

ITALIANS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

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HISTORIANS have asked three major questions concerning the relationship between immigrants and unions: what was the influence of the labor movement on immigrants?¹ What, in turn, was the impact of immigrants on unions, particularly on union structure, tactics, and ideology?² And what factors determined whether or not immigrants joined, organized, and remained members of unions in various industries at different times?³ The experiences of Italian immigrants in Pennsylvania and elsewhere throw light on each of these questions.⁴ In this paper I shall discuss the third of these, the subject which has raised the most intense controversy within the labor movement: the problem of organizing immigrants. I shall focus on the relative success enjoyed by three unions which enlisted Italians in Pennsylvania in the period of mass immigration before 1924.

The issue can be put simply. Were social factors—the mores, ambitions, and patterns of settlement of Italian immigrants—primarily responsible for their ability or inability to organize? Or were economic factors giving particular unions greater bargaining power than others the major variables influencing success with Italian immigrants? ¹

If we can place unions along a continuum extending from those with the greatest bargaining power to those with the least, we can predict solely on economic grounds whether or not a particular

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¹ See particularly Carroll D. Wright, "The Influence of Trade Unions on Immigrants," *Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor*, No. 56 (1905), 1-6.

² Jack Barbash, "Ethnic Factors in the Development of the American Labor Movement," in Industrial Relations Research Association, *Interpreting the Labor Movement* (Champaign, 1952), 70-82.

³ See William Leiserson, *Adjusting Immigrant and Industry* (New York, 1924); and Jeremiah W. Jencks and W. Jett Lauck, *The Immigration Problem* (New York, 1912).

⁴ See a discussion in Edwin Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions; A Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1957), 559-579.

union ought to have been able to organize successfully. If the Italians with whom these unions worked came from a common background in Italy and shared common aspirations and a common environment in this country,⁵ and if the relative success of each of these unions in organizing Italians proves to be in rough proportion to its economic bargaining position, we can conclude that the major determinants of success or failure were not social factors, but the bargaining power of particular unions. I have chosen to study the barbers, the journeyman tailors, and the bricklayers and masons. These were the three major occupational groups, common laborers excepted, of Italians in large Pennsylvania cities in the 1900 census, the last to carry such data.⁶

Let us examine in summary form the mores of these Italian immigrants.⁷ More than three-quarters of the four million Italians emigrating to the United States were peasants, mainly from South Italy and Sicily, who were driven abroad by the pressure of population on limited resources. As a group, South Italian peasants had three major characteristics: they were provincial, trusting no one from outside the bounds of their village or at most their section of the peninsula; they were fatalistic, the result partly of centuries of oppression; and they were self-reliant, preferring to depend on their own strong backs and on their families rather than on group action. Southern Italian peasants knew neither industrialism nor unions. Their lives were centered around the tiny plots of land which they owned or rented or hoped to acquire in the future. In their families and their villages they found security and fulfillment; religion and the village mutual benefit society gave them solace. As union members in America often pointed out, Italian peasants were quite unprepared by their Italian background to assume a role as trade unionists.

Merchants, artisans, and dealers from the villages shared the

⁵ See *ibid.*, 31-70, particularly 65-70, for an analysis of these matters in the United States generally.

⁶ Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, 1904), 370-379. Of course, all the garment workers here listed were not journeyman tailors.

⁷ Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 1-30; Robert Foerster, *Italian Emigration of Our Times* (Cambridge, 1918), 51-105; R. Schermerhorn, *These Our People* (Boston, 1949), 232-246; Leonard Covello, "The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child . . ." (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1944); Phyllis H. Williams, *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America* (New Haven, 1938).

outlook of the peasantry and emigrated for similar economic reasons.⁸ The small number of upper-class, educated people who joined the exodus soon divorced themselves from the emigrant host to make their own way in American society. But from the North, where anarchism, syndicalism, and socialism had taken hold, came numbers of artisans and intellectuals with years of experience in mutual benefit societies, co-operatives, unions, and the wider European radical movement.⁹ Unlike the peasants these men believed in the class struggle and in changing conditions through group action.

