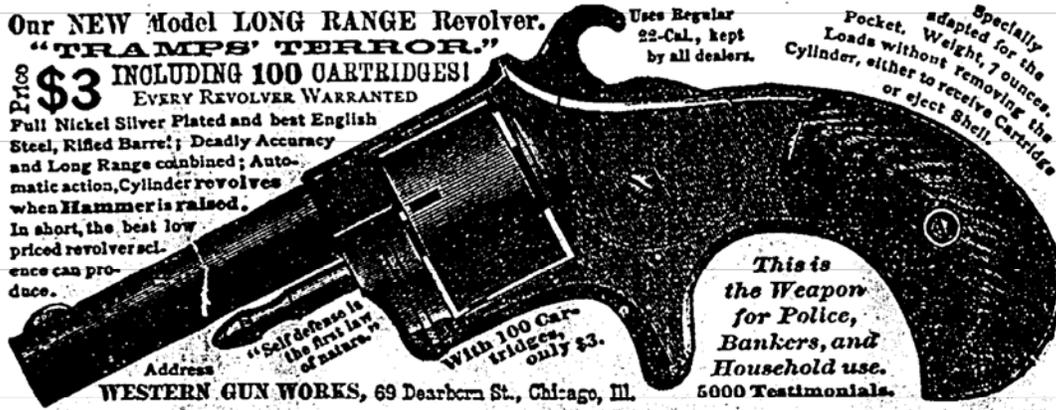
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Specially adapted for the  
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 the first law  
 of nature."

With 100 Car-  
 tridges,  
 only \$3.

Address  
**WESTERN GUN WORKS, 69 Dearborn St., Chicago, Ill.**

Annoyance gave way to fright as thousands of unemployed men wandered the country in search of work. The "tramp menace," many argued, required a repressive response—and advertisements like this exploited the pervasive fear.

Business and government leaders were inclined to blame the suffering of working people on "the ignorance, indolence, and immorality" of the poor, and attacked public-works schemes as a form of imported "communism." "The dangerous classes," symbolized above all by the tramp, became the target of their attack—not the economic system that had created the tramp in the first place.

The depression nearly destroyed the young labor movement. There were nearly thirty national trade unions in 1873 and only eight or nine at the end of the decade; the number of members dropped from 300,000 to about 50,000 (in New York City, it fell from 45,000 to 5,000). And wage gains won since the Civil War were lost: New York building tradesmen, for example, had earned \$2.50 to \$3.00 for an eight-hour day in 1872; three years later, they were working a ten-hour day for \$1.50 to \$2.00.

But as craft unions declined, activism among some groups of industrial workers increased. Between November 1873 and July 1874, a wave of railroad strikes swept the nation. Engineers, brakemen, and machinists on eighteen railroads walked off their jobs—mainly in response to wage cuts. Although not represented by trade unions, the railroad workers effectively disrupted railroad traffic through a variety of actions: removing coupling pins from freight cars, tearing up sections of track, and cutting telegraph lines. Railroad companies convinced a number of state governors to send in militias, and nearly all of the strikes were eventually defeated. Nevertheless, the strikes indicated the determination of rank-and-file workers to resist attacks on their living standards.

The most dramatic industrial conflict of the mid-1870s was the Long Strike in eastern Pennsylvania. Many of the early miners in the region had been Irish Catholic immigrants. In the early 1860s, they

attempted to redress their grievances by employing the violent and secret methods long practiced among poor Irish tenant farmers. Between 1860 and 1867 there were sixty-three unsolved murders in the region, many of them attributed by the employers and the press to a secret and shadowy organization known as the "Molly Maguires." A number of the victims were foremen notorious for "short-weighting" or for other offenses against mineworkers. Although the role of the Molly Maguires in these 1860s attacks was never definitely established, sharp conflict continued to plague the eastern Pennsylvania coalfields.

By 1868 the Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA) had emerged as a powerful union representing the region's miners, who were engaged in conflicts with many mining operators. In the early 1870s, however, the mining industry was in the midst of a major transformation. Franklin Gowen, president of the Reading Railroad, began to eliminate the cutthroat competition that plagued the industry by buying out many smaller mining concerns. By 1874, Gowen was the largest coal operator in eastern Pennsylvania and was ready to take on the WBA, providing leadership for all the operators. He first stockpiled his coal and then, in the winter of 1874-75, shut down his mines. The bitter ensuing struggle lasted for five months. Gowen later bragged that he had spent \$4 million to save his company from "the arbitrary control of an irresponsible trades union."

