

## A DECADE OF LABOR STRIFE\*

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IN LABOR'S struggle for economic and social equality often its most effective and always its most dramatic weapon is the strike. The strike is an old instrument, as old as history itself, for ameliorating working conditions and effecting a wage-bargain.<sup>1</sup> In colonial America, strikes and concerted action by combinations of workmen for enhancing their status in society were rare, almost unheard of. Scarcity of labor, the comparatively high wages, and Colonial law combined to deter them from uniting for common action.<sup>2</sup> But after the War for Independence labor strife and unrest became increasingly more evident, and the Pennsylvania wage-earners were among the first in America to seize upon the strike as a means for improving their lot.<sup>3</sup>

Skilled artisans, organized into trade unions, dominated the labor movement in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and of these, the journeymen cordwainers were the most successful in pressing their aggressive demands for higher wages. At Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, they had wrung successive increases from their employers, raising the price of making boots as much as \$3.00.<sup>4</sup> Frustrated in most of their attempts to resist the demands of their

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<sup>1</sup>In 1490 B. C. the Hebrew brickmakers of Egypt went on a strike. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (New York, 1911), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946), pp. 44, 137.

<sup>3</sup>One of the foremost students of the American labor movement stated that the first strike of wage-earners in America occurred among the printers of Philadelphia in the year 1786 for a minimum weekly wage of \$6.00. John R. Commons, *History of Labour in the United States* (New York, 1918), Vol. I, p. 25. (Hereinafter cited as Commons, *History of Labour*.) A more recent study has pointed out that there was an earlier strike among the journeymen tailors of New York in 1768. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup>John R. Commons, *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (Cleveland, 1910), Vol. III, IV. (Hereinafter cited as Commons, *Documentary History*.) See *Aurora and General Advertiser*, Nov. 27, 1805. Also, Erasmus Wilson, *Standard History of Pittsburgh* (Chicago, 1898), and Meyer A. Sanders: Labor Ch. VII, p. 123, in George E. Kelly: *Allegheny County Pittsburgh* (Allegheny County Sesqui-Centennial Committee, 1938).

journeymen, the master cordwainers turned to the courts and there found an effective instrument to check the aggressions of their employees.<sup>5</sup>

Other trades followed the lead of the working shoemakers. A feeble drive was made by the journeymen printers of Philadelphia for an increase, but it ended in dismal failure.<sup>6</sup> The journeymen curriers with unknown results sought to raise the price of their work.<sup>7</sup> At Lancaster it was reported that the carpenters and weavers were organizing to press their requests for higher prices for their work.<sup>8</sup> And at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, all the carpenters were out because of an attempt to reduce their wages.<sup>9</sup>

In the latter years of this period new issues which were to characterize the labor movement throughout the Jackson Era appeared. The agitation for higher wages, although never forgotten, would for a brief moment be subordinated to the struggle for the ten-hour day. The gigantic army of the unskilled workers, which would give inspiration and dynamic leadership to the labor movement, showed signs of shrugging off its lethargy. Sometime in 1822, the journeymen millwrights and machine workers of Philadelphia met one day in a tavern and resolved that ten hours of labor for one day was sufficient. Twenty-nine hundred handloom weavers in the city turned out for higher wages in the winter of 1825.<sup>10</sup> Thus the lines on which labor-management struggles would be waged for the next decade were clearly marked out.

The political democracy which ushered in the Jackson era had its repercussions in the labor movement. The skilled and the unskilled, the men and women workers, all on one occasion or another expressed their disapproval of existing conditions. Shorter hours, and Sunday work, higher wages and the union shop caused many bitter conflicts between capital and labor. Provocative efforts by the entrepreneurs to lower wages, the speed up, and the introduc-

<sup>5</sup> See Commons, *Documentary History*, Vol. III, IV.

<sup>6</sup> Ethelbert Stewart, *Documentary History of Early Organizations of Printers* (Indianapolis, 1907), p. 28. See also George A. Stevens, *New York Typographical Union No. 6* (Albany, 1913), p. 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Aurora and General Advertiser*, Nov. 9, 1803. See Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York, 1947), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> *Lancaster Journal*, April 15, 1813.

<sup>9</sup> *Letters from Commandant of Philadelphia Navy Yard 1815-1821*, Dec. 17, 1821.

