The Origins of the Labor Movement in the United States: Themes From the Nineteenth Century

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Anniversaries always seem to be a good occasion to reevaluate the past and also to consider new beginnings. Over the last eight years conferences have been held to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the New Deal and the CIO. More recently, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of the United Mine Workers of America by holding a conference at the Eckley Miners' Village at which the papers published in this volume concerning the history of the anthracite coal miners of northeastern Pennsylvania were originally presented.

Paradoxically, all these anniversary celebrations occurred during hard times for the events and institutions which they honored. That reality reminds me of the piece which the historian David Brody wrote for Dissent on the occasion of the Golden Anniversary of the CIO, an essay in which Brody compared the CIO to the Knights of Labor and asked whether or not the CIO would be remembered in history more for its failures than accomplishments, more for its truncated existence than for its transformations of working-class life and labor.

For anthracite coal and for those people whose lives have been shaped by it, hard times came far earlier, even before the New Deal and the CIO. Indeed, if we are to believe most of what has been written about the industry and the region, especially in the work of Clifton Yearly, Anthony F. C. Wallace, Harry Aurand, Perry Blatz, and others, hard times and anthracite coal mining were synonymous for miners, operators, and the hard-coal communities.

The papers which follow tell us about the history of anthracite, its employers, its workers and their institutions, and its communities. Here I intend to focus more on the general background of working-class history and union formation over the course of the nineteenth century than on anthracite Pennsylvania. Yet I also expect to illustrate how the articles in this issue broaden and deepen our knowledge of the main themes of United States labor history. In doing so, I want to make comparisons and contrasts between the past and the present, to suggest that the contemporary crisis of labor and its institutions has its historical counterparts.

The plight of American workers and their unions in the year 1991 is there for all to see. For a decade and longer now, workers have experienced stagnation in
their real wages and standards of living (for some workers there have even been measurable decreases). Union members survive in a shrinking and perilous trade-union universe; everywhere one looks union-free environments and alternative industrial relations systems spread. A global marketplace also imperils American workers and their unions, as corporations seek the cheapest source of labor globally and foreign competitors as well as overseas U.S. enterprises capture larger shares of the domestic American market. And while all this happens, the American labor force finds itself being reshaped not just by the pressures of global competition and technological innovation but also by massive waves of new immigrants and a revolutionized gender structure.

It is important to remember, however, that such great changes in the conditions of American workers and their institutions are not without precedent. The past is filled with moments when workers had to confront new material realities and, as in the 1980s, lacked the ability or facility to reshape the external environment to their advantage.

People have a tendency to romanticize the past, to remember more heroic actors and deeds from days of yore. For some observers, labor’s golden age occurred in the heyday of the CIO. For others at some imprecisely defined point in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, as caught in the title of David Montgomery’s recently much admired history of American labor between 1870 and 1920, *The Fall of the House of Labor*. And for still others, that Golden Age coincided with the glory days of the Knights of Labor or with the emergence of the first militant American workers’ movement in the era of Andrew Jackson. Such romanticizers of the past, whether Montgomery in describing a labor movement that was militant and anticapitalist; or Leon Fink celebrating the solidarity of the Knights of Labor and its principle, “an injury to one is the concern of all”; or Sean Wilentz exalting the republicanism of Jacksonian labor, seem to see and write the history of American labor as a declension.

Clearly, however, the reality of the nineteenth century for working people was far more complex and contradictory, and the history of labor during that century was far more cyclical than linear; it moved neither steadily upward nor continuously downward. The papers presented at the conference in Eckley and published here all illustrate precisely that point. Whether we read Harry Aurand on the early history of unionism among anthracite miners, or Perry Blatz on the origins of stable unionism, or Clement Valletta on the trials and tribulations of hard-coal miners and their union during the 1920s and 1930s, the tale told is one of flood and ebb, rise and fall, cycles of success and failure rather than persistent and linear progress.

Working people in the nineteenth century lived through changes as drastic as those we are experiencing today. Perhaps the rate of change was slower then, at
least by our contemporary standards, but remember that what may seem a glacial pace to us could well have been experienced as rapid transformation by our ancestors. Two incredible transformations altered life for working people over the course of the nineteenth century.

