

The Working People of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the General Strike of 1835

THE founding of Philadelphia in 1682 marks the close of British North American settlement in the seventeenth century. From its founding, ships had been built in the Quaker City for foreign orders, and the city early became a leading colonial commercial center. But, as elsewhere in the colonies, the manufacturers of Philadelphia had to await release from British mercantilist restrictions before they were able to develop in earnest.

The American Revolution provided this release, and from 1776 on, Philadelphia became one of the nation's industrial centers. Tench Coxe, speaking there in 1787 before the Friends of American Manufactures, listed in impressive array the county's products. Included were such diverse items as ships and malt liquor and distilled spirits, paper and its allied fields, meal, candles, soap, tobacco, cannon, muskets, anchors, nails, windsor chairs, ploughs and other farm implements, carriages, shoes, saddlery, boots, leather goods, hosiery and other wearing apparel, coarse linens and woolen and some cotton wares, and metal products ranging from gold to stone and copper.¹ To produce these items there existed in Philadelphia from the first days of the Republic a large number of people who were by occupation operatives in the mills. It is to these we now turn.

I

Philadelphia's Working People to the Depression of 1819-1822

Indentured servants were numerous in early Philadelphia; some 2,000 entered the city in the middle of 1709. Upon arrival and whenever their masters exchanged them, they were by law supposed to be

¹ Tench Coxe, *A View of the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1794), 39.

registered before the mayor. Of almost 2,000 so registered in 1745 and 1746, over half had terms of four and five years.²

Adam Smith cited Philadelphia as one of three colonial centers where it was generally cheaper to hire a freeman than a slave. The colonial assembly in 1712, possibly influenced by an insurrection in New York, placed a high duty on Negroes, which crystallized increased opposition to slave competition in a 1722 resolve.³ There was a protest in 1737 against the effects of Negro competition; as early as 1707 free mechanics had complained of the "Want of Employment, and Lowness of wages, occasioned by the Number of *Negroes* . . . hired out to work by the Day."⁴

Some time after 1700, the Common Council gave the cordwainers (shoemakers) and the tailors corporate privileges and formulated the policy of chartering other craft guilds for the sake of better public service. The best known guild in Philadelphia was probably the Carpenters' Company of Philadelphia, founded in 1724, with membership limited to masters of six years' standing.⁵ Two secessions proved short-lived, and in 1792 the Company was incorporated. Its entrance fee was raised to \$100, eldest sons of deceased members excepted. A book of prices was established; limited to the use of guild members, changes in it were made by a standing committee whose decisions were binding. Members of five years' standing could fix the prices of their work, but they were liable to expulsion if they did so without first being certified by the committee.⁶ This guild system was also to be found in many of Philadelphia's seventeen fire companies on the eve of the Revolution—for example, the Cordwainers' Fire

² Benjamin Rush, *An Account of the Manners of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1875), 10; "Register Before James Hamilton, Mayor," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXII (1908), 358; *The Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania from 1682-1801* (Harrisburg, 1896-1911), IV, 170-171, 369-370.

³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, rev. ed. (London, 1904), I, 83; John F. Watson, ed., *Annals of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1857), I, 98; W. E. B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro* (Philadelphia, 1899), 14-15.

⁴ Quoted in Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness, The First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742* (New York, 1938), 201.

⁵ Richard B. Morris claims that there is no evidence to support the position of Ware and Harris that the company included from the start not only masters, but also journeymen. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946), 142 (note); Norman J. Ware, *Labor in Modern Industrial Society* (New York, 1935); and Herbert Harris, *American Labor* (New Haven, Conn., 1938), 5 (note).

⁶ Morris, 152.

Company, which was founded by thirty-nine master shoemakers, and which limited its membership to those who first served a regular apprenticeship.⁷

Such organized groups undertook positive action from time to time to protect their rights.