<sup>10</sup> John Bach McMaster, *History of the People of the United States* (New York, 1884-1913). Vol. V, p. 84. *New York Evening Post*, Apr. 29, 1835.

tion of new machinery often initiated a spirited resistance by the wage-earners. But the disputes over hours and wages overshadowed all others in the "Age of Jackson."

Probably nowhere can a better expression of this insurgent democracy be found, than in the struggles of the factory operatives and the manual laborers to raise their status in society. In the fall of 1828, the cotton spinners of Philadelphia and its suburbs struck against a proposed reduction of twenty-five per cent in their wages.<sup>11</sup> They complained of the "avarice of their employers, who are attempting to reduce the prices of labour, although they already accumulate in the form of profits *more* than is obtained by the journeymen as wages."<sup>12</sup> While the spinner could make only "from \$7.50 to \$8.50 per week . . . by working the full period of twelve hours," it was asserted that, "in doing this he actually earned for the millowners, from \$40 to \$50 dollars per week."<sup>13</sup> As the strike progressed, feelings between the strikers and those who persisted in working grew taut. At Norristown a few children sneered at a scab and were taken to court and charged with assault.<sup>14</sup> Three striking spinners at Manayunk were bound over by the Philadelphia County Court to keep the peace because it was alleged that they had threatened strike breakers.<sup>15</sup> Despite a stand out of over three months and financial aid from the journeymen carpenters and cordwainers, the spinners were compelled to accept a reduction of ten per cent on their present wages.<sup>16</sup> This marked the beginning of the aggressions by the employers and within two years successive reductions totaling thirty per cent had been imposed upon the factory operatives.<sup>17</sup>

In the summer of 1833, the factory owners once again decreed a reduction of about twenty per cent in the wages of the factory hands.<sup>18</sup> Both factions in this dispute exhibited a keen awareness of the necessity of crystallizing public opinion in their favor. The strikers turned to the press to plead their cause before the people. They exposed the degrading and iniquitous system of labor which

<sup>11</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Nov. 15, 1828, April 17, 1830.

<sup>12</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Dec. 20, 1828.

<sup>13</sup> As cited in John R. Commons, *History of Labour*, I, p. 418.

<sup>14</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Nov. 15, 1828.

<sup>15</sup> *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania*, Vol. III, p. 39, Jan. 17, 1829.

<sup>16</sup> *Mechanic's Free Press*, Dec. 20, 1828, April 17, 1830.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Germantown Telegraph*, Aug. 7, 1833; *Daily Chronicle*, Aug. 8, 1833.

compelled them to work from thirteen to fourteen hours per day for weekly wages which averaged \$4.33.<sup>19</sup> With sentiments, which today would stigmatize them as Marxists, the factory workers charged "that as the poor are sinking, the rich are rising." "Are we so debased," they asked, "as to be afraid to assert our rights, the rights of freemen, to break the shackles of oppression?"<sup>20</sup> Although an old biblical maxim stated that "he that will not work, neither let him eat," the operatives recognized that, "in the present state of society, it happens that many contrive to eat at the expense of those who work."<sup>21</sup>

Under the pseudonym "Observer," there appeared in the *Germantown Telegraph* articles in defense of the mill owners. The operatives were convinced, however, that the anonymous writer was a paid propagandist drawn from the ranks of the factory hands.<sup>22</sup> This apologist for the owners wrote platitudes on the equality of the rich and the poor and hailed the virtues of the individual contract. He asserted that the employers exercise "no kind of control" over the employees. "He [the worker] is perfectly at liberty to reject or accept [any] offer, and if he can get higher wages elsewhere, he will, and is right in so doing," insisted this spokesman for the factory owners.<sup>23</sup>

Answering this infantile argument of the "Observer," a worker reminded him of the enormous economic power which the owners possessed and of the "blacklist." "If he [the worker] is honest enough to proclaim his wrongs, and assert his rights," the factory operative pointed out, "he is excluded by the proscription from getting employment in any other of these slave shops, and being unable from want of physical strength . . . to follow out-door labor, he becomes a burden to his friends, his spirit is broken, and he sinks into the grave another victim of our *equal laws*."<sup>24</sup>

Cognizant of their weakness and of the difficulty of sustaining a lengthy strike, the factory operatives resolved that a "*permanent* union be established amongst them."<sup>25</sup> Inexperienced in organiza-

<sup>19</sup> *Germantown Telegraph*, Aug. 28, 1833.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct. 30, 1833.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 4, 1833.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 18, 1833.