First, there occurred what David Gordon and his coauthors have characterized as the process of "initial proletarianization," and others have more generally labeled the industrial revolution. This process itself consisted of two parts. First, there was the separation of people from the land and the means or tools of production. Many immigrants had only their labor power to sell to others in order to sustain themselves and their families. Masses of people found themselves transformed from self-employed and self-sufficient farmers and artisans into dependent wage-earners, the first American proletariat.

Second, a transport-communications revolution widened the market in which labor power and commodities competed. Distant, impersonal, allegedly self-regulating markets determined the prices received by workers for their labor or the products they produced. Indeed, in the law, in economic theory, and partly in practice, labor became another commodity to be bartered in a competitive market for the cheapest price. The implications of such competition for working people were immediate and dire.

Simultaneous with these two great transformations equally powerful forces contributed to a reshaping of the labor force. Those enterprises most clearly and most often associated with the industrial revolution, the textile mills, relied heavily on a female labor force. Young, mostly unmarried women became the industrial workers, and thousands of their sisters, married as well as unmarried, swelled the ranks of domestic or sweated homeworkers in the large seaport cities and rural regions. Then, in the 1840s and 1850s the first massive waves of immigration introduced several million Irish and German immigrants into the labor force, the Irish clustering heavily in unskilled day labor, domestic labor, and the textile mills, and the Germans distributing themselves more evenly across the labor force. By the eve of the Civil War, then, the U.S. had a labor force fractured along fault lines based on gender, ethnicity, and religion. Once again in the papers published here we see evidence of how ethnicity and religion, if not gender (for the miners were all men), marked, and sometime scarred, the history of the anthracite communities. In the era which Harry Aurand discusses, religion divided Irish Catholic laborers from Protestant Welsh and English miners, foremen, and bosses, adding a sharper edge to class hostilities and sparking the violence of the Molly Maguires. Then, in the periods described by Blatz and Valletta, readers learn how an overwhelmingly English-speaking union leadership had to come to terms with the South and East European immigrants employed in the mines and to recruit some of them for leadership positions in the anthracite union districts and locals.
Toward the end of the nineteenth century a so-called second industrial revolution began, one which further reshaped the labor force and transformed the lives of working people. Now entrepreneurs applied science and technology to industry, using the managerial techniques and production methods described so well in the work of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. The growth of mass-production industry, scientific management, and what the historian Daniel Nelson has called a managerial revolution, occurred simultaneously. The new mass-production industries demanded a new labor force composed in large part of semi-skilled operators who ran specialized, single-purpose machines, which were set up and kept running by a smaller minority of skilled workers who themselves were subjected to tighter managerial discipline than ever before.

And mass immigration continued to recompose the labor force. In the late 19th century millions of fresh Irish and German immigrants joined their compatriots of the antebellum immigration. They in turn were joined in the immigrant stream by Britons (English, Scots, and Welsh), Scandinavians, and toward the end of the century by Italians, Slavs, East European Jews, and even Turks, Lebanese, and Syrians as well as Quebecois and surplus American farm boys and girls. This was the labor force that Friedrich Engels described to an American associate as one in which workers were separated by a deep chasm of language, nationality, and race.

Disruptive as such forces and changes were for working people, they were rendered more calamitous yet by the cycles of accumulation and disaccumulation which marked the history of capitalism in the nineteenth century. Recurrent panics, recessions, and depressions scarred the history of the century. Not without good reason has the last quarter of the nineteenth century gone into world history as the age of the great depression. Remarkably, during precisely that era of economic contraction, the United States and Imperial Germany continued to lay the foundations for their economic power and to surpass Great Britain as the workshops of the world. For workers, however, there was no doubt that the great depression spelled misery, for it was precisely then that the word “unemployment” entered the English vocabulary.

How did working people respond to such transformations in the circumstances and conditions of their lives? There are no simple answers. Thanks to the blessings of hindsight, we can see cycles of working-class protest and organization analogous to the cycles of business. For workers and their movements there was no steady or linear development over the course of the nineteenth century. Instead, discontinuity and rupture proved the norm. The history of anthracite miners, as portrayed by Aurand, Blatz, and Valletta, leaves no doubt of that reality. In the late nineteenth century, as Aurand stresses, unions among hard-coal miners emerged and disappeared with regularity. In the next century, the successful union
movement explored by Blatz and built in the century's first decade was later wracked by the sorts of internal dissension and external threats described so well by Valletta.