At first, experiences in America reinforced the provincialism, fatalism, and self-reliance of the peasantry. The members of the Philadelphia colony might well serve as an example.¹⁰ By 1860 there were about fifty Italians in the city, largely Ligurians. The Italian population grew slowly until the late 1870's when it numbered about three thousand, largely Genoese, but with a sprinkling of Sicilians and Neapolitans. After 1885 the colony mushroomed. In 1902 an official of the Italian government estimated the number of Italian stock in the Philadelphia area at about 100,000, of whom about 90 per cent were from central and southern Italy and Sicily. Unable to find work in agriculture, and often cut off by membership restrictions from American unions, these former peasants at first became strolling musicians, dealers in plaster statuettes, and common laborers. They were sent from the city to construction projects in gangs under bilingual foremen called *padroni*, who directed their labor, provided lodging and board, and exploited their charges in the process. Despite several efforts to reform the padrone system in Pennsylvania, the most notable in 1883-1884 by an Italian-American physician named D. A. Pignatelli, its abuses remained unchecked until about the time of the First World War.

In the meantime, partly in reaction against rejection by wider

⁸ See Foerster, *Italian Emigration*, 102-105, 122-126; "Reports of the Immigration Commission," *Senate Document*, 61 Cong., 2 sess., no. 633 (1911), IV, 222-224.

⁹ Renaldo Rigola, *Storia del Movimento Operaio Italiano* (Milano, 1946), 9-22; Humbert L. Gualtieri, *The Labor Movement in Italy* (New York, 1946); Wayland Hilton-Young, *The Italian Left* (Bristol, 1949), 1-75.

¹⁰ See particularly "L'Immigrazione e le Colonie Italiane nella Pennsylvania," *Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*, 1902, No. 4, 62-69; *New York Times*, August 2, 1891; John Koren, "The Padrone System and Padrone Banks," *Bulletin of the Department of Labor*, No. 9 (1897), 123; *L'Eco d'Italia*, April 21, May 22, 1883; April 4, 20, 1884.

American society, the Italian residents organized mutual benefit societies similar to their Italian antecedents. In 1886 there were eleven in the colony, three begun by men in particular trades (barbers, masons, and garment workers) and each of the other eight composed of people from the same Italian village; by 1902 the number had increased to forty-one.¹¹ The proliferation of these societies indicates the degree to which local loyalties were infused in Italian immigrants here. Moreover the colony was divided in additional ways. Anarchist and socialist circles were organized in the city and began to flourish in the 1890's.¹² The members of these groups made vitriolic attacks on the *prominenti*, the self-made men who dominated the Italian colony and controlled the mutual aid societies which were its chief social organisms. How, then, could radicals at the same time expect to win members of these societies to unions? On the whole, Italian immigrants in Philadelphia, hostile to much of America which had exploited or rejected them, divided internally by provincialism and philosophy, unfamiliar with labor unions, and intensely anxious to save money, seem to have been poor prospects for the union organizer. Yet many were enrolled soon after landing here.

Unfortunately, occupational statistics by nationalities in cities and states are unavailable after 1900, when a special census report contained this information. These figures indicate that in 1900 there were 1,727 Italian-born garment workers in Pennsylvania, 1,063 masons, and 996 barbers.¹³ In some areas Italians were a substantial percentage of the workers in these three occupational groups. In Philadelphia alone they made up 4 per cent of the garment workers, 8 per cent of the masons, and 19 per cent of the barbers and hairdressers. In the two decades after 1900 the proportion of Italians in the three trades increased rapidly.

The proportions of North to South Italians varied substantially from one occupation to another. Our only statistical information on this subject, however, is of occupations stated by immigrants at entry in the period after 1899. Since many men changed their occupation after arrival in the United States, and since men from

¹¹ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, September 12, 1886; "L'Emigrazione e le Colonie Italiane nella Pennsylvania," 62-63.