<sup>25</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, Aug. 28, 1833.

tional activity and ignorant of trade union rules, they addressed an appeal to the different Trades' Unions throughout the United States requesting information concerning their regulations.<sup>26</sup> This appeal resulted in the formation of the ambitious but short-lived "Trades' Union of Pennsylvania."<sup>27</sup> In an address to the public, the working people of Manayunk explained their action:

We have long suffered the evils of being divided in our sentiments but the universal oppression that we now all feel, have roused us to a sense of our oppressed condition, and we are now determined to be oppressed no longer.<sup>28</sup>

Whether the immediate object of the strike was obtained is not known. Though the factory workers might have failed in resisting a reduction in their wages, the turn out was not a complete failure. It had provided inspiration for the trades' union movement of Philadelphia and had introduced to the workers, John Ferral, a hand-loom weaver, who was to become one of the foremost labor leaders in the United States during the "Age of Jackson."

Prophetically the factory workers during the strike of 1833 had expressed the fear "that the attempted reduction in our wages is but the forerunner of greater evils, and greater oppressions."<sup>29</sup> To their dismay, the mill owners of Manayunk and Blockley, early in March 1834, ordered another reduction of twenty-five per cent on their present wages.<sup>30</sup> A strike of the operatives was the inevitable result, and it occurred during the bank war and the hard times of 1834.<sup>31</sup> The workers appointed a relief committee—three men and two women—to solicit aid for the widows and orphans "who have been unable to save anything from their miserable earnings and are now destitute of the means of subsistence."<sup>32</sup> A picket line was organized and the strikers showed remarkable solidarity

<sup>26</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, Aug. 22, 1833.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 24, 1833. The Union was formed on the ninth of September at Manayunk. It was composed of delegates from Blockley, Gulf Mill, Brandywine, Pike Creek, Roseville, Haddington, Haverford, Norristown, and Manayunk, all chiefly manufacturing districts. See Commons, *History of Labour*, I, p. 374.

<sup>29a</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 28, 1833.

<sup>30</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, Aug. 28, 1833.

<sup>31</sup> *Germantown Telegraph*, March 19, 1834; *The Man*, April 15, 1834.

<sup>32</sup> *The Man*, April 15, 1834.

<sup>33</sup> *The Man*, April 15, 1834.

in the crisis. One owner made an effort to coax the workers back with a fifteen per cent reduction but the strikers were firm.<sup>33</sup>

Determined to break the strike, the employers hired strike breakers and secured police protection for the scabs.<sup>34</sup> At a public meeting held May 9, 1834, the factory workers indignantly declared, "that we, the free citizens of this republic, deprecate with well merited contempt, the attempted bullying of the working people, into a reduction of their wages."<sup>35</sup> Not even the clergy were immune from this struggle and their voices were raised in behalf of the owners. The operatives had only pity for these misguided religious pastors, "from whom better might be expected," and who used their influence, "to force some [workers] to go to work at the reduced prices."<sup>36</sup> But the strike was broken, and the strikers were urged "to use every exertion on their part, immediately to procure such work elsewhere as will suit each one of them individually."<sup>37</sup> Some of the hands returned to work at an advance of five per cent but the remainder, it was understood, "are likely to procure work elsewhere."<sup>38</sup>

In the following year the factory owners persisted in their efforts to reduce the wages of their employees. At Norristown, in the spring of 1835, one employer proposed to discharge all his old hands and secure new ones from another state. This was to be accomplished "by such a reduction in the prices of wages, as would be tantamount to an actual discharge of those at the present in his employ."<sup>39</sup> "What rendered the act particularly censurable as well as uncharitable," remarked the *Germantown Telegraph*, "was the fact, that those now in his employ, were principally constituted of persons who were brought up to the business at that establishment."<sup>40</sup> This same proprietor defrauded his workers by paying them in worn-out, defective pieces of coin, whereby he made a profit of ten to fifteen per cent.<sup>41</sup> The citizens of Norristown almost unan-

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, April 22, 1835. See also John B. Andrews and W. D. P. Bliss, *History of Women in Trade Unions*, Senate Document, No. 645, 61st Congress, 2d Session (Washington, 1911).