It would be no exaggeration to say that all the worker protests and labor movements looked backward and forward simultaneously. Let us consider, for example, the first truly effective or noticeable worker movement in U.S. history, the one that emerged in the era of Andrew Jackson. On the one hand, Jacksonian labor leaders and their followers used themes and symbols that harked back to the revolutionary generation and the founding fathers. They spoke in terms of restoration and a golden age in the past when all adult men were free, equal, and independent citizens in a republic based on virtuous citizenship and not material accumulation. On the other hand, to restore that more glorious, or virtuous, or republican condition, the same spokespeople also talked the language of trade unionism, collective action, strikes, closed shops, and a primitive labor theory of value. The more advanced among them, such people as Thomas Skidmore, Robert Dale Owen, and Frances Wright, even elaborated utopian reforms which promised to create egalitarian, communitarian, cooperative societies. Such ideas resonated in a labor movement that remained throughout the Jacksonian era quite local and community-based in character and composition.  

However vital, vigorous, and militant this labor movement may have been, it lacked the resources to withstand the economic depression which decimated business between 1837 and 1843. Economic contraction, falling wages, and competition for jobs fostered conflict among workers rather than struggle between workers and employers. For the next two decades ethnoreligious and racial strife transfigured all aspects and arenas of American life. Protestant and Catholic workers fought on the streets of Philadelphia and other cities with substantial Catholic immigrant working classes. Politics and political parties were persistently reshaped by the impact of ethnoreligious strife. By the era of the Civil War, the old Democratic party and the new Republican party had each integrated a sector of the working class into a cross-class political alliance. At work, as the writings of David Montgomery and Ira Katznelson show, workers may have been momentarily united against their bosses on the basis of class, but at home in the neighborhood and its political parties, they were divided on the basis of nationality and religion.  

Not until the Civil War and its runaway inflation in a tight labor market did the labor movement revive itself in anything like the form, fashion, and militancy of the Jacksonian era. This time there was even an effort to build it on a national basis. By and large, however, unions and other working-class institutions remained most active and effective in local arenas where their actions focused on issues vital to the community. But this movement, like its Jacksonian predecessor, disintegrated during the depression of the 1870s, and for much the same reasons.
Aurand's article on early mine workers' organizations illustrates perfectly the local character and community-based origins of such unions and how that reality doomed them to impermanence.

Two decades later in the middle of the 1880s a militant labor movement reemerged under the auspices of the Knights of Labor to stand front-and-center during what historians have labeled labor's "Great Upheaval" of 1885-86. Like the Jacksonian labor movement, the Knights' leaders and their followers simultaneously glimpsed backwards and forwards. Although few, if any, of the labor leaders of the 1880s had direct or even ancestral links to the Jacksonian labor movement, their rhetoric struck many of the same themes. The speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers of the Knights were filled with paeans to republicanism, good citizenship, independence, communitarianism, virtue, and proper Christian behavior. Aurand's article also provides us concrete examples of how the appeal of the Knights of Labor resonated throughout the Anthracite region. It is well to recall that the Greenback-Labor mayor of Scranton and former skilled machinist, Terence Powderly, served between 1878 and 1893 as the Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor.

We should recall, however, that another tradition harbored itself deep within the bosom of the Knights of Labor, a tradition that looked ahead to a different sort of labor movement with different objectives. This counter-tradition might best be associated with the national trade assemblies, actually trade unions, incorporated within the structure of the Knights, and built around the principles of collective action (strikes and boycotts), closed shops, and all the weapons of working-class militancy in a war between labor and capital. The struggle between the two traditions was fought within the Knights of Labor as well as between it and its external trade-union critics.

It is essential for us to remember that the Knights of Labor remained largely a local or community-based organization and movement. It was never truly effective at the state, regional, or national levels. Its most effective actions, whether in the form of strikes, boycotts, or political campaigns, occurred at the local level as so well described by Leon Fink in his history of that movement.