¹² *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, November 10, 1892; *Proceedings of the Ninth Convention of the Socialist Labor Party* (New York [1896]), 16.

¹³ *Occupations at the Twelfth Census*, 370-379, 672-679.

North or South Italy often concentrated in different areas, these figures are clearly not indicative of exact proportions of the two groups in any particular city, but they may at least indicate approximations. Of the Italian males declaring their occupations at entry between 1899 and 1920, 4 per cent of the barbers were North Italians, as were 10 per cent of the garment workers, and 30 per cent of the masons.¹⁴ Some historians have argued that North Italians were easier to organize than their southern countrymen. They have pointed to the fact that Italian masons, 30 per cent northerners, joined unions readily, but that Italian barbers, with only 4 per cent from the North, proved virtually unorganizable.

There is evidence, largely from outside Pennsylvania however—immigrants evidently did not settle with the needs of the Pennsylvania Historical Association in mind—that a large percentage of northerners in an industry did not assure success. Forty-five per cent of Italian immigrant stonecutters were from the North. Yet while the Granite Cutters' International Association here organized Italians with conspicuous success, both the International Association of Marble Workers and the Journeymen Stonecutters' Association (Softstones) failed to enlist them during the first decades of the present century.¹⁵ The Granite Cutters' had in its ranks a minority of highly skilled cutters and letterers indispensable particularly to the branch of the industry which made tombstones and monuments. But marble and Softstone Cutters' Unions, whose members worked on building materials, saw the position of skilled men undermined by new machinery and substitute materials, and their unions collapsed.¹⁶ Although almost half of the potential Italian members of all three unions were northerners, only the granite cutters, who had substantial bargaining power, were able to organize successfully. A large proportion of North Italians, who generally had contact with the labor movement at home, in the labor force of an industry was not enough by itself to insure successful organization.

I believe that Italian immigrants, whether they were from the

¹⁴ See table worked out from the *Annual Report* of the United States Commissioner-General of Immigration in Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 586.

¹⁵ Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 430-457.

¹⁶ Between 1903 and 1905 Italian socialists working in softstones in ten Pennsylvania towns organized locals independent from the International, but these too were unsuccessful. *Il Proletario*, April 16, 23, 1905; *L'Araldo Italiano*, February 28, April 29, July 6, 1906.

North or the South, were organized before 1924 if they had considerable bargaining power, and remained unorganized if they did not. In this paper the term bargaining power means simply the capacity of a union or of a group of unorganized workers to secure one or more specific objectives, such as a raise in wages or an improvement in working conditions, from an employer or an employer's group either by persuasion or by striking. It should be stated that although economists and economic historians have been investigating the nature of bargaining power for decades, no generally accepted theory has emerged. Most writers resort, instead, to a list of factors involved in exerting pressure for concessions from employers.¹⁷ The seven most significant variables in the three industries chosen for this study are as follows:

- 1) The wage bill as a proportion of the final price of a product. The smaller the proportion of wage bill to final price, the easier for workers to wrest concessions from employers.
- 2) The ability of employers to pass wage raises to the consumer. If prices could be raised without reducing the number of units sold, employers were more likely to make concessions. (That is, if the demand for the product was inelastic.)
- 3) The skill or strategic position of the workers in the productive process. If workers were highly skilled or occupied a position in a plant which enabled a few men to shut down operations, they were more likely to win concessions.
- 4) The competitive structure of the industry. Where other firms were eager to fill the orders of customers of plants on strike, the owners of struck firms were more likely to concede.
- 5) The seasonality of the industry. If an industry was seasonal and could be struck at the beginning of a rush period, concessions were more easily won.
- 6) The financial resources of the employer. Small firms with limited finances gave in more readily than large ones with great reserves, particularly on non-monetary issues.
- 7) The size and scope of the bargaining unit. Unions negotiating locally for a local market had a simpler problem, and

¹⁷ See Neal W. Chamberlain, *Collective Bargaining* (New York, 1951), 213-238; Melvin W. Reder, *Labor in a Growing Economy* (New York, 1957), 164-168; Alfred Kuhn, *Labor: Institutions and Economics* (New York, 1956), 167-200.

more power, than others which were forced to negotiate for more people over a larger geographic and market area.