Although John R. Commons claims that the Philadelphia printers' strike of 1786 was the nation's first, this is questioned by Richard B. Morris, who cites a strike of New York's journeymen tailors in 1768. In 1779, too, there had been a strike of 150 mariners at the port of Philadelphia for higher wages. Charging riot rather than conspiracy, the Confederation had used federal troops to back up state authorities, who had the leaders of the strike arraigned before the magistrates.⁸ The journeymen printers who went out on strike in 1786 were protesting a wage cut. They provided for what was probably the first strike benefit fund on record in the United States. Although permanent organization was delayed, the printers today have the oldest extant constitution of any American labor organization.⁹ In 1791 the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers of Philadelphia organized to protect themselves from "scab labor." They conducted at least three strikes by 1800, the first called by a bona fide union in our history. (Strikes before this had been spontaneous.) When the boot-makers walked out in sympathy, they were probably the first to go out on a sympathy strike. In 1794 the shoemakers compelled the employers to hire union members only. An unfriendly court witness complained:

If I did not join the body no man would sit upon the seat where I worked, nor board or lodge in the same house, nor would they work at all for the same employer.¹⁰

When they went on strike in 1803, Philadelphia's journeymen curriers issued the following notice:

To the Journeymen Curriers of all Parts of the Union

Your brethren of Philadelphia take this method of informing you that they have turned out unanimously for higher prices—they therefore think, that, as they ask

⁷ *Ibid.*, 142 (note).

⁸ *Colonial Records* (Harrisburg, 1838-1853), XI, 664-665.

⁹ Ethelbert Stewart, ed., *A Documentary History of the Early Organization of the Printers* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1907), 941-945.

¹⁰ Quoted in John R. Commons, ed., *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (Cleveland, 1910), III, 294; hereafter cited as Commons.

no more than the prices established in New York, that their brethren of the trade will take no notice of any advertisements of the employers here to allure them to the city; more especially as the master curriers have entered into resolutions to lower the prices that have been current for twenty years past.¹¹

Seven years later, striking printers of Philadelphia received a pledge from their brethren in New York not to accept their employers' enticements to take their jobs. A Philadelphia cordwainer was fined five dollars for contempt of court in 1806, when he arose during a trial and shouted, "A scab is a shelter for lice!"¹² When the employers replied by a lockout to a strike of the Federal Society of Philadelphia Cabinet-Makers in 1796, the latter issued the following call:

We hope and intreat that a union of the respective mechanical branches in this city, and throughout America, will immediately take place, in order to repel any attack . . . on societies of this description. . . . We feel that the united efforts of all the societies, must produce a more permanent establishment of the independence of each, than the individual exertion of a single one. Hasten, then, fellow citizen, to declare yourself ready at any time to assist one another, in a cause which will determine the independence of so useful a body as the working citizens of America.¹³

One of the first court cases in which the right of workers to combine was tested concerned the Philadelphia journeymen cordwainers' society. On November 1, 1805, a Quaker City grand jury indicted eight of the society's members on charges of combining and of conspiring to raise wages. The workers appealed to the public to join them in resisting the establishment of a precedent dangerous to all democratic movements;

under whatever pretences the thing is done, the name of freedom is but a shadow . . . if we are to be torn from our friends for endeavouring to obtain a fair and just support for our families, and if we are to be treated as felons and murderers only for asserting the right to take or refuse whatever we deem an adequate reward for our labor.¹⁴

The trial was of national importance because it became involved in the struggle between the Federalists and the Democrats over the former's control of the judiciary. Jared Ingersoll, a Federalist champion of the common law, represented the prosecution; Caesar A. Rodney, later to be Jefferson's Attorney-General, was retained by the

¹¹ *Aurora* (Phila.), Nov. 9, 1803.

¹² *Commons, et al.*, I, 110-111.

¹³ *Aurora*, Apr. 7, 1796.

¹⁴ *Aurora*, Nov. 28, 1805.

shoemakers. Rodney was a foe of the common law, which he regarded as an anachronism which should have been swept away with British tyranny.¹⁵

At least nine members of the jury came from groups in the population which could be expected to be unfriendly to the workers. The prosecution's choice for a first witness set the tone of its approach: he was Job Harrison, a self-confessed labor spy. Unless the union were crushed, the prosecution averred, industries would leave the city. Ingersoll asked the jury whether it was prepared to allow unions "composed of men who have been only a little time in your country" to exist rather than "submit to the laws of the country" which they were seeking to "alter according to their own whim. . . ."

Rodney, for the defense, observed that the employers were hiding behind the English Statute of Laborers of 1349, passed originally to halt the rise of wages that would have followed the Black Plague. Had the patriots of 1776 made their sacrifices to maintain such a law? he asked. As for the argument that unless the union were crushed businessmen would leave the city, Rodney said that, if it were not that it was false, it would be immaterial, for is not "the labourer surely worthy of sufficient honor to enable him to live comfortably?" In his concluding remarks, Rodney placed the question as follows:

If you are desirous of introducing a spirit of inequality into our government and laws, if you think that the labourer and the journeyman enjoy too great a part of liberty . . . such disposition . . . will lead you to convict the defendants. If, on the other hand, . . . you are content with the blessings enjoyed under our Constitution which secures to the citizen an equality of rights which recognize no distinction of classes—I shall look for a verdict of acquittal.