<sup>34</sup> *The Man*, April 29, 1834.

<sup>35</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, May 9, 1834.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *The Man*, May 29, 1834.

<sup>38</sup> *Germantown Telegraph*, April 15, 1835.

<sup>39</sup> *Germantown Telegraph*, April 15, 1835.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

imously condemned this high-handed operator and an aroused citizenry compelled him to continue with the old hands and at the old prices.<sup>42</sup>

Alarmed by these continued assaults on their wage standards, the hand-loom weavers of the city and county of Philadelphia met in May. At this meeting it was resolved that, "The Trades' Union Societies are the only means by which the laborers can evade the crushing grasp of unfeeling employers."<sup>43</sup> John Ferral, one of the organizers of the meeting, anticipating the Marxists by many years, declared " 'War to the Knife' is the only security for the laborer in his contest with capital."<sup>44</sup> It was agreed then and there to "unite under the designation of 'The Handloom Weavers' Association of the city and county of Philadelphia."<sup>45</sup>

While most of the wage-earners in 1835 were aggressively pushing forward their demands for a ten-hour day, the textile workers were still struggling against wage reductions. It is true that in June, the factory hands at Manayunk did manage to secure an "agreement with the proprietors . . . that their day's service shall close at a somewhat earlier hour,"<sup>46</sup> but this brief reference is the only indication that these unskilled workers were in a position to demand a shorter work day. In the summer, the tailoresses, seamstresses, binders, folders and stock workers of Philadelphia turned out for an advance in wages and met with indifferent success.<sup>47</sup> Late in the fall of that year, the weavers once again were compelled to resist an attempted reduction of their wages.<sup>48</sup> Several hundred strikers paraded through the streets of Philadelphia with music playing and banners flying. The National Trades' Union, whose president was John Ferral, promised financial aid, and the Trades' Union of Newark pledged "individually and collectively to make the most strenuous efforts to assist them in throwing off a yoke which no Republican ought to submit to."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *The Man*, May 8, 1835; *Pennsylvanian*, May 15, 1835.

<sup>44</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, May 15, 1835.

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

<sup>46</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, June 4, 1835. *Germantown Telegraph*, June 24, 1835.

<sup>47</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, June 10, 27, 1835; *Republican Standard and Downingtown Journal*, June 30, 1835.

<sup>48</sup> *National Trades' Union*, Oct. 31, 1835; microfilm copies from the Wisconsin State Historical Society in the possession of Columbia University. See *Niles Register*, Oct. 10, 1835, Vol. 49, p. 84. Niles says that the turn out was for higher wages.

<sup>49</sup> *National Trades' Union*, Oct. 31, 1835.

The year 1836 was a year of labor unrest, not only in Pennsylvania but throughout the United States. Skyrocketing prices, which accompanied the business prosperity of the previous year, seriously menaced the living standards of the wage-earners. Although most of the trades were successfully contending for higher wages the textile workers continued to be on the defensive resisting the aggressions of their employers. At Fairmount the hand-loom weavers vainly fought to resist wage reductions totaling twenty-five per cent.<sup>50</sup> Throughout the fall, intermittent strikes broke out among these workers generally because of the unwillingness of the mill owners to bargain in good faith.<sup>51</sup> At Norristown, the female operatives were out on strike because of an effort by the employers not only to reduce the price of their labor, but also to introduce the speedup.<sup>52</sup>

At Pittsburgh, it was the ten hour issue which agitated the factory hands. In October, the Pittsburgh press reported that "a number of workmen have been discharged by their employers" for assembling to advocate the shorter workday.<sup>53</sup> "Sixty hours in a week, or ten hours each day is sufficient for any one to work, more especially for the young and tender," contended the operatives. They pointed out that "In England, where a Monarch reigns, and the Nobility its Law-Makers, children are protected by a special law of the Realm."<sup>54</sup> "It is not for the *men* we wish the time of labour reduced," explained the strikers; "we plead for the *poor children, male and female.*" They found it difficult to reconcile

<sup>50</sup> *National Laborer*, Sept. 10, Nov. 12, Nov. 26, 1836. It was reported the hand-loom weavers had established a co-operative association.