On their economic position alone, we would expect bricklayers and masons to organize the most successfully of the three trades here considered. Although we have no exact statistical measuring rods, the bricklayers and masons clearly had greater bargaining power than either barbers or tailors.¹⁸ The wages of bricklayers and masons were a comparatively small part of the price of a building. A small increase in prices would not generally deter a customer from expanding his business or building a home. The skills of the bricklayer and mason were indispensable to contractors, particularly in large buildings where wood was not an adequate substitute. They could strike when a building was partially completed, a form of seasonality, bringing pressure from the customer on the contractor to concede. Moreover most contractors were small and in danger of going bankrupt as a consequence of a long strike. It is true that other firms could not complete a building tied up by a strike, but they could seek contracts on which a struck firm could not bid with its resources tied up indefinitely by bricklayers and masons. Finally, since most contractors work for a local market, a union was forced to control conditions in only a small area, without concern for the situation in cities far removed. Masons and bricklayers had, and still have, an enviable economic position giving them great leverage to use on an employer.

Until about 1900, the Bricklayers' and Masons' International Union of America made no systematic effort to organize stone masons, and on several occasions the International refused to admit masons organized independently.¹⁹ But when unorganized masons began to lay bricks, and some formed a rival union, the Stonemasons' International Union of America, centered in Pittsburgh, the leaders of the International reversed their policy and began a concerted drive to recruit the masons, many of whom were Italians, to their ranks. The union drew up a series of codes for bricklayers' and masons' locals pledging each to refuse to work with non-union men of the other trade.²⁰ The movement originated

¹⁸ See William Haber, *Industrial Relations in the Building Industry* (Cambridge, 1930), 5, 30-42, 45-46, 49-62, 95-96, 285-291, 311-318, 325-327.

¹⁹ See Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 385-390.

²⁰ *Thirty-ninth Annual Report of the President and Secretary of the Bricklayers' and Masons' International Union of America* (Indianapolis, 1904), 1-4, 12-16, 42-48, 55-58.

in New York, where several locals of Italian-speaking masons were organized within a few years.

In Philadelphia, Italians had organized a mutual benefit society, similar to parent organizations in Italy, in 1886; and in 1887, this organization was permitted to affiliate with the International as an Italian-speaking local.²¹ In 1902, Italian Local 3 was merged with one German- and two English-speaking masons' locals when bricklayers insisted upon consolidation as a condition for supporting the masons' demands.²² They complained that language locals had resulted in exclusive control of the work on a building by men of one nationality, with consequent mutual suspicions resulting partly from differences in pay and working conditions from one job to another. They also charged that officers of the Italian local admitted men who could not meet union standards—evidently even unqualified Italians were anxious to join. Within four years after consolidation took place, the co-operation of mason and bricklayer had won for the union complete control of the entire building industry in Philadelphia except for some residential construction.²³ Moreover, the union won both higher wage scales and improved working conditions without a strike by negotiating with an employers' group which evidently recognized the futility of fighting workers wielding such great economic power. For this study the significant point is clear: Italians who could meet union standards joined the International in Philadelphia readily enough, once they were accepted.

A similar development took place in Pittsburgh, where Italian organizer Domenico Madonna of Italian Masons' Local No. 84 organized a campaign in 1903 to enroll Italians for a reduced initiation fee of \$3.00.²⁴ About seventy-five Italian masons joined immediately. Within a year the International was forced to send a representative to Pittsburgh to examine charges that the Italians admitted unqualified men, worked improper hours, sometimes accepted piece work, and failed to follow orderly procedure in their meetings.²⁵ Such behavior was not at all unusual with immigrants of many nationalities when they were independently organized for

²¹ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, September 12, 1886; January 13, June 24, 1887; *The Bricklayer and Mason*, November, 1901, 14.