Taking the former course, the jury set a precedent, declaring the workers "guilty of a combination to raise wages."¹⁶

One at least of the "working citizens" early appreciated the need for political action to supplement economic beliefs. Even before the Revolution, a Philadelphia mechanic wrote:

It has been customary for a certain Company of leading Men to nominate persons, and to settle the ticket, for Assembly-men, Commissioners, Assessors, etc., without ever permitting the affirmative or negative voice of a Mechanic to interfere. . . .

¹⁵ W. Nelles, "The First American Labor Case," *Yale Law Journal*, XLI (1931), 177.

¹⁶ John R. Commons, *et al.*, *History of Labor in the United States* (New York, 1925-1936), III, 172 ff., hereafter cited as Commons, *et al.*; Nelles, 177.

This we have so tamely submitted to so long, that those Gentlemen make no Scruple to say, that the Mechanics . . . have no Right to *speak* or *think* for themselves. . . . I think it absolutely necessary that one or two Mechanics be elected to represent so large a Body of Inhabitants.¹⁷

In 1772, a "Patriotic Society," two years later to become the Mechanics' Association of Philadelphia, was formed to preserve "our just Rights and Privileges to us and our Posterity against every attempt to violate . . . the same, either here or on the other side of the Atlantic."¹⁸

Later, Pennsylvania's constitution made it one of the few states without property qualifications for voting. One Philadelphia mechanic urged his fellow workers to take advantage of this, declaiming that "all the miseries of mankind have arisen from freemen not maintaining and exercising their own sentiments. No reason can be given why a free people should not be equally *independent* in this, as in other respects, in their *political* as well as their religious persuasions."¹⁹

Evidently these words expressed the feelings of others, too, because artisan clubs were formed after the Revolution by the coopers, watchmakers, ropemakers, brickmakers, saddlers and cordwainers, among others. These clubs represented the artisans of Philadelphia during the processions held in that city in celebration of the adoption of the Constitution.²⁰ Philadelphia's mechanics later took a leading part in the formation of the Democratic Club which supported Jefferson, contributing half of the more than 200 club members.

¹⁷ *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Phila.), Sept. 27, 1770.

¹⁸ Philip Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1941), 77-78.

In the summer of 1779, a Philadelphia public meeting elected a committee to enforce Pennsylvania's price-fixing law. At the meeting it was announced that the committee would retain its arms until its purpose was accomplished. Most merchants seem to have been co-operative. However, when Tom Paine and a Committee of Inspection confiscated one of his cargoes, Robert Morris protested that it was "inconsistent with the principles of liberty to prevent a man from the disposal of his property in such terms and for such considerations as he may think fit." Ellis P. Oberholtzer, *Robert Morris: Patriot and Financier* (New York, 1903), 52 ff. Contrariwise, the committee's view was that trade could regulate itself only when not "clogged with disease." Morris, 111. Significantly, it received an offer of armed support from the artillery company of Philadelphia, and announced its support of its counterparts in every state and county in the nation.

¹⁹ *Independent Gazetteer* (Phila.), Oct. 9, 1784.

²⁰ Samuel Hazard, ed., *The Register of Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1828-1835), I, 419-424.

With rights goes responsibility: during the War of 1812, the Philadelphia Typographical Society appropriated a day's labor from each of its members to help build fortifications in the city, and soon after voted to assist wives of members who were serving their country.²¹

II

Trade Unions in Philadelphia, 1822-1832

The depression of 1819-1822 tolled the death knell for most of the few unions which had survived adverse court decisions, blacklists, and fatal strikes. Then, late in March, 1823, the printers of New Orleans formed a union and initiated another period of growth for labor organizations. By 1827, it took a combination of employers threatening to halt construction for the season to break a strike of Boston's carpenters for a ten-hour day.²²

Two months later, Philadelphia's carpenters also were striking for a ten-hour day. Complaining of suffering under a régime of excessively long hours which made them subject to nervous diseases, among others, a resolution unanimously passed by the journeymen carpenters at a meeting held on June 13 insisted that "all men have a just right . . . to have sufficient time in each day for the cultivation of their mind and for self-improvement. . . ." The master carpenters rejected this thesis, however, regretting "the formation of any society that has a tendency to subvert good order . . .," and stating that "the present price per day given to Journeymen Carpenters . . . by their employers" did not permit of their hours of labor being shortened.²³

Replying to the master carpenters in an appeal to the public, the journeymen argued that the masters exaggerated, even on their own reasoning, the amount of time lost by adoption of a ten-hour day, an amount which would disappear entirely when other factors than

²¹ *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 9, 1788; Charles A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York, 1913), 241, 244, 247; Eugene P. Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800* (New York, 1942), 71-72.