Its formation in local branches and its focus on community issues and actions made the Knights of Labor an anomaly in a nation passing from the first through the second industrial revolutions. The Knights were scarcely equipped to go to war with adversaries who operated multi-plant enterprises in various political jurisdictions and who competed for labor and markets nationally. In fact, the leaders preferred not to go to war with their class enemies but lost control of their troops who waged battle only to be savagely defeated. The history of anthracite mine unions in the 1860s, 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s exemplifies localism at work in the labor movement and the inability of workers to unite across space.
The trade unions outside the Knights of Labor and the national trade assemblies inside came to grips sooner and better with most aspects of socio-economic reality. The notions of "pure and simple" or "business unionism" so often associated with the trade unions of the late nineteenth century, or Samuel Gompers and his American Federation of Labor are really only a small part of the story of what happened. More important was the decision by the trade unionists to recognize the permanence of corporate capitalism in a national marketplace; to elaborate a program aimed at taking workers and products out of competition with each other; and to recognize the priority of solidarity and thus to bridge the chasms of ethnicity, race, and gender, however imperfectly done. Most trade unions became a haven or a home largely to the more highly skilled workers who were largely North European or American-born in origin (often Protestant also) and whose irreplaceable skills gave them the ability to build stable labor organizations. Too often and easily some scholars have denigrated such workers as the aristocrats of labor. Yet as Blatz and Valletta show, the United Mine Workers built stable unionism among the anthracite workers only by uniting them regardless of skills and welding together people of diverse nationalities and religions.

As the UMW proved, the new labor movement did not belong only to the aristocrats. At its creation in 1890, the new union amalgamated the old national trade assembly of the Knights of Labor with its trade-union enemy, and the founding convention numbered more Knights than trade unionists. And the union was called United Mine Workers because it welded together formerly antagonistic bodies in common cause. The UMW also took seriously the old Knights principle of solidarity and opened its doors to all who worked in and around the coal mines regardless of skill, nationality, or race. It also fought the great bituminous strike of 1897 to take wages and prices out of competition throughout the Central Competitive Field, an objective it achieved through the agreement of 1898 with the CCF operators, the first truly industry- and area-wide collective bargaining contract in U.S. history. Perry Blatz suggests in the first footnote to his article precisely how important that settlement was not only for the history of the UMW but also for the future success of unionism among anthracite miners.16

The trade unionism and labor movement built by the AFL and its affiliates and exemplified by the UMW in the decade of the 1890s was a fitting response to the worker's world of the late nineteenth century. The problem for it, and perhaps for us, was that the worker's world was ever changing, and that capital, corporations, and business innovated and labor reacted.

For few workers was that more true than the anthracite miners of northeastern Pennsylvania who during the 1920s and 1930s saw their world, and union, and culture change beyond salvation. As Valletta shows, the hard-coal miners and their union grew impotent in the face of competing sources of energy, new forms of
domestic heating, and the tragedy of the Great Depression. Hard times led to a recurrence of intraunion dissension and a partial return to the organizational instability of the late nineteenth century. The miners and their union never recovered fully from the reverses suffered during the 1920s and 1930s. Today anthracite coal and its workers bulk larger at state museums in Ashland, Scranton, and Eckley, Pennsylvania and at anniversary conferences such as the one in which the following articles were first presented as oral papers than as a vital presence in the national or regional economies. Anthracite coal, its people, its traditions, its culture, its folklore, and its unions now belong largely to history.

Notes
3. The Fall of the House of Labor: the Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925 (New York, 1987).
9. Although none of the papers here analyze the language of class and coal miners, it should be noted that miners and their leaders spoke a lan-
guage which resonated with the symbols and tones of masculinity, a language which cries out for gender analysis.


13. Wilentz, Chants Democratic, is the best treatment and analysis of the ideology and symbolism of the Jacksonian labor movement.


15. Fink, Workingman’s Democracy is the most sympathetic guide to the ideology, symbolism, and ritualism of the Knights. For an almost equally favorable portrait, see Richard Oestreicher, Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900 (Urbana, IL, 1986), esp. chs. 3-6.