²² *Bricklayer and Mason*, August, 1902, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1906, 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, July, 1903, 4.

²⁵ *Thirty-ninth Annual Report . . .*, 256-257.

the first time by an American union. But, once again, it is clear that Italians willingly joined the Bricklayers' and Masons' Union once they were assured of being accepted. Why should they not? They would win better pay, shorter hours, and freedom from exploitation by petty contractors. Even in the face of an abundant supply of labor with many partly skilled men invading the market, the Bricklayers' and Masons' Union successfully organized Italians in Pennsylvania cities after 1900 because its great bargaining power enabled it to win concessions from contractors and attract and hold Italians to the organization.

The garment workers were less fortunate.²⁶ Their wages were a much higher proportion of the final price of a product, and in a highly competitive industry with firms scattered all over the country, it was extremely difficult for an individual employer to pass on increased costs by raising prices. Some trades, such as cutting, were highly skilled, but most of the workers in the industry could be trained quickly for their jobs. The industry was seasonal, an advantage to a potential union, and the resources of many employers were extremely small, again a point in a union's favor. The garment workers had intermediate bargaining power; their success depended to a much greater degree than in the case of masons and bricklayers on their ability to strike and win concessions from all the employers in a market area simultaneously, and this, in turn, was a function of their ability to present a united front to the employers.

Within the garment industry, the Journeymen Tailors' International Union of America, the organization of custom tailors, faced a more difficult organizing situation than the three unions whose members worked on ready-made clothing.²⁷ In the custom branch of the industry, expert tailors measured customers for garments in small shops scattered far and wide over miles of city streets. In some cases these same tailors made the garments themselves, and, of course, could not be organized by a union because

²⁶ See discussions in Louis Devine, *The Women's Garment Workers* (New York, 1924), 1-23; Jesse E. Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (Columbia, Missouri, 1905), *passim*; Gertrud Berta Greig, *Seasonal Fluctuations in Employment in the Women's Clothing Industry in New York* (New York, 1949), 142-150; Charles J. Stowell, *The Journeymen Tailors' Union of America: A Study in Trade Union Policy* (Urbana, Illinois, 1918), *passim*.

²⁷ *The Tailor*, June, 1913, 14-15; May, 1914, 20-21.

they were self-employed; in others, they hired journeymen to assemble garments either in the tailors' shops or in their own homes; a third method of work, increasingly important after 1900, was to send the measurements to a factory where teams of workers made the garments in much the same way that men worked in the ready-made clothing industry. Journeymen working at home or in shops were frequently piece workers competing with each other by laboring long hours at low rates, and they were exceedingly difficult for a union to police. Factory workers in the custom trade became involved in jurisdictional disputes between the Journeymen Tailors and either the United Garment Workers or the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, the two unions in the men's ready-made clothing trade, and employers played one union against the other. Finally, if the union struck in one city, tailors sent their work to another until the strike was broken.

Like Italian bricklayers and masons, the Italian tailors of Philadelphia organized a mutual benefit society in 1884, long before any significant union movement developed among them.²⁸ This organization, the Italian Tailors' Society, provided mutual aid for its members and supplied a variety of social and psychological functions for immigrants unaccustomed to an urban industrial world. Each year its members held a ball or a picnic to which the leaders of Philadelphia's Italian colony were invited.²⁹ In 1891, when the Journeymen Tailors' International Union of America began to recruit custom tailors in the city, the members of the Italian Tailors' Society joined the union, one hundred strong, as an Italian local. But the International had no material written in Italian for the new brothers, and with the failure of the general organizing drive in the city, the Italians severed connections with the International and resumed their status as an independent organization.³⁰ This series of events stands in contrast to the history of the Italian masons who first joined a mutual aid society, then joined the International from which they secured benefits, and finally remained members of that organization until their Italian-speaking local was amalgamated with others sixteen years later. May we not conclude that Italians resorted to mutual benefit

²⁸ *L'Eco d'Italia*, February 12, April 10, 17, 1884.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, March 26, August 27, 1885; April 30, 1886; April 7, 1887.