²² Commons, VI, 76-77, 79-81. Commons points out that this strike was broken "not by the master carpenters, but by the employers of the masters, the capitalists, and merchants." *Ibid.*, VI, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*, V, 75-80, 81.

hours alone were considered. They charged that their antagonists really feared being deprived "of the power they had hitherto had of employing a man during the summer, in the long days, and either discharging him in the winter, or reducing his wages." Concluding, they asked the public to "remember, we are men of like persons with yourselves, and say will you combine with employers to force us to be slaves."²⁴

Once the strike started, a committee of twelve was authorized to negotiate with the masters, to accept jobs at reasonable pay when offered by individual citizens, and to handle strike relief. Meetings called by the journeymen house painters and glazers about this time may have been purposely planned to aid the carpenters. The bricklayers did join them by walking out for a ten-hour day. But the strike was lost for want of better organization and broader support.²⁵

This strike had been inspired in part by an anonymous pamphlet calling upon the workers to fight for sufficient leisure to attain the knowledge necessary to put universal suffrage to use. To supplement pamphlets such as this, the *Mechanics' Free Press*, the oldest extant labor newspaper of the United States, was founded after the strike, and was soon followed by the organization of the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations.

In the Mechanics' Union preamble,²⁶ the journeymen mechanics, conscious of their poor economic conditions and feeling unable to defend their families from evils resulting from an accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few, announced the Union's initiation. Pointing out that "those who labour, while acquiring to themselves thereby only a scanty and penurious support, . . . maintain in affluence and luxury the rich who never labour . . .," they asked whether it was just that the wealth of the nation created by them should be "absorbed by the coffers of the unproductive. . . . The products of our labour may be accumulated by a few into vast pernicious masses, calculated to prepare the minds of the possessors for the exercise of lawless rule and despotism . . . and [to] fright away that shadow of freedom which still lingers among us."

²⁴ *Ibid.*, V, 82-83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 75.

²⁶ Its complete text, reprinted from the *Mechanics' Free Press* (Phila.), Oct. 25, 1828, is in Commons, V, 84-90.

Had God given them the power to create more than society could ever consume only to make existence a curse and a burden to them? Yet the day of emancipation was dawning, inasmuch as "whatever is conducive to the real prosperity of the greatest numbers, must in the nature of things conduce to the happiness of all. . . . If the mass of the people were enabled by their labour to procure . . . a full and abundant supply of the comforts and conveniences of life, the consumption of articles . . ." would double.

Of all fallacies, none was greater than that which maintained that society could benefit "by deprecating the value of human labour." Carried to its logical conclusion, this could but lead to the glutting of the world market and an overflowing of its products into the store-houses of the monopolizers. First to suffer from this process were the producing majority, who, "having no other resource for subsistence than what they derive from the miserable pittance, which they are compelled by competition to receive in exchange for their . . . labour, must first begin to . . . suffer under its . . . withering effects." But they will be rapidly joined in their misery by the "vendors of the products of human industry." Demand having plummeted with the real income of the majority of the population, "trade must in consequence languish, and losses and failures become the order of the day. At last, . . . [the capitalist's] capital . . . will become . . . unemployed and stagnant."

The Mechanics' Union, the preamble concluded, speaking for the fifteen founding member unions,²⁷ would seek to raise the level of the mechanics to the point "their practical skill and ingenuity, their immense utility to the nation and their growing intelligence are beginning to demand." It was prepared to co-operate with other groups to establish "a just balance of power . . . between all the various classes and individuals which constitute society at large."

Before a year had elapsed the Mechanics' Union had determined to take political action. With its formation of a Working Men's Party, its economic activities declined; only four unions were reported sending delegates to its final meeting.²⁸

The Working Men's Party, at its first meeting on August 11, 1828, which all workingmen were invited to attend, adopted a preamble

²⁷ *Ibid.*, V, 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

and several resolutions.²⁹ Anticipating attacks, the preamble observed that pre-election public meetings had long been sanctioned; certainly the United States "particularly" would not deny one group what it granted another. ". . . Thoroughly convinced of their undoubted right so to do in such cases, the Mechanics and Working Men of the City and County of Philadelphia, are determined henceforth to take the management of their own interests, as a class, into their own immediate keeping. . . ."

