

# PHILADELPHIA LABOR DURING THE JACKSON ERA

BY WILLIAM A. SULLIVAN

FOR over a century before 1830, Philadelphia had been the undisputed center of finance and industry in the United States. Until the publication of the returns of the fifth census it had been recognized as the largest and most populous city in the nation. It was the home of some of the most prominent public figures of the day. What other city "could begin to match in talents so distinguished an array of men" as Stephen Girard and Nicholas Biddle in finance, Alexander J. Dallas and Richard Rush in statesmanship, William Tilghman and Horace Binney in law, Samuel Breck and Robert Vaux in education, and Matthew Carey in political economy.<sup>1</sup> The itinerary of almost every foreign traveler to America included a stop at Philadelphia.

Although no official census of industry and the industrial worker was taken in 1830, the journals and the newspapers of the period unfold a remarkable record of industrial development for the city. It ranked high in the production of textile goods and almost one fourth of the nation's steel production was centered there.<sup>2</sup> Hazard's *Register* for January 1828 lists 104 warping mills in operation in Philadelphia and vicinity, employing approximately 4,500 weavers, 3,000 spoolers, 2,000 bobbin winders, and 200 dyers.<sup>3</sup> The heavy industry located there included the Baldwin Locomotive works, and the Junction Car Works and Flue Mill, believed to be the largest of its kind in the United States, if not in the world.<sup>4</sup> The official returns of the Sixth Census disclosed a capital investment of \$11,587,668.00 in manufacturing establishments employing 17,005 men,<sup>5</sup> and these figures were by no means final.

<sup>1</sup> Philip Shriver Klein, *Pennsylvania Politics* (Philadelphia, 1940), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1884), III, 2251.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hazard, *The Register of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1828-1835), I, 28.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, *Manufactories and Manufacturers of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1834), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Sixth Census of the United States*, pp. 142, 143.

The story of the industrial worker on the other hand is a tale of exploitation and endless struggle. Although the editor of the *National Gazette* could write in the fall of 1828 that "we have never known Philadelphia to be better circumstanced than at the present time,"<sup>6</sup> it is scarcely credible that he spoke for the mass of carpenters, cordwainers, hod-carriers, seamstresses and woodpilars who inhabited large precincts of the city.

The bitter and cold winter of 1829 struck harshly at the laboring classes of the city.<sup>7</sup> Some of the local newspapers attributed the widespread poverty and suffering among the poor "to their own extravagance, idleness and improvidence during the spring, summer and fall when work was plentiful."<sup>8</sup> But the general unemployment and the low wages made it difficult even for the penurious to meet the rising cost of living. The price of wood had doubled since the early fall when only the rich had sufficient funds to purchase it in abundance. Wood which formerly sold at \$4.25 to \$5.50 a cord now sold from \$8.00 to \$10.00 per cord.<sup>9</sup> Thousands of laborers traveled "hundreds of miles in quest of employment on canals at 62½, 75, and 87½ cents per day, paying \$1.50 and \$2.00 per week for their board."<sup>10</sup> Expert seamstresses working early and late could make no more than \$1.12½ per week from which fifty cents was deducted for lodging, leaving 62½ cents per week or nine cents a day for food and the other necessities of life.<sup>11</sup>

There could be no doubt of it, the conditions of the workingman stood in need of improvement. Insecurity and fear dogged his footsteps. He lived in the crowded and unsanitary dwellings where no provision was made for the most elementary of man's needs. A wealthy Philadelphian, after having made an exhaustive investigation of some of the homes of the working people reported the following: Fifty-five families comprising 253 individuals inhabit thirty tenements "*that have not the accommodation of a privy for their use.*"<sup>12</sup>

The conditions under which he worked were scarcely any better. Long hours, the constant fear of unemployment, and the deprecia-

<sup>6</sup> The *National Gazette and Literary Register*, Oct. 4, 1828.