<sup>51</sup> *National Laborer*, Sept. 19, 26, 1836. The Fairmont Trade Association reported that an "agreement was entered into and settled by Mr. S. McBride, meeting with a committee from the hands appointed for that purpose at a general meeting. . . . On the morning of the 22nd inst. the mill went into operation, the hands cheerfully joined their work, satisfied that although they had lost a little time they had succeeded in maintaining their prices, and were, if possible, more firmly united than before the strike took place; but what was their surprise to hear that those of the men who had given notice to quit the factory previous to the strike if the prices were not raised, but intended to continue if they were, that they were all to be paid off and discharged immediately, which has actually been done."

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 24, Oct. 15, 1836; Oct. 22, 1836. The factory operatives complained that the employer having reduced their prices far below those paid in other places, resorted to a sneaking mode of increasing the quantity of their labor. They were paid a certain price for what is called a "cut" and the respectable employer, without intimation, added to it two or three yards, thus compelling them to perform additional labor without compensation.

<sup>53</sup> *Allegheny Democrat and Working-Man's Advocate*, Oct. 21, 1836.

<sup>54</sup> *Allegheny Democrat and Working-Man's Advocate*, Oct. 7, 1836.



the altruistic actions of many of their employers "who [gave] hundreds of dollars to 'missionary societies' and other 'benevolent purposes' " while at the same time they kept "poor little children in servile bondage, from 13½ to 14 hours."<sup>55</sup>

Erroneously they likened their status to that of a slave or even worse. In an address to the citizens of the city the factory workers declared, "we consider the *white* children that are employed in the Cotton Factories of this city, equal, if not in a worse situation than the black slaves of the South."<sup>56</sup> The charge was reiterated by the editor of the *Allegheny Democrat*. "It is an absolute fact, averred this editor, "that the females in the Cotton Factories in this city, and its vicinity, are treated and abused worse than the female black slaves of the South."<sup>57</sup>

Although unsuccessful in securing the shorter work day, the efforts of the Pittsburgh factory workers were not fruitless. The public was aroused and shortly afterwards a movement was initiated which culminated in an investigation of factory conditions in Pennsylvania by a committee of the state legislature.<sup>58</sup>

In the years to follow, in the years of the great panic, there were only a few recorded instances of strikes by the textile workers, and as always, these disputes grew out of the efforts of the mill owners to reduce the wages of their employees. During the summer of 1839, the hand-loom weavers of Philadelphia struck against a proposed reduction of their wages. At a meeting designed to win the sympathies of the American public to their struggle, they disclosed the pitiful prices paid the weavers for their labor:

18 yards of Superfine Check is considered a day's work, which at 4½ cents per yard, amounts to 81 cents per day, or \$4.86 per week—out of which is to be deducted 75 cents per week for winding, leaving a balance of \$4.11; for house rent, fuel, light, loom, and tackling repairs, etc. \$1.37½ per week—leaving a balance of \$2.73½ for finding food and raiment for a family of four or five members. The proposed reduction being \$1.08 per week, in exact ratio to the above, would reduce the amount for

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct. 21, 1836.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct. 7, 1836.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1836.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 23, 1836; Feb. 3, 1837. See *Pennsylvania Senate Journal*, Vol. II, 1837-38. See also J. Lynn Barnard, *Factory Legislation in Pennsylvania: Its History and Administration* (Philadelphia, 1907), p. 7.

finding food and raiment for the family to \$1.65 per week.<sup>59</sup>

During the "Jackson era," an era of aggressive capitalism, the factory workers fought a losing battle to maintain their living standards. Although economically weak, feebly organized and their ranks composed largely of women and children, they had a notable record of resistance, and although they lost, their struggles were not in vain. These lowly factory hands had given inspiration to the trade union movement of Pennsylvania, and to the trade union movement of the United States they had given an outstanding leader, John Ferral.

This spirit of unrest which had moved the factory hands to a vigorous defense of their rights, when imbibed by the large mass of inarticulate workers—the day laborers, the canal hands, the carters, the wood sawyers and others—often culminated in serious riots. The use of the police and the militia to break these strikes was widespread. The causes for these outbursts varied, but the question of wages figured prominently in most of the disputes.

It was reported in the fall of 1828, that the canal workers near Harrisburg had rioted. The New York Mammoth Company, which had undertaken the construction of this section of the canal, had stopped payment of wages and was in arrears as much as \$400 to some workmen.<sup>60</sup> One year and a half later riots again broke out among the canal hands near Harrisburg.