To implement this intention, the meeting recommended that the workers support only such candidates for City Council and the Legislature who pledged, if elected, to advance the workers' interests. Four district meetings were to pick suitable candidates in nonpartisan fashion. It was suggested in one proposed resolution that only workers should sit as delegates to the district meetings.

Of the thirty-nine new party candidates, nineteen also ran on the Jackson ticket and ten on the Adams. Those who ran on the new party ticket alone polled from 239 to 539 votes, while those on the Democratic ticket received from 3,800 to 7,000 and the Administration men from 2,500 to 3,800 votes. "False, slanderous and malicious reports . . . circulated by our enemies" and "treasonable conduct . . . on the part of some of the workingmen's delegates" partly explained the low vote. Under the circumstances, the *Mechanics' Free Press* asked, "Who can say but we have achieved a triumph?"³⁰ For, while the Working Men's Party eschewed action in the national election, both congressional candidates publicly admitted "the justice of the working people's attempts to lessen the established hours of daily labour," and conspicuously displayed the slogan "From Six to Six." Both major parties had attached to their names, "The Working Men's Ticket."³¹

In the election of 1828, the new party had relied upon "Committees of Vigilance" set up by the county nominating conventions. After the election, ward and district clubs were organized to win votes for their candidates and to bring about a "general diffusion of constitutional, legal and political knowledge among the working

²⁹ Reprinted in *ibid.*, V, 91-92.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, V, 77.

people.”³² Finally, in March, 1829, the Republican Political Association of the Working Men of the City of Philadelphia was organized to bring out the workers’ votes in the fall elections.

At meetings, many of which produced warnings against fusion with any established party, the ward clubs elected delegates to city and county nominating conventions which picked the candidates. These latter were chosen before either of the old parties selected theirs in order to spike charges of fusion, and to emphasize the independence of the Working Men’s Party. Of thirty-two of its city candidates, nine were later endorsed by the Federalists and three by the Democrats, while the Federalists also endorsed three of its county candidates. Despite both the lack of a secret ballot and threats of economic reprisals, the new party’s city candidates averaged 800 votes and its county candidates, 1,600. Twenty of its fifty-four candidates were elected; fourteen of the fifteen endorsed by the two old parties won. The *Mechanics’ Free Press* observed, “The balance of power has at length got into the hands of the working people, where it properly belongs. . . .”³³

Before the election, the delegates of the new party sent those legislative candidates it endorsed a list of questions. One would have committed them to support the establishment of “an open school and competent teachers for every child in the state, from the lowest branch . . . to the lecture rooms of political science,” with superintendents to be chosen by the people.³⁴

Fifteen wards sent delegates to a City Convention to discuss issues and candidates for the next election. A disagreement arose on whether candidates should be limited to workers or extended to include “tried friends.” In the meantime, the Democrats assailed the new party as being but a section of the Federalists; they organized a meeting of workingmen in the suburb of the Northern Liberties to denounce it. At the same time, the press called Frances Wright its ideological parent, a charge to which the new party issued a flat denial. But to no avail. The Democrats polled two thirds of the total vote. Yet, the Working Men’s Party did increase its average by

³² *Mechanics’ Free Press*, Nov. 1, 1828, quoted in Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York, 1947), 128.

³³ Oct. 10, 1828, quoted in Foner, 128.

³⁴ Commons, V, 93.

about 300; its candidates received from 812 to 1,047 votes, and all eight of those also nominated by the Democrats were victorious. In the Northern Liberties, eight Labor candidates for county commissioner were elected.

In the elections of 1831, the Working Men's Party failed to elect any candidates. Those running for city office without endorsement by either major party received less than 400 votes each, although candidates for state assembly polled from 1,316 to 1,800 votes.³⁵ The party never again placed candidates in the field; among the reasons given for its decline were: (1) its discouragement over the static situation it was encountering in vote-getting³⁶; (2) the dominating public interest during 1832 in questions of national politics³⁷; and (3) the failure to unite the various political clubs which had sprung up throughout the state (notably in Lancaster and Carlisle) into a state-wide party.³⁸

III

The City Central, 1833-1834

City centrals consisting of delegates from various craft unions were founded in many places throughout the United States during 1833. They gave member unions financial aid during strikes, sometimes using the boycott. Frequently, as in the assistance given in 1835 by the Newark Trades' Union to striking Philadelphia handloom weavers, they helped strikers in another city. Some started their own papers, while others supported friendly papers. Occasionally, they sent agents to organize new local unions which later joined them. One Philadelphia union organizer spoke of the city central "as a school in which every member has an opportunity of learning how to defend and protect his rights."³⁹

Delegates from the factory districts around Philadelphia founded the Trades' Union of Pennsylvania in August, 1833, as a result of a call by the workers of Manayunk at the close of a public appeal. This

³⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Foner, 129.