³⁰ *The Tailor*, December, 1890, 6; February, 1891, 3; March, 1891, 4; April, 1891, 6; May, 1891, 1; June, 1891, 4.

societies primarily when unions failed to win concessions for them?

Between 1900 and the outbreak of the First World War, the Journeymen Tailors' International Union of America repeatedly assigned Italian organizers to Philadelphia. In 1901 the first of these reported that Germans, Jews, Italians, Irish, Swedes, Poles, Hungarians, and a few "Americans" whom he interviewed in their tenement workrooms seemed receptive to unions, but no local was formed.³¹ In 1903 the International, describing a new attempt to establish an Italian local, noted that Italians had been organized on several occasions in the past, but had dropped from the union when no improvements were forthcoming in wages or working conditions.³² Although 180 Italians were reported as members of the local in 1903, this large nucleus had almost entirely disappeared by 1905, when organizer Louis T. Romagnoli began to work again with the Italian Tailors' Society to found an Italian branch of the local.³³ He too evidently failed. After two reports of progress being made among the Italians in March and April, 1906, news of the organization disappeared from the pages of *The Tailor* for the rest of the year.³⁴ An attempt to win concessions by a general strike in 1907 was similarly unsuccessful when it proved impossible to persuade everyone to leave the shops.³⁵ A nine months' drive to enlist Italians and Jews in 1911 also collapsed because, once again, no material benefits were forthcoming.³⁶ Instances like this could be multiplied, but the point is perhaps already clear: some Italians, as well as men of other nationalities, could be persuaded to join the JTIUA during an organizing drive; but when the union was unable to wrest concessions from employers, even after a ten weeks' strike, the men withdrew in defeat, retreating to their mutual benefit society.

Aldo Cursi, the national secretary of the Journeymen Tailors in 1914, summarized the organizing problems in Philadelphia in a long article in *The Tailor*.³⁷ He pointed out that home work and piece work were entrenched practices in the city, and that individual piece workers, anxious to earn more money, worked long

³¹ *Ibid.*, May, 1901, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, October, 1903, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, October, 1905, 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, March, 1906, 12; April, 1906, 18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, May, 1907, 3; June, 1907, 10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, February, 1911, 11; December, 1911, 25.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, May, 1914, 20-21.

hours in their homes where no union could supervise them. Moreover they were scattered over miles of city streets, forcing an organizer to spend most of his day shuttling between widely separated establishments. Working with a crew of young helpers learning the trade, the experienced tailor, by exploiting his hired hands, could sometimes make more money than if he worked in a shop by himself. Finally, Italian tailors in the city had been discouraged by years of organizational failure. Essentially, Cursi was describing an exceedingly difficult organizing situation where the key tailors were making a satisfactory living as independent contractors and where unions with limited resources had little chance to organize the employees of tailor-contractors who were themselves working for merchant-employers. The historian is struck not so much by the fact that Italians did not organize successfully, as by their constant struggle against overwhelming odds.

Barbers faced an even more complicated problem.³⁸ Their wages, which absorbed most of the price of a haircut, could not be passed on to customers without raising prices. More barbers could easily be trained, and with each ship from Europe adding to the numbers of barbers in cities like Philadelphia, the labor market was endemically flooded, so that barbering skill was not at a premium. The barber business was extremely competitive, with hundreds of small shops scattered over metropolitan areas, and unless the great majority raised prices at once, competition from unorganized men soon forced master barbers to cut their prices, and hence their wages, anew. Obviously, barbering was not a seasonal industry; hair grows altogether too fast in both summer and winter. True, the employers had small resources, but since most master barbers worked in the shops and, of course, did not strike against themselves, their income was not completely cut off by a strike. In order to organize journeyman barbers successfully, a union had either to persuade the master barbers who employed journeymen, and those who did not, to raise prices, or to force them to do so. If persuasion failed, the unions' only weapons against shops employing no journeymen were threats, violence, or government regulation of prices.