During the severe winter of 1828-1829, the men numbering two to three hundred had been unemployed and had become "indebted to storekeepers and others for their subsistence."<sup>61</sup> A freshet in the Susquehanna had ruptured the dam at Clark's Ferry and the men, taking advantage of the crisis, demanded that their wages be increased from eighty cents to one dollar per day before any repairs would be made. The contractors refused to comply with their request. Apparently the strikers had anticipated this for sympathetic hands from other sections on the Susquehanna and from the Juniata section appeared, and a general turn out of all hands on that section was ordered.<sup>62</sup> "All this appears to have been done with perfect coolness," a Harrisburg paper reported, and expressed

<sup>59</sup> *Public Ledger*, Aug. 30, 1839.

<sup>60</sup> *Poulson's American Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 25, 1827.

<sup>61</sup> *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, April 9, 1829.

<sup>62</sup> *Pennsylvania Reporter*, April 7, 1829.

the fear, "that an understanding to the same effect exists along the whole line of [the] canal, as canalers from various other contracts were on the ground, encouraging the rioters."<sup>63</sup>

The local police, the militia, and the clergy were called upon to put down the strikers. From Dauphin County the sheriff with cavalry and with the assistance of the Halifax infantry, armed with bayonets and muskets, rushed to the scene of the strike. As the military approached, "the labourers armed themselves with clubs, and threatened to repel any attack." A Catholic priest, Rev. Fr. Curran, used his "personal influence over the rioters" to "induce them to submit to civil authority," and received the commendation of the press for his intercession in the disturbance.<sup>64</sup> This threat of force combined with the exhortations of the clergyman appears to have broken the strike, since nothing further was reported about it.

The impetus which the common laborers gave to the struggles for the shorter work day was, without a doubt, their greatest contribution to the labor movement in Pennsylvania. In May 1835, about 300 coal heavers on the Schuylkill wharves struck for the ten-hour day. A complete stoppage of work was effected. Seventy-five vessels were reported in the river waiting to take on freight, but "the hands in the boats dare not attempt to load, lest their vessels should be scuttled."<sup>65</sup> Niles estimated that the loss to the community was \$2,000 per day.<sup>66</sup> Late in May, the employers met and resolved not to accede to the demands of the day laborers, and offered one dollar a day for those who would "work from sunrise to sunset."<sup>67</sup> They also agreed: "That unless the terms offered be accepted by the laborers, and they return to duty, at the respective yards, by tomorrow morning . . . all hands heretofore employed by us shall be discharged, and not again employed by [any] of us."<sup>68</sup> One or two men responded to the call and a few new hands were hired at higher wages than had formerly been given. But in a few days the newly hired strikebreakers and the old hands who

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Pennsylvania Reporter*, April 7, 1829; *Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, April 9, 1829; *Crawford Messenger*, April 11, 1829; *Norristown Herald*, April 8, 1829.

<sup>65</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, May 20, 1835; *Niles Register*, Vol. 48, June 6, 1835, p. 235.

<sup>66</sup> *Niles Register*, Vol. 48, June 6, 1835, p. 235.

<sup>67</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, May 30, 1835.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

had returned to their jobs were out with the striking coal heavers and all work on the docks once again was suspended.<sup>69</sup>

The press was almost unanimous in its condemnation of the strike. Niles charged that "the leaders of these 'strikes' are chiefly freshly imported *foreigners*—who despise and defy the law."<sup>70</sup> The *Saturday Evening Post* asserted that "those who refuse to act with . . . [the strikers] they treat with open violence."<sup>71</sup> A more lurid account was printed in the *Philadelphia Gazette*. "One man who attempted to work was assailed by the laborers, and . . . his head was laid open with a stone."<sup>72</sup> They "paraded the streets commanded by a man with a drawn sword in his hand, and [they] have threatened every man with death who dares lift a piece of coal," charged the *Gazette*.<sup>73</sup> But the *National Trades Union*, the organ of the unionized workmen, assured its readers, "that the manner in which the workmen on the Schuylkill have conducted their strike, for the ten-hour system, has been grossly misrepresented, in the same way and by the same class of people, as the journeymen of New York have been." It concluded that this deliberate distortion of fact was an endeavour to discredit the struggles of the workingmen and the Trades' Union.<sup>74</sup>

By the first of June, almost every other trade in the city had joined with the coal heavers in demanding the ten-hour day. This was another manifestation of that desire on the part of the wage earners to make of democracy more than just a shibboleth. Previous to this, abortive ten-hour strikes had been conducted by the journeymen bricklayers and house carpenters of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.<sup>75</sup> But it was the day laborers on the Schuylkill wharves who, "against the tremendous power of wealth and avarice" and even when "the issue . . . was considered doubtful,"<sup>76</sup> stubbornly resisted all efforts to break their strike. When joined by the carpenters, bricklayers, stone masons, and a dozen other trades, the

<sup>69</sup> *The Man*, June 8, 1835.