³⁹ *National Laborer* (N. Y.), Apr. 9, May 14, and June 25, 1836, in Foner, 112.

appeal⁴⁰ vividly described conditions in the factories. Working thirteen hours a day in the summer, in impure air, weakened the factory workers to such an extent that they were scarcely able to work.

. . . But nevertheless work we must . . . or our families would soon be in a starving condition. . . . We cannot provide against sickness . . . for our present wants consume the little we receive, and when we are confined to bed any length of time, we are plunged into the deepest distress which often terminates in total ruin, poverty and pauperism. . . .

The maxim that the laborer was worthy of his hire was acknowledged in theory, yet in practice

. . . our employers would wish to reduce our present wages twenty percent . . . [because] cotton has risen in value, but is it not a necessary consequence of the rise of cotton that cotton goods will rise also; and what matters it to us what the price of cotton is, our wants are as great when cotton is dear as they are when it is cheap. . . .

Whereas investigation had somewhat alleviated the deplorable plight of the children working in the English factories, the appeal of the Manayunk workers observed that nothing had been done for their children who were "oppressed as much as those in the English factories." Children who had to enter the factories at an early age were "reared in total ignorance of the world, and the consequence . . . is the inculcation of immoral and oftentimes vicious habits, which terminates in the disgrace of many . . . in the public prisons." If their fathers worked reasonable hours at decent wages, the children could be placed in a public school,

. . . but situated as they are, and reared in ignorance, they are . . . made the tools of political as well as avaricious men, who lord it over them as does the southern planter over his slaves!

Of the women, no allowance was made "on the part of our employers, for their sex or age." Those grown to womanhood earned barely enough for their support.

Briefly, "it would be useless to point out in detail, all the injustices we suffer from an overbearing aristocracy," the appeal concluded. In a postscript, the Manayunk People's Committee expressed a desire "to hear from the different trades unions throughout the United States." This request led to the formation of the Trades' Union of Pennsylvania.⁴¹

⁴⁰ For its full text, see Commons, V, 331-334.

⁴¹ Commons, *et al.*, I, 374.

William Gilmore, President of the Manayunk People's Committee, signed a call of the Trades' Union of Pennsylvania for a convention of farmers and factory workers to be held at the Philadelphia County Courthouse on December 9, 1833, to take measures to secure "a system of General Education—the ten-hour system of labor—and wages adequate to the labor done."⁴² The convention was attended by delegates representing the house carpenters of Philadelphia and the manufacturing districts around the city. They appointed a committee of three to meet with representatives of the newly organized Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia to discuss the practicability of a merger. Since that is the last heard of the Trades' Union of Pennsylvania and since many of its leadership and membership are later found in the Mechanics' Union, the merger may well have taken place.⁴³

The Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia was founded on November 14, 1833, by delegates representing the tailors, bookbinders, and cordwainers. By the new year its membership had grown from three societies to twelve, and by April, 1836, the original three societies representing 400 workers had been expanded to fifty, representing 10,000.

An address⁴⁴ signed by William C. Doores and William English, chairman and secretary respectively, announced to the public certain principles of the new organization.

. . . That state of feebleness . . . that . . . suggested a union of the members of a trade into Societies, suggests also . . . a union of the Trades Societies, which should be carried into effect throughout the United States. The rights of each individual would then be sustained by every working man in the country whose aggregate wealth and power would be able to resist the most formidable oppression. . . . It is as degrading to endure evils which we are able to remedy, as it is honorable to prevent them. . . . [The] American spirit . . . resists oppression.

A meeting held on March 11, 1834, formally settled the organization of the Mechanics' Union. George MacFarlane was elected president and William English, secretary. Originating from the more skilled trades, it later included factory workers' societies. "If he is a workingman in favor of the emancipation of all who labor from the thralldom of monied capital, he is welcome to our ranks. We ask

⁴² Commons, V, 334.