<sup>7</sup> *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser*, Feb. 27, 1829.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Carey, *A Plea for the Poor* (Philadelphia, 1829), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser*, Feb. 27, 1829.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Carey, *Essays on the Public Charities of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1829), p. 21.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Carey, *A Plea for the Poor* (Philadelphia, 1829), pp. 6, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

tion in the value of human labor weighed heavily on the mind of the worker. The disproportionate cost of manufacture and the final selling price convinced the workingman that he wasn't receiving an equitable share of the wealth which he had helped to create. Articles of clothing which cost the purchaser \$5.00 were manufactured at a total cost of \$2.00 to the proprietor. The *Mechanic's Free Press* made the following breakdown: cost of material \$1.25, cost of labor \$0.75, cost of article to purchaser \$5.00. It then went on to state that the "difference in cost of material and the price of the article must be the value of labour."<sup>13</sup>

The tyrannous and overbearing conduct of the proprietors did not aid in quelling the rising discontent among the laboring masses. One of the contemporary papers left the following description of an owner of a textile mill: "The owner of the establishment is a rich nabob who once or twice a day, rides down and struts through it for an hour or two with all the pride, pomp, and circumstance of royalty."<sup>14</sup> From the *Mechanic's Free Press*, the only paper purported to speak solely for the workingman, came ominous charges against the wealthy of the city. It accused the rich of a desire to "crush the poor man by the iron hand of despotism and when they drain all that they can from his labour, despise him as much as they do a reptile that crawls around the ground."<sup>15</sup>

Rumblings of protest and discontent over hours and wages permeated almost all groups of workers throughout the city. Carpenters, cordwainers, and mechanics complained most bitterly of their ignominious status in the community. Alarmed by the number of protests, one of the conservative papers suggested that "one of the most effectual circumstances in sustaining the rate of wages is that all useful industry should be held in respect. Labouring in the field or in a workshop cannot confer any distinction but it ought not to be a degradation."<sup>16</sup> The editorial struck closely to the heart of the issue since the problem of the working classes was social as well as economic, and enhanced issues other than a struggle for better wages and shorter hours.

It was no accident that the first labor movement in the United States which culminated in the emergence of the workingman into

<sup>13</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Aug. 25, 1828.

<sup>14</sup> *Banner of the Constitution*, Dec. 19, 1829.

<sup>15</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, April 19, 1828.

<sup>16</sup> *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser*, Aug. 18, 1830.

politics had its origin in Philadelphia since that city had the necessary aggregation of laborers dispossessed of their tools, and a factory system which made a labor movement natural and inevitable.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Philadelphia workingmen were among the first laborers of the United States to enjoy manhood suffrage.<sup>18</sup> Its workers possessed a long tradition of militant struggle and some of the earliest conflicts of labor occurred there. The Journeymen Printers of the city, according to John R. Commons, initiated the first "authentic strike" in the history of the nation in 1792,<sup>19</sup> and from that time forward until 1829 Philadelphia was in the vanguard of the American labor movement.

The forces which precipitated the Philadelphia workingmen into politics in 1827 embodied a long list of economic, political and social ills which had plagued them for many years. It was as a consequence of these political and social inequalities that the workingmen felt that they were being deprived of their rights as citizens of a democracy. Since the abstract ideal of equality had failed to be converted into concrete reality, they felt that "true democracy had been cheated of any real substantial victory."<sup>20</sup> "We are fast approaching," said the *Working Man's Advocate*, "those extremes of wealth and extravagance on the one hand, and ignorance, poverty and wretchedness on the other, which will eventually terminate in those unnatural and oppressive distinctions which exist in the corrupt governments of the old world."<sup>21</sup>

When the city councils and the state legislatures ignored their petitions for more just and equitable legislation, it merely confirmed the workers' suspicions that justice for the laborer did not emanate from those sources. All their efforts to draw the attention of the governing classes to their unsanitary and unprotected dwellings were in vain. In the spring of 1830, the *Mechanic's Free Press* wrote that "the manner in which the memorials of the working people have been first produced in the councils of the city of Philadelphia and secondly in the legislature of Pennsylvania show us clearly that we may expect neither favor nor affection, neither equal

<sup>17</sup> Frank T. Carlton, *History and Problems of Organized Labor* (Chicago, 1911), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Francis N. Thorpe, *The Federal and State Constitutions* (Washington, D. C., 1909), V, 3096.