The shutdown caused tremendous hardships for the mineworkers. "Hundreds of families rose in the morning to breakfast on a crust of bread and a glass of water," reported one observer. "Day after day, men, women, and children went to the adjoining woods to dig roots and pick up herbs to keep body and soul together." The strike was also marked by tremendous violence. "Coal and iron police" hired by Gowen shot indiscriminately into crowds of workers, while WBA members attacked strikebreakers with clubs and stones. Although they possessed great courage and determination, the miners finally had to concede defeat. They returned to work in nonunion mines with a 20 percent wage cut.

Now Gowen pressed his victory to a final conclusion. In 1873 the coal operator had hired the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to infiltrate the miners' organizations. Pinkerton was a private company that had achieved some fame for protecting railroad property at a time when local police forces were notoriously weak. The agency now entered a new phase of its history as a leading antilabor force.

James McParlan—a Pinkerton operative—lived among the Irish miners of eastern Pennsylvania for several years. In 1876 he came forward as a leading witness in a series of sensational murder trials. McParlan testified that these murders were the result of a conspiracy by the Molly Maguires, the same secret society that had stood ac-

The Molly Maguires. An illustration from *The Molly Maguires and the Detectives*, Allan Pinkerton's self-serving account of his detective agency's infiltration of the secret society of Irish miners. Pinkerton's work in the service of the Reading Railroad typified the widespread use of private police by railroads and other businesses to suppress unions.



caused a decade earlier of the murders of dozens of mine foremen. McParlan claimed that the "Mollies" dominated the WBA and other Irish organizations in the region. Despite questions about the validity of McParlan's testimony, twenty miners were found guilty and sentenced to death. Equally important, because of widespread press coverage, the Molly Maguire trials helped link trade-unionism and terrorism in the public mind. As a result, unionism in Pennsylvania mining was totally destroyed and would not reemerge until the end of the century.

Employers used many means to break the wave of strikes that marked the 1870s depression. When miners in Ohio's Hocking Valley went on strike in 1874, for example, employers imported African-American workers from southern and border cities to take their place. "We'll flood the whole area with blacks before we are done with this thing," one mine operator told a reporter. The ploy was possible largely because of the failure of Radical Reconstruction—freed blacks in the South were never able to buy enough land to be economically independent, so it was only logical that they accept the offer of industrial jobs in the North. And—equally important—the unwillingness of unions to admit black workers gave African-Americans little reason to refuse to take white workers' jobs in the first place.

Industrial conflict was intense during the 1870s depression: employers adopted harsh strategies to destroy unions, and unionism declined. As a result, workers turned increasingly toward political activity. "Hundreds of the ablest men in the [labor] movement have lost hope in . . . the organizations known as trade unions," noted the



*Iron Molders' Journal* in 1875. "Hence we find them no longer urging the organization of labor into trade and labor unions, but urging organization for political purposes."

The relationship of workers to politics had grown increasingly complicated. Many working-class immigrants, especially the Irish, retained a strong loyalty to the Democratic Party. As we have seen, big-city Democratic political machines provided numerous services to urban immigrants, and the party was far more tolerant than the Republicans toward the Catholic Church, the saloon, and other cultural and social institutions within the immigrant community. At the same time, the Democratic Party continued to emphasize hostility toward blacks, which heightened its appeal to white workers with deeply ingrained racist beliefs.

On the other hand, many workers (especially Protestants) supported free labor, temperance, and economic development—all tenets of the Republican Party. In particular, some labor leaders identified strongly with the Republican Party in the late 1860s and extended its antislavery and free-labor ideology to a critique of the entire wage system. But the Republicans didn't accept this critique; they opposed eight-hour-day laws, as we have seen, contributing to a breakdown of the labor-Republican alliance. Working-class dissatisfaction with the Republicans increased dramatically during the depression of the 1870s.

After 1872 the Republicans retreated from free-labor ideals and Radical Reconstruction, and the Democratic Party gained in the 1874 congressional elections, leading to a national political stalemate. The Republican and Democratic parties, which had been diametrically opposed a mere decade earlier, now seemed indistinguishable. Moreover, politicians in both parties enjoyed the fruits of the post-Civil War spoils system: businessmen used outright bribery to guarantee the support of politicians, Republican and Democratic alike.