⁴³ Commons, *et al.*, I, 375.

⁴⁴ Text in Commons, V, 339-341.

no qualification of birth or parentage . . . to gain admission among us."⁴⁵

The Mechanics' Union started in 1834 a newspaper called the *Trades' Union*. Unfortunately, reports of the Mechanics' Union's proceedings are not at present extant. It was the cordwainers, evidently its most active members, who set in motion the series of events culminating in the General Strike of 1835.⁴⁶

IV

The General Strike of 1835

Shortly after its formation in 1834, the National Trades' Union had proposed that the city centrals use the general strike whenever employers united to resist their demands. However, the impulse for the Philadelphia General Strike seems to have come in large part from the Boston Carpenters' Strike of 1835. When the carpenters, joined by the masons and stonecutters, went out on strike for the ten-hour day, they took the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the small employers, choosing Seth Luther and two other workers as leaders. They appointed a traveling committee and issued a circular explaining their demands and asking for assistance.⁴⁷ Despite the defeat of the strike, the Boston Circular, reprinted and spread broadcast in Philadelphia, proved decisive there. John Ferral, a Philadelphia labor leader, observed that "the movements of the useful classes here, are mainly to be attributed to the circular."⁴⁸

"We cannot, we will not, longer be mere slaves to inhuman, insatiable, and impitying avarice," that document proclaimed.⁴⁹ "We have taken a firm and decided stand, to obtain the acknowledgment of those rights to enable us to perform . . . [our] duties to God, our country, and ourselves." Their employers were themselves "slaves to the capitalists as we are to them." But the worker had no desire to

⁴⁵ *National Laborer*, Apr. 2, 20, and 23, May 21 and Nov. 5, 1836, in Foner, 112.

⁴⁶ Commons, V, 326.

⁴⁷ For the Boston strike, see *ibid.*, VI, 73 ff.

⁴⁸ From a letter from Ferral to Luther, in Commons, VI, 39. The letter is reprinted in *ibid.*, VI, 39-43, from *The Man* (N. Y.), June 29, 1835. It is significantly dated "6 Mo., 22d., Ind. 49."

⁴⁹ The Circular is printed in Commons, VI, 94-99, prefaced by the following notation: "This was the circular which was republished in Philadelphia and inspired there the General Strike for ten hours."

be the "servant of servants." "They threaten to starve us into submission to their will. Starve us to prevent us from getting drunk!" (One of the arguments of their employers against the ten-hour day was that it would lead to increased drunkenness.) The mechanics were willing enough to do their part of the social services if they were treated as human beings and not beasts of burden. "We claim by the blood of our fathers, shed on our battlefields in the War of the Revolution, the rights of American Freemen. . . ."

Announcing that the time had come "to enroll your names on the scroll of history as the undaunted enemies of oppression . . .," the Boston carpenters pointed out to their "Brethren in the City, Town, and Country, our cause is yours, the cause of Liberty, the cause of God." One Boston worker gave, during the strike, as accurate a précis as exists of the circular. "By the old system we have no time for mental cultivation—and that is the policy of the big bugs—they endeavor to keep people ignorant by keeping them always at work."⁵⁰ William Thompson, President of the Carpenter's Society of Philadelphia, told Seth Luther that "the carpenters considered the Boston circular had broken their shackles, loosened their chains, and made them free from the galling yoke of excessive labor."⁵¹

The first in Philadelphia to follow in the footsteps of the Boston carpenters were the unskilled Irish workers on the Schuylkill River coal docks. Demanding higher wages and a ten-hour day, they apparently took active measures to prevent their jobs being taken by nonstrikers. "Three hundred of them headed by a man armed with a sword, paraded along the Canal, threatening death to those who unload or transfer the cargoes to the 75 vessels waiting in the river."⁵² Shortly after the strike began, the Boston Circular reached Philadelphia. John Ferral described its effect as "electric." It became the most widely discussed topic at union meetings. A rally was held, under its influence, to support the coal heavers and to endorse the ten-hour-day principle.⁵³

The house painters went on strike, denouncing the "present system of labor as oppressive and unjust—destructive of social happiness,

⁵⁰ *Boston Post*, Apr. 17, 1835, in Foner, 116 (note).

⁵¹ Seth Luther, *An Address delivered before the Mechanics and Working-Men of the City of Brooklyn on the Celebration of the Sixtieth Anniversary of American Independence* (Brooklyn, 1836), in Foner, 116 (note).

⁵² *Pennsylvanian* (Phila.), Aug. 8, 1835, in Commons, *et al.*, I, 417.