<sup>19</sup> John R. Commons, *History of Labour* (New York, 1921), I, 109.

<sup>20</sup> John R. Commons, *History of Labour* (New York, 1921), I, 177.

<sup>21</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, Nov. 7, 1829.

laws nor justice from any political party who may ascend into power."<sup>22</sup>

There were other evils more immediate and more tangible which had a desolating effect upon the workingmen. They had seen their unions maligned as conspiracies, and their fellow workers who struck for higher wages or better working conditions thrown into prison. "If the mechanics combine to raise wages," wrote Stephen Simpson, author of the *Workingman's Manual*, "the laws punish them as conspirators against the good of society, and the dungeon awaits them as it does the robber. But the laws have made it a just and meritorious act that capitalists shall combine to strip the man of labor of his earnings, and reduce him to a dry crust and a gourd of water."<sup>23</sup>

While members of the workingmen's unions had been arrested for no other cause "than trying honestly to obtain an advance in wages,"<sup>24</sup> they saw a bill of indictment, charging some employing tailors for conspiracy to reduce wages, dismissed by the grand jury. On that grand jury sat two of the tailors against whom the indictment had been directed.<sup>25</sup> There was little hope for the workingman from the courts of justice.

Imprisonment for debt was another of those evils which fell more heavily upon the poor man than upon the rich. The debts on the whole were very small but they had an injurious and degrading effect upon the workingmen. Hazard's *Register* reported that from June 6, 1829, until February 24, 1830, 817 persons were imprisoned for debt in Philadelphia as follows:<sup>26</sup>

30	for debts below \$ 1.00
233	" " above \$ 1.00 and below \$ 5.00
174	" " above \$ 5.00 and below \$ 10.00
140	" " above \$10.00 and below \$ 20.00
142	" " above \$20.00 and below \$100.00

For 252 of these unfortunate individuals, the debts totaled \$663.00

<sup>22</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, March 14, 1829.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Simpson, *The Workingman's Manual* (Phila., 1831), p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> From the *National Laborer*, May 21, 1836, as cited in John R. Commons, *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (Cleveland, 1910), V, 359.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, June 11, 1836, as cited in John R. Commons, *Documentary History*, V, 362.

<sup>26</sup> Hazard's *Register*, V, 176.

and the costs \$448.00, and for 68 others, the debts were \$58.00 and the costs were \$120.00.

While the poor man languished in prison for some trifling debt, he lost not only his source of income but he was also forced to depend upon charity for the necessities of life. Thus indisposed, he often fell into the hands of an unscrupulous creditor and was a valuable pawn during the elections. "The blessed law (if law it is)," wrote the *Working Man's Advocate*, "gives the monied man an influence in our elections that no other man could possess."

The most odious aspect of this law was the degrading influence that it had upon the working members of the city. In an address to the city and country conventions of the workingmen of Pennsylvania the speaker asked, "How long fellow citizens, shall the fair page of our history be blemished by this foul blot? How long shall it be the policy of our government to add oppression and insult to the wounded feelings of the unfortunate man?"<sup>27</sup>

Of all the evils against which the workingmen of the city raised their voices in protest, their loudest and most persistent complaint was directed against the highly partial and totally inadequate system of education provided for their children. Private schools for the wealthy were provided, but for the sons of the poor there existed only the detested charity schools.<sup>28</sup> Under such a system only the poor were taken care of, however inadequately. Thousands of children whose parents were unable to provide a good private education for them, and whose standing in the community excluded them from taking advantage of the benefits of the poor law, were totally neglected.<sup>29</sup>

As in the case of these other evils against which the workingmen of Philadelphia protested, their struggles for free, tax supported schools reflected their fight for social and political equality rather than economic equality. They feared the degradation of their status in society and felt that their fundamental liberties were jeopardized because of the present unfair system of education. "Lack of education deprives the poor from representation in government," wrote the *Mechanic's Free Press* in 1829.<sup>30</sup> The workingmen believed that the future of a free and democratic gov-

<sup>27</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, Nov. 1, 1830.