<sup>70</sup> *Niles Register*, Vol. 48, June 6, 1835, p. 235.

<sup>71</sup> *Saturday Evening Post*, May 30, 1835.

<sup>72</sup> *Philadelphia Gazette*, June 6, 1835. Reprinted in *Niles' Register*, Vol. 48, p. 235.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *National Trades' Union*, June 6, 1835.

<sup>75</sup> *Aurora and Franklin Gazette*, June 14, 1827; *The Mechanic's Free Press*, June 27, 1829; *The Allegheny Democrat*, March 24, 1829; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, May 25, 1831; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, March 20, 1832.

<sup>76</sup> *National Trades' Union*, Oct. 10, 1835.

outcome was inevitable. One June 13 the *Saturday Evening Post* reported:

The excitement among our mechanics seems to have nearly abated, the object for which the strike was made having been obtained by the acquiescence of the master workmen generally in their request.

In the turbulence and excitement which prevailed in the City during these hectic June days only brief and sneering remarks greeted the turn-out of "that humble but useful class of working-men, the wood sawyers." They struck for an increase of wages "from forty to fifty cents for oak wood, and seventy-five cents for hickory."<sup>77</sup> More interest should have been directed toward it, since it was an early attempt of Negro and white workers acting in unison to improve their lot. Instead of sympathy for the efforts of these humble woodcutters, there was only animosity in the derisive accounts of the strike in the local papers. "The wood-sawyers had a regular turn out, ebonies, mulattoes and whites," one newspaper observed. "They raised a dust, made a good deal of noise, marched up street and down again, and 'strait were seen no more!'"<sup>78</sup> The conservative *United States Gazette* made no effort to conceal its racial sentiments. "Yesterday," the *Gazette* informed its readers, "there was a turnout among the wood sawyers—some ten or a dozen who claimed affinities with whites and the rest the cullings of a lot of blacks. . . ."<sup>79</sup>

Elsewhere in Pennsylvania the day laborers were on the move. At Norristown, three or four hundred railroad workers struck successfully for the ten-hour day.<sup>80</sup> The laborers and carters employed by the Borough of Reading "left off work, on account of the alleged lowness of their wages." They had been receiving seventy-five cents per day.<sup>81</sup> From Pottsville came word that the boatmen had assembled at Hamburg and had refused to permit any coal boats to pass until their demands had been met. The merchants and miners flatly rejected their request for \$1.25 a ton for carrying coal.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, June 13, 1835.

<sup>78</sup> *The Republican Standard and Downingtown Journal*, June 30, 1835.

<sup>79</sup> *The United States Gazette*, June 12, 1835.

<sup>80</sup> *The Pennsylvanian*, June 18, 1835. *The Columbia Spy*, June 20, 1835.

<sup>81</sup> *The Chronicle of the Times*, July 21, 1835. *The Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, July 25, 1835.

<sup>82</sup> *The Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, July 11, 1835. *The American Sentinel*, July 7, 1835.

The *Miner's Journal*, rabidly opposed to the strike, charged that only a small minority—40 or 50 of the 400 boats on the canal—supported the strike; that the striker had resorted to “force and violence” to intimidate their fellow workmen; and lastly, that the civil authorities had “connive[d] at their outrages, and by their culpable apathy [had] afford[ed] encouragement to the strikers.”<sup>83</sup> But other accounts contradicted these charges. When the strikers held a demonstration and marched into Pottsville, several hundred boatmen made up the procession.<sup>84</sup> And what violence occurred seems to have been precipitated by the sheriff, who, “with a ‘monstrous watch,’ charged the column [of marchers], secured several, and put the rest to flight. . . .”<sup>85</sup> Late in July a satisfactory agreement was reached between the boatmen and the coal operators.<sup>86</sup>