Workers were growing dissatisfied with both parties, and some activists now looked for other, independent roads to political influence. The main vehicle was the Greenback Party, organized on a national level by farmers in 1875. The new party stood for governmental action to expand the currency with paper "greenbacks" that were not tied to the nation's gold reserves—a reform intended to inflate prices, thus benefiting debtors and providing capital needed for economic growth. Key labor figures, such as Richard Trevellick, A. C. Cameron, and John Siney, endorsed the new party, and it won some working-class support in the presidential election of 1876.

Ira Steward, who had worked so hard for third-party support for the eight-hour day, vehemently protested this new departure. He believed that the eight-hour day would lead to a gradual elimination of capitalists altogether, but that an expanded currency would have no such

sweeping consequences. Nonetheless, many labor leaders rallied to the Greenback cause, marking their final rejection of the Republican Party, which after 1872 grew more and more committed to the ideology of laissez-faire.

But the Greenback Party offered no real threat to Republican dominance. As the Republican Party moved away from its radical free-labor program in the South, it increasingly emphasized other aspects of its agenda, particularly economic development. It continued to draw some working-class support through high protective tariffs—which, it was hoped, would ensure high levels of employment in domestic industry. But more and more the party looked to businessmen as its most important social base. The inauguration of Republican Rutherford B. Hayes following the tense electoral dispute of 1876—aided by the active intervention of railroad owners such as the Pennsylvania Railroad's Tom Scott—gave party leaders confidence that they were following the correct course.

Businessmen were equally confident by 1877. Though the country had not yet emerged from the depression, the major problem of cut-throat competition was gradually being eliminated by the emergence of large monopolies in a number of basic industries. And unionism was clearly in retreat. The public hanging of ten accused Molly Maguires in June 1877 seemed to close the book on a defeated post-Civil War labor movement.

Within a month, however, it would be clear that this confidence was profoundly misplaced. The railroad strike of July 1877 shook the foundations of business complacency with the force of a mighty explosion.

### THE GREAT UPRISING OF 1877

The railroad strike of July 1877 represented a turning point in American history. In two short weeks, the strike spread through fourteen states from coast to coast. It left over a hundred people dead and millions of dollars' worth of property destroyed. The uprising of 1877 was the first truly national strike in American history and the first one in which the federal government placed its full power (in the form of the army) on the side of business, a development that would be repeated. Though the strike failed in the short run, it marked the birth of a working-class movement far broader and more powerful than anything seen before. In a deeper sense, the strike registered the fact that class relations had become a central issue of national life and that the United States would not be able to avoid the class-based conflict that had plagued Europe since the birth of industrial capitalism.

The Great Uprising of 1877 was brought on by the hard times of

the depression. Railroad workers had suffered one wage reduction after another since 1873: brakemen, for example, now earned a mere \$1.75 for an extremely hazardous twelve-hour day. In Massachusetts forty-two railroad workers died each year in accidents, and brakemen commonly lost a finger or a hand on the job. After the railroad strikes of 1873-74 were defeated, union members were blacklisted, and unions were nearly nonexistent.

Against this background, executives from four of the largest railroads met in March 1877 to formalize a pooling arrangement. We have seen how pools had been used to end destructive competition. But the presidents of the four railroads—the Pennsylvania, the New York Central, the Erie, and the Baltimore and Ohio—added a new dimension by adopting a plan to cut wages. A wage cut was hardly necessary at this point—the railroads had already cut costs substantially, and several actually paid stock dividends at the same time as they announced their wage cuts. But cutting wages was an accepted practice when unemployment was high and workers' power to resist was limited. John Garrett, president of the Baltimore and Ohio, explained the railroads' actions: "The great principle upon which we joined to act was to earn more and to spend less."

The railroad workers, however, had been pushed beyond the limits of endurance. When the B&O implemented its 10 percent wage cut on July 16, workers in Martinsburg, West Virginia, staged a spontaneous strike, vowing to shut down the railroad yards until wages were restored. This proved to be the spark that ignited the Great Uprising. On July 19, President Hayes ordered federal troops into West Virginia to protect the B&O and the nation from the "insurrection."

But the use of federal troops in a domestic labor dispute created a wave of popular anger that spread the strike. In Baltimore, the Maryland state militia fired on huge crowds of workers, leaving eleven dead and forty wounded. Work stoppages rapidly spread north and west along the railroad lines to Pennsylvania, where the strike reached its most dramatic climax.