<sup>28</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, July 10, 1830.

<sup>29</sup> Hazard's *Register*, IV, 293. Stephen Simpson, *Workingman's Manual*, p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Oct. 3, 1829.

ernment hinged on this issue. A committee of workingmen investigating the state of public education in Pennsylvania made the following statement which expressed accurately the prevailing attitude toward this problem. "The original element of despotism is a monopoly of talent, which consigns the multitude to comparative ignorance, and secures the balance of knowledge on the side of the rich and the rulers—this monopoly should be broken up, and . . . the means of equal knowledge (the only security for equal liberty), should be rendered, by legal provision, the common property of all classes."<sup>31</sup>

It was infuriating for the poor of the city to see public funds expended for the improvement of colleges and universities which obviously did not provide for the education of their sons. "Funds thus expended," wrote the *Mechanic's Free Press*, "may serve to engender an aristocracy of talent, and place knowledge, the chief element of power, in the hands of the privileged few; but can never secure the common prosperity of a nation nor confer intellectual as well as political equality on a people."<sup>32</sup>

The vigor displayed by the Philadelphia workingmen in their fight against the inadequate educational facilities for the poor brought upon themselves attacks not only from the conservative local papers but also from papers outside the city. Their whole program was dubbed "agrarianism" by the *National Gazette*.<sup>33</sup> And the *Southern Review* felt that nothing good could result from such a program. "Is this the way to produce producers?" it asked. "To make every child in the state a literary character would not be a good qualification for those who must live by manual labor,"<sup>34</sup> added the *Review*.

Humanitarians joined in this struggle for school reform, and some of the most prominent personages of Philadelphia were to be found in the forefront of this movement. Robert Vaux, John Sergeant and Governor Wolf, all influential in the affairs of the city and state, devoted much of their time to the reformation of the public school system of Pennsylvania. But in evaluating the forces responsible for educational reform, F. T. Carlton states, "The

<sup>31</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Mar. 6, 1830.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Mar. 6, 1830.

<sup>33</sup> From the *National Gazette* as quoted in the *Working Man's Advocate*, Aug. 28, 1830.

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous, "Agrarian Educational Systems," *The Southern Review*, VI (1828), 16.

vitality of the movement for tax-supported schools was derived, not from the humanitarian leaders, but from the growing class of wage-earners."<sup>35</sup>

Undoubtedly, of all the injustices and the iniquities about which they grumbled, the most pressing were the long hours of work. The accepted working day was from sun until dark, a system, according to Helen Sumner, that had been carried over from agriculture.<sup>36</sup> One paper reported that men worked from 4:30 a. m. to 8:00 p. m. during the three hottest months of summer, but that during the short days of winter they were without work.<sup>37</sup>

If there was any one single item which could be designated as the immediate cause for the rise of labor as an organized force in politics, it was this issue of the long working day. An excerpt from the Preamble of the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations read:

Is it equitable that we should waste the energies of our minds and bodies, and be placed in a situation of such unceasing exertion and servility as must necessarily, in time, render the benefits of our liberal institutions to us inaccessible and useless in order that the products of our labour may be accumulated by a few into vast pernicious masses, calculated to prepare the minds of the possessors for the exercise of lawless rule and despotism, to overawe the meagre multitude, and frighten away that shadow of freedom which still lingers among us?<sup>38</sup>

Out of this growing demand for leisure time by the workingmen came the ten-hour-day issue in subsequent political campaigns.