In the spring of the following year, rising costs induced the canal hands at Manayunk and the day laborers and the Schuylkill coal heavers at Philadelphia to strike for higher wages. At Manayunk, where unemployment prevailed, the contractors on the canal works cut the wages of their hands to seventy-five cents per day. But the canal workers resisted to a man and not only rejected the reduction but compelled the bosses to give them the ten-hour day.<sup>87</sup>

The efforts of the Schuylkill laborers to advance their wages to \$1.25 per day met with more substantial resistance. As evidence of good faith and to meet the criticisms of their employers, the coal yard workers, weeks in advance of the strike, made known their intentions. Their employers responded by placing in the newspapers an advertisement for 500 hands.<sup>88</sup> Sufficient workers apparently did not respond to the call, because the employers turned to the courts for aid. A charge of rioting secured the arrest of several of the coal heavers and the mayor placed the bail for three of them at the exorbitant sum of \$2,500.<sup>89</sup>

Other trades reacted immediately to this attack on the Schuylkill workers and made the coal heavers' struggle their own. The Trades' Union entered into the fray and for the first time it ad-

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid. Hazard's Register*, Vol. 16, July 1835, p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> *Berks and Schuylkill Journal*, July 11, 1835.

<sup>85</sup> *Pennsylvanian*, July 14, 1835.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *National Laborer*, March 7, 1836.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

mitted unskilled workers into its membership.<sup>90</sup> From the far end of the state came word that the Pittsburgh workers had assembled and had protested this unwarranted attack on "our rights and liberties" by the present mayor of Philadelphia.<sup>91</sup> Despite the testimony of many of the respectable coal speculators themselves, the court decided "that there was no evidence of a breach of peace" during the strike.<sup>92</sup> This vindication of the coal heavers did not assuage the angry wage-earners of Philadelphia, and the Trades' Union led a movement for the defeat of Mayor John Swift in the forthcoming election, for his prejudiced conduct toward the Schuylkill laborers.<sup>93</sup>

Caught up in this general movement for higher wages were the day laborers who were employed by the plasterers and the bricklayers. They struck for a minimum wage of \$1.25 per day. The Trades' Union, responding to an appeal of these workmen, recommended that its members pay the prices asked. Months later, to the chagrin of that organization, it was learned that some of its own members were paying "less than the prices fixed by the Laborer's Society."<sup>94</sup>

Unemployment and the hard times which followed the panic of 1837 put an end to much of the unrest which had aroused such animosity between the workers and their employers in the previous two years. Isolated and futile strikes emphasized more than anything else could how seriously the depression had struck the ranks of the common laborers. Late in the summer of 1837, a general strike broke out among the workmen on the Susquehanna canal "for higher wages and more grog."<sup>95</sup> All work was suspended and for a short time it appeared as if the strikers would win their demands. But the resolute stand taken by the contractors and the return of many hands broke the strike.<sup>96</sup>

Two years later, 300 railroad workers between Reading and Hamburg turned out for an increase in their wages from \$1.00 to \$1.12½ per day, and for a larger ration of whiskey. One con-

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, May 21, 1836.

<sup>91</sup> *Allegheny Democrat and Working Man's Advocate*, Sept. 2, 1836.

<sup>92</sup> *Public Ledger*, Aug. 25, 1836; *National Laborer*, Aug. 27, 1836. See Commons, *History of Labour*, I, p. 377.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *National Laborer*, July 2, 1836.

<sup>95</sup> *Harrisburg Chronicle*, Aug. 23, 1837.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

tractor complied with the requests of his workers but on most sections their demands were summarily rejected.<sup>97</sup> The bewildered laboring men looked hesitantly toward the future for a solution to their difficulties.

These unskilled wage-earners had fought the good fight. Against tremendous odds they had bent their efforts toward making this Democracy live up to its promise. They were among the first workers to realize the necessity of an organization embracing all workingmen. They had inspired the first successful ten hour movement in Pennsylvania. And when all else failed, they alone of all the wage-earners of Pennsylvania were able to arouse the state legislature and to compel it to consider the workers' demands. Although many of their dreams were shattered and their high endeavours met with failure, the fault was not theirs. Forces far beyond their comprehension and control conspired to defeat them.

<sup>97</sup> *Public Ledger*, June 12, 1839.