Pittsburgh was dominated by the Pennsylvania Railroad, the largest corporation in America. Residents of the city had been particularly hard hit by the depression of the 1870s and blamed the railroad for much of their misery. When railroad workers in Pittsburgh went on strike on July 19 under the banner of the recently revived Trainmen's Union, they were immediately supported by the city's iron workers. "We're in the same boat," said one iron-roller at a strike meeting held that evening. "I won't call employers despots, I won't call them tyrants, but the term 'capitalists' is sort of synonymous and will do as well." The railroad workers had the sympathy of much of Pittsburgh's population—including the city's militia companies, largely composed of workers—so railroad officials looked for outside

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help. On July 20, the adjutant general of Pennsylvania ordered the Philadelphia militia to Pittsburgh. As Tom Scott, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, put it from his Philadelphia headquarters, "My troops will see that the trains pass."

The Philadelphia troops reached Pittsburgh the next day. A crowd of strikers and sympathizers greeted them with hoots and hisses; suddenly the troops began thrusting their bayonets at members of the crowd. Several rocks were thrown at the troops, who answered with a volley from their rifles. Panic followed. "Women and children rushed frantically about, some seeking safety, others calling for friends and relatives," wrote a newspaper reporter at the scene. "Strong men halted with fear, and trembling with excitement, rushed madly to and



July 22, 1877. The interior of the Pennsylvania Railroad's upper roundhouse after the battle between the Philadelphia militia and Pittsburgh strikers. From a series of 44 stereographs by S. V. Albee sold commercially as "The Railroad War."

Stereographs were cards with "double photographs" that, when viewed through a "stereoscope," looked three-dimensional. By the 1870s stereoscope-viewing was one of the most popular forms of home entertainment.

fro, trampling upon the killed and wounded." When the gunfire finally ended, twenty people, including a woman and three small children, lay dead.

As news of the killing spread, a vast crowd, including thousands of workers from the mills, mines, and factories in the surrounding area, gathered at the railroad yards. By dawn they had set fire to dozens of freight cars and burned the Philadelphia militiamen out of the railroad roundhouse into which they had retreated. As the Philadelphians fled for their lives, new shooting erupted, killing twenty more Pittsburgh residents and five militiamen. Working people from all over the Pittsburgh region, most of them unemployed, then systematically burned and looted Pennsylvania Railroad property. Striking Pittsburgh workers and other residents quickly formed citizens' patrols to restore calm to the city's streets and prevent further looting. With the arrival of federal troops, the citizens' patrols were disarmed and the local strike ended.

In the next few days the strike spread across the Midwest. Workers took over entire towns, shutting down work until employers met their demands. The same railroad and telegraph lines that unified the nation and laid the groundwork for the full emergence of industrial capitalism also linked and unified the workers' protest. The strike spread as far as Galveston, Texas, and San Francisco. Without any central organization (most national unions, as we have seen, were defunct), the conflict gave rise to local committees that provided unity and direction to the strike.

Nonetheless, the strike was not the same everywhere. In Terre Haute, Indiana, for example, workers struck in the last week of July. Yet the specific features of the town, especially its lack of heavy industry, its close contact between workers and employers, and its native-born homogeneity, gave the strike a particular cast. Workers constantly reiterated their "full faith" in the "honor and integrity" of the local railroad president. Although they were genuinely angered by the railroads and the growing role of monopoly in national life, Terre Haute strikers' awareness of

#### THE GRAND ARMY OF STARVATION

*At a rally called on July 23, Albert Parsons, a printer and a leader of the Workingmen's Party, addressed ten thousand striking Chicago workers and their supporters. Parsons's speech evoked widely held republican ideals; his opening image of a grand army of starvation recalls the victorious Union Army in the Civil War—the Grand Army of the Republic.*

WE ARE ASSEMBLED as the grand army of starvation. Fellow workers, let us recollect that in this great Republic that has been handed down to us by our forefathers from 1776, that while we have the Republic we still have hope. A mighty spirit is animating the hearts of the American people today. When I say the American people I mean the backbone of the country—the men who till the soil, guide the machine, who weave the material and cover the backs of civilized men. We have demanded of those in possession of the means of production that they be not allowed to turn us upon the earth as vagrants and tramps. We have come together this evening, if it is possible to find the means by which the great gloom that now hangs over our Republic can be lifted and once more the rays of happiness can be shed on the face of this broad land.