There were many other live issues against which the voices of the workingmen were heard in protest. The hated militia system, which required that every able-bodied male with the exception of those employed in public service be enrolled in the state militia, incurred the wrath of most of the workingmen of the city.<sup>39</sup> What purpose was served by this annual collecting of the "the depraved,

<sup>35</sup> Frank T. Carlton, "Economic Influence Upon Educational Progress in the United States 1820-1850," *University of Wisconsin Bulletin*, No. 221, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> Commons, *History of Labour*, I, 171.

<sup>37</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, May 7, 1831.

<sup>38</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Oct. 25, 1828.

<sup>39</sup> From the "Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania," pp. 231-247, as quoted in Commons, *History of Labour*, I, 222.



and the vicious, . . . contributing largely to a continuance of their degradation," asked the *Mechanic's Free Press*.<sup>40</sup>

Equally hated by them was the lottery system, which, according to one of the spokesmen of the workingmen, "had been the fruitful parent of misery and want to numberless heart-broken wives and helpless children, who have beheld the means of their subsistence lavished in the purchase of lottery tickets."<sup>41</sup>

In addition the workingmen fought the monopolies which were insidiously gaining exclusive control of the "wealth creating powers of modern mechanism."<sup>42</sup> "And the pernicious operating of paper money" which, in the minds of the workingmen, was closely associated with the monopolies, received the scorching criticism of the spokesmen for their cause.<sup>43</sup>

Coupled with the many broad and humanitarian issues which drove the workingmen into politics, there were some immediate grievances which they hoped to remedy through the election of their own candidates. They demanded "hydrant water for the accommodation of the poor" in those districts of the city where the workers lived.<sup>44</sup> The "failure of the city to clean the streets in the remote sections of the city where the workingmen reside"<sup>45</sup> merely added to the heap of injustices against which they fought.

John R. Commons very adequately sums up labor's struggles in this period when he says: "In general, the workingmen of this period were ardent champions of all reforms, from temperance and the abolition of prison labour, lotteries, and capital punishment, to the reform of taxation and a simpler and less expensive system of legal procedure, and many of these measures found their first friends in this labour movement."<sup>46</sup> On the masthead of the last copies of the *Mechanic's Free Press* were listed the following reforms championed by the Workingmen's Party:

Abolition of Imprisonment for Debt  
Abolition of all licensed monopolies  
An entire revision or abolition of the present militia system

<sup>40</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, July 10, 1830.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 25, 1830.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1828.

<sup>43</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Dec. 13, 1828; Stephen Simpson, *Workingman's Manual*, pp. 88, 89.

<sup>44</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Oct. 10, 1829.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Commons, *History of Labour*, I, 31.

A less expensive law system  
 Equal taxation on property  
 No legislation on religion  
 A district system of elections.<sup>47</sup>

Inarticulate and unorganized, the workingmen of Philadelphia were no serious threat to the existing order. As long as they conducted their struggles for political and social equality through the various local unions which existed prior to 1827, they were incapable of achieving any of their most cherished reforms.

The year 1827 marked a sharp turning point in the history of labor in the United States. The first signs of labor unrest in the city appeared in the spring of that year with the publication of a pamphlet describing "the evils under which the working people are laboring and a plan for their efficient removal."<sup>48</sup> It went on to add that the blessing of universal suffrage was useless to the worker as long as he possessed insufficient knowledge to make proper use of it. Scientific inventions and improvements might have been instrumental in reducing the hours of work from twelve to ten, to eight, to six, and so on "until the development of science [had] reduced human labour to its lowest terms," instead of its increasing the many difficulties which beset the laborer.<sup>49</sup>

Not long after the appearance of this pamphlet the Journeymen Carpenters of Philadelphia struck, in June 1827, for a ten-hour day.<sup>50</sup> For too long a time the house carpenters of the city had suffered "under a grievous and slave like system of labour," stated the resolution which set forth the demands of the strikers.<sup>51</sup> As soon as the resolution had been made available to the public, the Master Carpenters of the city rallied to the defense of the employers. They declared that the house carpenters were desirous of robbing their employers of "about one fifth part of their usual time" when they approved certain resolutions "not to labour longer than from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the evening."<sup>52</sup> Not only did the Master Carpenters deplore "the formation of any society that has a tendency to subvert good order, and coerce

<sup>47</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Mar. 19, 1831.