⁵³ *Pennsylvanian*, June 4, 1835, in *ibid.*, I, 390.

and degrading to the name of freemen,"⁵⁴ and they were followed by bricklayers, masons, carpenters, plasterers, hod carriers, blacksmiths, plumbers and leather curriers. The cordwainers, already striking for higher piece rates, now joined the ten-hour movement, arguing that the higher wages would permit them to work shorter hours. The printers, followed by the auger makers and the saddlers, who were piece workers like the cordwainers; the drygoods stores' clerks, who wanted closings at early candlelight; the bakers, who wanted no baking Saturday night and Sunday; and, lastly, the city employees, joined the strike for a ten-hour day.

A parade was organized by the carpenters, cordwainers, and others. The societies were preceded by a fife and drum corps, holding aloft banners which proclaimed, "From 6 to 6, ten hours work and two hours for meals."⁵⁵ John Ferral told how the parade marched "to the public works, and the workmen joined with us; when the procession passed, employment ceased, business was at a standstill; . . . aprons on, working tools in hand were the orders of the day."⁵⁶

One of the largest meetings held up to that time in Philadelphia was organized by a group of citizens, among whom professional people were most prominent. At this meeting John Ferral urged that, besides supporting the striking coal heavers, those present should give their patronage to a merchant who had already granted the ten-hour day and should initiate a boycott against all merchants who failed to follow suit.⁵⁷

Shortly after the public workers quit work, the common council announced that "the hours of labour of the workingmen employed under the authorities of the City Corporation shall be from 'Six to Six' during the summer season, allowing one hour for breakfast, and one for dinner," and the commissioners of suburban Southwark added to the ten-hour day a twelve-and-a-half-cent increase in the daily wage.⁵⁸ The employer press complained, "What we object to is

⁵⁴ *Proceedings of the Government and Citizens of Philadelphia on the Reduction of the Hours of Labor, and Increase of Wages* (Boston, 1835), in Foner, 117.

⁵⁵ Commons, *et al.*, I, 390-391.

⁵⁶ Commons, VI, 41-42.

⁵⁷ A report of the meeting is printed in *ibid.*, VI, 44-46.

⁵⁸ *Journal of Commerce* (N. Y.), June 8, 1835, in Commons, *et al.*, I, 391; *Proceedings of the Government and Citizens of Philadelphia* . . . , in Foner, 118; *Pennsylvanian*, June 8, 1835, in Commons, *et al.*, I, 391.

not the thing sought . . . but the means of attaining it. . . ." On June 8, the master carpenters granted a ten-hour day to the journeymen, and three days later the master cordwainers increased their journeymen's wages. The strike was won.⁵⁹

By June 22, less than three weeks after the coal heavers had gone on strike, the ten-hour day and a corresponding increase in wages had been granted throughout the city. John Ferral wrote Seth Luther that "The Mechanics of Philadelphia . . . conquered, because they were united and resolute in their actions." He promised that the Mechanics' Union would celebrate Independence Day both with an oration by "a hard-handed mechanic, that we may keep clear of party and profession," and also by raising heartfelt thanks to the Boston workingmen for the Circular "which called forth the energies of the working men of Philadelphia, and knit them together in brotherly feelings, by which they attained their just object."⁶⁰

The victory so speedily won was given great publicity. Carried by the labor press as far south as the Carolinas, a wave of largely successful strikes followed in its train. Towns like New Brunswick and Paterson, New Jersey, Batavia and Seneca Falls, New York, Hartford, Connecticut, and Salem, Massachusetts, were engulfed by strikes for a ten-hour day. By the end of 1835, most mechanics in Newark, New Jersey, and Albany, Troy, and Schenectady, New York, were working a ten-hour day, although there is no evidence of strikes that year in those places. "At the close of the year 1835, excluding Boston, . . . ten hours became the standard day's work for most of the city mechanics who worked by the day."⁶¹

The Philadelphia General Strike had given the fight for the ten-hour day its greatest push. Thence it became an integral part of the working class movements of Europe. It seems a fitting point, therefore, at which to bring to a close this essay into the early history of Philadelphia's working people.

Harrisburg, Pa.

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

⁵⁹ *Journal of Commerce*, June 8, 1835, in *ibid.*, I, 392; Commons, VI, 27.

⁶⁰ Letter from Ferral to Luther, in Commons, VI, 41-43.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, VI, 254-255; and Commons, *et al.*, I, 393.