# WARNING TO THE PEOPLE BY THE MAYOR

I again warn all idlers and curious people, especially all women and children, to keep off the public streets as the authorities in case of necessity will not be responsible for the consequences.

MONROE HEATH,  
MAYOR.

Chicago's mayor absolves himself of responsibility, July 1877.

themselves as members of a distinct social class remained fleeting.

In Chicago, on the other hand, the strike quickly became a city-wide general strike that touched off open class warfare. Roving groups of strikers, led by brass bands playing the "Marseillaise"—the revolutionary anthem of the European working-class movement—swept through industrial areas of Chicago calling workers out of shops and factories, regardless of occupation. Although unemployment was not as severe in Chicago as in Pittsburgh, working people had suffered many wage reductions and had been driven to the breaking point by the depression. Socialists in the newly formed Workingmen's Party of the United States exercised leadership in Chicago and urged the city's workers to take disciplined action.

But city officials responded with extraordinary force. Police were ordered by the mayor to fire their pistols into crowds of strikers. The first such confrontation was at the giant McCormick reaper works, where two strikers were shot dead. As police broke up meetings and charged through working-class neighborhoods, men and women fought back with grim determination. Chicago's businessmen rallied to the cause of "law and order," with bankers, lawyers, and merchants organizing squads of special police to combat what they called "stray strikers and tramps." The strike in Chicago was notable for the unity maintained between German, Bohemian, and Irish workers and for the participation of women. "The women are a great deal worse than the men," proclaimed one journalist unsympathetic to the strikers, claiming that nearly one-fifth of the crowds were made up of women. The strike in Chicago came to an end only with the appearance of troops and artillery on the streets of the city.

Socialists were also active in the St. Louis strike. Here thousands of workers participated in a largely peaceful general strike. They shut down virtually all of the city's industries while government officials fled the city. Black workers in St. Louis took an active role in the strike, shutting down canneries and docks. When an African-American steamboat worker, addressing a crowd of white workers, asked, "Will you stand to us regardless of color?" the crowd responded, "We will! We will! We will!"

Such racial unity did not characterize all local strikes, though. The racism that had been institutionalized in the labor movement of the late 1860s and early 1870s now took a more ominous direction. In the far West, white hostility toward Chinese immigrants put its imprint on the strike as well. In San Francisco a crowd that met to discuss strike action ended up rampaging through the city's Chinese neighborhoods, killing several residents and burning buildings.

But the strike was directed mainly against the railroads and the unchecked corporate power they typified. Working people in 1877 were seeking not to overthrow capitalism as a whole, but to set limits

on the unbridled economic power of corporate leaders and to assert workers' right to an equitable share of the economic bounty they helped produce. As a worker on the Wabash railroad told his foreman at the height of the strike, "We are striking not for a few cents, but for principles, and the spirit of liberty, equality, and fraternity so actuates us, that we will stay on the strike till the last one of our brothers on the other roads receive their rightful pay." This sense of social justice and demand for dignity ran like an electric current through the strike. A Pittsburgh militiaman reported that all of the strikers he talked to felt "that they were justified in resorting to any means to break down the power of the corporations."

Businessmen and their supporters took a different point of view. For them the railroad strike represented a revolutionary attempt to interfere with established property rights. They would not tolerate, as one letter writer to a newspaper put it, "this style of men, without a dollar, giving permission to capitalists to use their property under certain conditions." Many spokesmen for "respectable society" blamed the strikes entirely on tramps, the foreign-born, and "communists," and called for constructing armories in major cities, and reorganizing and rearming state militias.

Though the strikers were defeated in the short run, the railroad strike of 1877 marked the beginning of a revival of the labor movement. In 1878, the Greenback Party (renamed the Greenback-Labor Party) polled an impressive number of working-class votes, and in the 1880s the labor movement would grow again, now on a far more massive scale than in the 1860s. The railroad strike, by polarizing social classes and forcing all Americans to choose sides between capital and labor, helped revive the flagging labor movement. One labor leader, looking back to 1877, wrote, "Pittsburgh, with its sea of fire caused by burning freight cars, roundhouses, and depots, was the calcium light which illumined the skies of our social and industrial life."



"Waiting for the Reduction of the Army." As this 1878 cartoon from the *New York Daily Graphic* indicates, in the aftermath of the "Great Uprising," Indians, trade unionists, immigrants, and tramps were increasingly grouped together in the press as symbols of disorder and opposition to the nation's progress.