<sup>48</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, June 21, 1828.

<sup>49</sup> John R. Commons, *History of Labour*, I, 186.

<sup>50</sup> John R. Commons, *Documentary History*, V, 75.

<sup>51</sup> From the *Democratic Press*, June 14, 1827, as quoted in Commons, *Documentary History*, V, 80.

<sup>52</sup> *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser*, June 18, 1827.

or mislead those who have been industriously pursuing their avocation and honestly maintaining their families," but also declared that "the present price per day given to Journeymen Carpenters, is as high as can be afforded by their employers."<sup>53</sup>

The general unrest spread to the other labor organizations within the city and in the latter half of 1827 the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations was formed.<sup>54</sup> Helen Sumner credits the ten-hour strike of the carpenters as the inspiration for the formation of the city central organization. "Out of the ten-hour movement," states Miss Sumner, "grew the first union of all the organized workmen of any city."<sup>55</sup> This organization voiced the same complaints which had been made by the individual unions, but now it was the unified voice, not only of the carpenters but also of the bricklayers, glaziers, painters, typographers and other trade societies.

Not long after the formation of the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations, the *Mechanic's Free Press* made its appearance in Philadelphia.<sup>56</sup> Now, with a paper to speak for them and with an organization to guide them, the workingmen of the city girded themselves for political action. Thwarted in all their attempts to achieve reform through the old and established political parties the workingmen decided to push forward their own candidates for the various offices of the city government. In the summer of 1828 the *Mechanic's Free Press* reported: "At a very large and respectable meeting of Journeymen House Carpenters held on Tuesday evening, July 1st, at the District Court House, . . . the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations is entering into measures for procuring a nomination of candidates for legislative and other public offices, who will support the interest of the working classes."<sup>57</sup>

The workingmen looked with a jaundiced eye to the important city council offices and the state legislative posts which heretofore had been dominated by "ambitious and designing men" who had secured their influential positions through an "injudicious use, or criminal abuse of the elective franchise."<sup>58</sup> They too wanted their

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Commons, *History of Labour*, I, 189.

<sup>55</sup> Commons, *Documentary History*, V, 84.

<sup>56</sup> The date of the first number of *Mechanic's Free Press* which is preserved in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania is April 19, 1828.

<sup>57</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, July 5, 1828.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, May 31, 1828.

share of the elective offices in the city. The city legislature consisted of twenty Common Council members and fifteen Select Council members. Members of the former were elected annually while the members of the latter served for three years and vacated their seats in rotation so that one third of them were elected each year. The executive authority was vested in a mayor who was selected at a joint meeting of the two councils.<sup>59</sup>

Why should not the workingmen nominate and elect candidates of their own choosing for the various elective posts in the city? It was a well known fact, reported *Mechanic's Free Press*, that "the interest of the labourer had never been efficiently recognized by legislators."<sup>60</sup> The workingmen caught in the swirl and excitement of the election day would blindly support their favorites at the polls only to see a deterioration in their influence as a body and "with it a decline in their rights and privileges."<sup>61</sup> At a general meeting of the "Mechanics and Workingmen" of the city and county of Philadelphia, the workingmen decided "to take the management of their own interests, as a class, into their own immediate keeping . . . and to support such men only for the City Councils and State Legislature, as shall pledge themselves in their official capacity to support the interests and claims of the Working Classes."<sup>62</sup>

In the fall of 1828, when the nomination of the Jackson and Anti-Jackson parties appeared in the city papers, there also appeared a list of candidates supported by a new party, the Working Men's party.<sup>63</sup> This event did not pass unnoticed by the two major parties which previously had monopolized the politics of not only Philadelphia, but of the whole country. "The leaders of the two great political parties," wrote the *Mechanic's Free Press*, "appear to feel a deep interest in the present effort of the working people to form themselves into a distinct party. The friends of the Administration . . . have tried every means to divert their attentions and draw them within the sphere of its own influence. In one thing both parties agree: their dread of our forming a party distinct from and independent of themselves."<sup>64</sup> The Federalists and the Jack-

<sup>59</sup> J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1884), III, 1703.