Like the masons and the tailors, Italian barbers in Philadelphia

³⁸ See W. Scott Hall, *The Journeyman Barbers' International Union of America* (Baltimore, 1936), 1-16, 39-40 and *passim*; Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 259-260.

formed a mutual benefit society, the *Stella d'Italia*, in 1886.³⁹ In that same year, when the Knights of Labor reached the apex of its power in the East, an Italian socialist named Nicholai Conforti, a mason by trade, helped to organize an Italian barbers' union in New York City.⁴⁰ On a trip to Philadelphia to inform Terence Powderly of this development, Conforti called a meeting of Italian barbers, perhaps beginning with the members of the *Stella d'Italia*, and asked them to join with American socialists in a Knights of Labor local.⁴¹ In June Conforti persuaded a group of Italian barbers to enroll in the Knights as an Italian-language section.⁴² Evidently this organization was short-lived; at least the Italian-language press made no further mention of it. Like its sister organization in New York, it probably disappeared with the demise of the Knights in the late 1880's. There is no evidence that this local, or any other local of barbers in the Knights, won permanent concessions from master barbers or enlisted more than a small minority of the journeymen in the trade. Its existence merely indicates that a small number of Italian barbers, probably radicals before they landed in the States, would join, probably as a matter of principle, an organization of their trade.

Between 1886 and 1906, three significant movements took place among Philadelphia barbers. The first was the growth of mutual aid societies among the Italians composed of journeymen, boss barbers, and sometimes men who were not barbers at all. Like its fellow societies in New York and Boston, the *Stella d'Italia*, the Philadelphia organization, provided its members with unemployment and death insurance and with an opportunity to talk about common problems and to meet in a congenial atmosphere.⁴³ The second movement, a successful attempt to persuade the state legislature to pass a Sunday closing law, became necessary when the union was unable by other means to enforce its working conditions, but the law was almost immediately a dead letter.⁴⁴ The third was an attempt to form locals of the Journeymen Barbers' International Union of America. In 1900 there were 4,114 barbers

³⁹ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, September 12, 1886.

⁴⁰ *L'Eco d'Italia*, May 12, 1885; *New York Times*, June 10, 1886.

⁴¹ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 6, 1886.

⁴² *Ibid.*, June 9, 10, 11, 1886.

⁴³ Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 266.

⁴⁴ *Proceedings of the Tenth Convention of the Journeymen Barbers' International Union of America* (Indianapolis, 1901), 93.

in Philadelphia of whom 805, or about 19 per cent, were Italians. But in September, 1905, the English-speaking Local 104 of the JBIUA had enrolled only thirty-three members, the Italian local had thirty-five, and a Negro local had thirteen.⁴⁵ In this weak condition, the Philadelphia leaders pressed for the enforcement of the Sunday closing law and assessed their members four dollars each to support an officer to work with the police. Despite the expenditure of \$578.25 by the union, unorganized barbers continued to violate the law, and the three locals appealed to the JBIUA for five hundred dollars to finish the fight.⁴⁶ The International instead paid for an organizer (ten dollars a week for four weeks) to enroll additional members in the three locals, an attempt which failed completely. Some shops were even offering shaves for five cents.⁴⁷ It proved impossible in Philadelphia, as in New York or Boston, where there was also a large number of Italian barbers, or in Pittsburgh, Cleveland, or Columbus, where there were almost no Italians, to persuade a substantial number of barbers to join the JBIUA and strike for better conditions.⁴⁸

The three movements among Philadelphia barbers in this period indicate that Italian journeyman barbers acted as if their interests were similar to those of their employers. They frequently joined with boss barbers in mutual aid societies. Men from both groups supported Sunday closing laws, and other individuals, both bosses and journeymen, opposed this legislation on different grounds. Finally, journeymen failed to rally to the JBIUA to win concessions from their employers by strikes. This identity of interest grew partly from the nature of the business, where a large percentage of shops was manned by a single proprietor or by partners employing no journeymen, and partly from the close tie between boss and journeymen from the same Italian village. Clearly, the failure of the Italians to organize locals in Philadelphia must be attributed in a large degree to the nature of the business itself; otherwise how can one account for the fact that barbers' locals could not organize successfully in any large metropolitan area, whether or not Italians were present? The *Journeyman Barber*, spokesman of the JBIUA, consistently indicted Italians in the port

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 93, 129.