<sup>60</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, May 30, 1829.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 16, 1828.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Poulson's Daily American Advertiser*, Sept. 30, 1828.

<sup>64</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Sept. 28, 1828.

sonians showed more than a passive interest in this party. In the late summer of 1828, when the formation of the Working Men's Party was being discussed, the *Mechanic's Free Press* reported an "attempt made by certain lawyers and speculators, to distract the meetings lately held for the purpose of taking into consideration the propriety of nominating suitable persons to represent our interests in the different legislative bodies."<sup>65</sup>

Despite strong opposition, men nominated and supported by the Working Men's Party appeared on the city ticket for four years. From the fall of 1828 until the fall of 1831, candidates were nominated and campaign speeches were issued by the workingmen.<sup>66</sup> They openly proclaimed their allegiance to the worker's cause and pledged themselves "to promote the interests and support the claims of the Working People."<sup>67</sup>

Scarcely had the Working Men's Party been launched than it became a pawn in the political struggles between the Jackson and the Anti-Jackson forces. The two major parties displayed a novel respect for this third force which appeared in the election of 1828, and the *Mechanic's Free Press* reported, "that both the great parties had attached to their carriages . . . these words 'The Working Man's ticket,' coupled with the names of Jackson and Adams."<sup>68</sup>

In spite of the generally accepted notion that the mechanics and workingmen gave their support to Jackson, and made the Jackson party their party,<sup>69</sup> a survey of the local and national elections as they were revealed in the contemporary press would readily disabuse us of this idea. It is revealed there, that Philadelphia, the second largest city in the union and possessing a large number of enfranchised workers, voted far more consistently for Anti-Jackson candidates.<sup>70</sup>

Moreover an analysis of the Working Men's Party reveals that both in its composition and in its predilections, it was amazingly regular in its support of the Anti-Jackson forces. In the election of 1829, the only year in which the Working Men's Party held the balance of power, the Federalists benefited most. After the remarkable showing in the election of 1829, the Working Men's

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 23, 1828.

<sup>66</sup> John R. Commons, *Documentary History*, V, 76.

<sup>67</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Aug. 16, 1829.

<sup>68</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Oct. 18, 1828.

<sup>69</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *New Viewpoints in American History* (New York, 1922), p. 209.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945), p. 143.

Party steadily declined in influence and by 1832 had disappeared from the Philadelphia political scene.<sup>71</sup>

The Working Men's Party in Philadelphia was shortlived and it never enjoyed any great measure of political success in the city. It never placed in office any candidate who was only on the Working Men's ticket, nor did it ever succeed in attracting any large segment of the Philadelphia workingmen to it. In spite of its apparent failure, the party was not wholly unsuccessful during its brief career. "Many of the reforms called for by the Working Men," declared the *Working Man's Advocate* in 1830, are now acknowledged to be just and reasonable, and are even advocated by several of the presses which have hitherto supported the party in power, and there is little doubt that the ensuing session of the legislature will relieve them from a share of their oppressive burdens."<sup>72</sup>

Long before the organization of any political party, the workingmen of Philadelphia had been urging the passage of legislation for the establishment of free tax-supported public schools. And in April 1831, while the Working Men's Party was still in existence, the *Mechanic's Free Press* reported: "The act providing for the establishment of a general system of education, was this day returned to the House of Representatives from the Senate, with sundry amendments which were concurred in by the house."<sup>73</sup> In spite of the acts of the legislature of Pennsylvania and the recommendations of a long line of governors, it was not until 1834 that an effective public school law was passed.<sup>74</sup> John R. Commons, in recognition of the great debt we owe to the early activities of organized labor for our public school system, says: "For our great public school system of today . . . we owe a large if unrecognized debt of gratitude to this first effort of the working class to exercise independently its citizenship."<sup>75</sup>

Much of the agitation for the abolition of imprisonment for debt came from the Working Men's Party. In June 1833, the Pennsyl-

<sup>71</sup> For a more detailed account of this phase of the problem see William A. Sullivan, "Did Labor Support Jackson?" *Political Science Quarterly* (Dec. 1947), LXII, 569-580.

<sup>72</sup> *Working Man's Advocate*, Dec. 11, 1830, as quoted in John R. Commons, *Documentary History*, V, 182.

<sup>73</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, April 1, 1831, as quoted in the *Working Man's Advocate*, April 9, 1831.

<sup>74</sup> Isaac Sharpless, *Two Centuries of Pennsylvania History* (Philadelphia, 1900), p. 304.

<sup>75</sup> John R. Commons, *History of Labour*, I, 327.

vania state legislature approved "an act to abolish imprisonment for debt and other purposes."<sup>76</sup> Although the Working Men's Party was no longer in existence when the law was passed, and although a large and growing body of reformers advocated the measure, it was largely the impetus given it by the workingmen which hastened the passage of the law.

A lien law for laborers was an old issue with the workers of Philadelphia. Before the organization of the Working Men's Party, agitation for the law had been carried on through the various trade unions which were in existence. It was shortly after the formation of this party that a mechanic's lien law was passed. In the spring of 1831, the *Mechanic's Free Press* reported: "We are happy to find that the lien law has passed which gives to the mechanics, journeymen and labourers a security for the labour expended in improving our cities, and adding to the comforts of their inhabitants."<sup>77</sup> In his study of organized labor in New York, Frank T. Carlton states, "it was clearly for the purpose of placating the workingmen that the measure [mechanic's lien law] was supported and pushed through by Tammany."<sup>78</sup> One can readily assume that the Philadelphia workingmen exerted a similar influence on the Pennsylvania state legislature.

The demand for a ten-hour day was the immediate issue which sent the workingmen into politics and it was to be a perennial plank in the platform of the Working Men's Party. Before any action had been taken to alleviate the long hours of work, the Working Men's Party had disappeared from the Philadelphia scene. In the summer of 1835, it was reported that the "city council passed the following resolution: That the hours of labor of the workingmen under authorities of the city corporation shall be from 6 to 6 during the summer season allowing one hour for breakfast and one hour for dinner."<sup>79</sup> By 1840 the ten-hour day had become general throughout the United States through the action of President Van Buren who established the ten-hour day on all federal government work.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> *Nile's Register*, Vol. 44, 295.

<sup>77</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Mar. 19, 1831.

<sup>78</sup> Frank T. Carlton, *History and Problems of Organized Labor* (Chicago, 1911), p. 34.

<sup>79</sup> *Labor Troubles in Pennsylvania*, p. 263.

<sup>80</sup> "By direction of the President of the United States 'all public establishments will hereafter be regulated as to working hours, by the ten-hour system.'" As quoted from George McNeill, *The Labor Movement: The Problem of Today* (New York, 1887), p. 90.

George McNeill, a well-known labor leader, was convinced that it was the agitation of organized labor that induced President Van Buren to issue that famous proclamation.<sup>81</sup> President Van Buren acted "after a spirited threat of political action on the part of organized labor and political managers in touch with labor," asserts Mary R. Beard in her study of the American labor movement.<sup>82</sup>

Labor had won. Its program had been incorporated into the platform of the two major parties. And today those radical reforms which the workingmen of the 1830's advocated are accepted as a minimum basis of labor's demand in a capitalist society.

<sup>81</sup> "Organization and agitation on this subject," states George McNeill, "finally attained such magnitude as to warrant the President of the U. S., Martin Van Buren, in issuing a proclamation establishing the ten-hour system for all employees of the U. S. government in the Navy Yards."

<sup>82</sup> Mary R. Beard, *American Labor Movement* (New York, 1928), p. 39.