⁴⁷ *L'Araldo Italiano*, February 18, 1902.

⁴⁸ *Occupations at the Twelfth Census*, 494-499, 526-535, 634-641, 678-679.

cities, it is true, but were they not in reality just a convenient scapegoat?

Nor was the JBIUA successful in large cities at any time before 1924. In 1913 the I.W.W. invaded the industry and led violent strikes of journeyman barbers, almost exclusively Italians, in New York and Boston.⁴⁹ Perhaps the failure of these affrays convinced Philadelphia barbers of their futility. At least no comparable outbreaks took place either there or in Pittsburgh. Late in 1915 the JBIUA mounted an organizing drive anew in Philadelphia, with three general organizers working full time.⁵⁰ The union estimated that 65 per cent of the city's barbers were Italian, and they re-established an Italian-language local. By June, 1916, Italian Local 751 reported a membership of two hundred and was enjoying the support of the powerful and long established *Stella d'Italia*.⁵¹ The union and the Italian Master Barbers' Association began a campaign to enforce the long-ignored Sunday closing law, and enjoyed a temporary success. But by September some of the barbers, admitted under a reduced initiation fee, dropped their affiliation, and after the JBIUA withdrew its staff of organizers in October, the drive collapsed and the language locals were forced once more to amalgamate in order to reduce expenses.⁵² In the meantime the *Stella d'Italia* continued to grow in size and prestige. Although several other attempts were made to organize the Italians in the succeeding few years, none met with success, even during the war years when the supply of barbers was somewhat reduced.

Was the predominance of Italian immigrants in the labor force of the barber business in Philadelphia the cause of the union's failure? I think not. Barbers' unions in all the major metropolitan areas failed during this period, whether or not Italians were present. But in small towns in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, the union was generally successful, again regardless of the presence

⁴⁹ Fenton, "Immigrants and Unions," 271-281. It is significant, I think, that despite the larger proportion of North Italians who were socialists or syndicalists among the bricklayers and masons, the I.W.W. was completely unable to win men in those two trades to its standard. They were, of course, accepted by a union which consistently won concessions for them. A successful union made conservatives of socialists; failure by a union prompted conservatives to become stone-throwing radicals.

⁵⁰ *Journeyman Barber*, November, 1915, 429-430; December, 1915, 495; January, 1916, 554.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, June, 1916, 154-155, 204.

⁵² *Ibid.*, November, 1916, 410.

of Italians. In small towns it was comparatively easy to persuade a few master barbers to set higher prices in order to raise the wages of their organized journeymen, but in cities with miles of streets, thousands of shops, and proprietors of a dozen nationalities the sheer dimensions of distance and numbers made similar co-operation impossible, and without it journeymen's groups were bound to fail. The nature of the organizing problem and not the presence of Italians was responsible for failure.

With time we could examine the experiences of the Italians as union members in several other industries in the Commonwealth. The story of the coal miners, where the Italians were led by socialists and syndicalists, is particularly interesting. But even here, where they proved to be excellent strikers, the Italians did not long remain organized between major strikes, primarily because their union lacked bargaining power, in the highly competitive national coal market. I have already mentioned, in passing, the case of the stonecutters. We can conclude that where workers had bargaining power stemming from the economic make-up of the industry in which they worked, and from the role which particular groups of workers played within the industry, they could organize Italians successfully. Where they had no such strong economic position, they failed. Italians, like many other late-comers to our shores, entered industries where workers had little bargaining power. There they became devils to unionized workers who soon believed that immigrants could not be organized. Nevertheless, given sufficient bargaining power, Italian immigrants organized rapidly and well. It is time for labor historians to recognize this conclusion.