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THE PITTSBURGH WORKING MEN'S PARTY

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THE ASSIDUOUS COURTING of the wage earners by the professional politicians in the decades of the 1820's and 1830's marked the appearance of a new and unknown force in the politics not only of Pennsylvania but also of the nation. Never before had one class of citizens been so persistently wooed and its interests and its problems given a preeminent position above all others. It is true that the partisans of Jefferson had made a strong and effective plea for the support of the people, but their appeal was "to the 'masses' against the 'aristocracy' of riches" with no specific plea for the support of the wage earners as such.²

One consequence of this appeal for the suffrages of the workers was the mushrooming of Working Men's parties throughout the United States. Philadelphia was the locale of the first of these parties purporting to speak for the workingmen. From there the movement spread to New York, Boston, Cincinnati, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and some of the lesser communities in Pennsylvania and the nation.³

The fact that the first articulate labor movement in the United

¹ The more comprehensive work upon which this article is based, entitled "A Study of the Industrial Worker of Pennsylvania from 1800 to 1840," was prepared by Dr. Sullivan under the sponsorship of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, and accepted as a doctoral dissertation by Columbia University.—*Ed.*

² Charles A. Beard, *Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy*, 401 (New York, 1949).

³ John R. Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, 1:185 ff. (New York, 1918).

States appeared simultaneously with the emergence of Andrew Jackson as a great political force has led many historians to proclaim him as a great proletarian leader. And the appearance of the Working Men's parties at this time has been regarded by many as a manifestation of the political revolution which took place in the Age of Jackson. Students have been prone to accept at face value the Working Men's parties and have regarded them as organized expressions of working class discontent against the existing order.

The story of the Philadelphia and the Boston Working Men's parties has been related elsewhere. From the evidence available it is apparent that the Philadelphia party could not under any circumstances be considered as a movement of protest on the part of the workers in that city.⁴ An examination of the Pittsburgh Working Men's party will disclose that it too could not be considered as a movement of the wage earners against the existing order.

The Pittsburgh Working Men's party differed from its Philadelphia counterpart in that from its very inception its only association with the workingmen was its name. Whereas the Philadelphia organization had grown out of a legitimate trade union dispute and was in the beginning intimately associated with the Mechanic's Union of Trade Associations, the Pittsburgh party was the work of professional politicians whose only interest in the workingman was to garner his vote.

On May 29, 1830, a so-called "Working Men's Meeting" was held at the courthouse in the city of Pittsburgh. Apparently influenced and encouraged "by the success of the working men wherever organized," some professional politicians in Pittsburgh felt that it would be advantageous to establish a Working Men's party there. Thomas Hazelton, who at one time had been associated with the Bank of Pittsburgh, was appointed to the chair, and John B. Butler, the editor of the *Statesman* and a very staunch supporter of Henry Clay, and W. B. Conway, the editor of the *American Manufacturer*, were appointed secretaries.⁵ Very active in these initial proceedings and in the later development of

⁴ For the story of the Philadelphia Working Men's party, see William A. Sullivan, "Did Labor Support Jackson?" in *Political Science Quarterly*, 62:569-580 (December, 1947). See also, in the same publication, Edward Pessen, "Did Labor Support Jackson?: the Boston Story," 64:262-274 (June, 1949).

⁵ *Pittsburgh Mercury*, June 9, 1830. In the election of 1828 J. B. Butler had been a leader of the pro-Adams movement in this part of the state.

this movement was Lewis Peterson, the owner of the Globe Cotton mills. At this meeting it was resolved that "it is deemed expedient to this meeting, that a ticket be formed for the county, to be called the 'Working Men's Ticket,' and that all who approve and concur in these views be respectfully requested to support our men and our principles."⁶ Early in June the *Allegheny Democrat* announced that "a new party with this title, 'the Working Men's Party,' has lately been introduced into this city and county, and bids fair to become respectable both in numbers and the standing of its members."⁷

At this public gathering of "workingmen" a committee made up of some of the most prominent industrialists and business men in Pittsburgh was selected to "publish an address to the county, stating the views and objects of the citizens now assembled."⁸ Among the more prominent members of this committee were Mark Stackhouse, steam engine manufacturer; Isaac Lightner of Kingsland, Lightner & Co.; John Arthurs, steam engine maker; John Irwin, rope manufacturer; John Gallagher, bell and brass founder; and Thomas Hazelton, banker. In addition there were the following less well-known citizens: Alba Fisk, William Leckey, John Sheriff, and James Shaw. Then there was N. B. Starr, who at one time, according to a notice which appeared in the *Mechanic's Free Press*, had attempted to ingratiate himself with the Philadelphia Working Men's party but was found to be dishonest and an impostor, although his name did not appear as a member of the Pittsburgh committee when its address was published. This committee was also to serve as a committee of correspondence for the county.⁹

The committee's address "To the Farmers, Mechanics, and Working Men of the County of Allegheny" was filled with the usual platitudes and adjurations. "All party names and distinctions" were renounced by them. This party was to "have no connection with religious excitement." In the past, it was stated that "in the selection of men to legislate for us . . . too little attention has been paid to the importance

⁶ *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), June 2, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, June 9, 1830.

⁷ *Allegheny Democrat* (Pittsburgh), June 8, 1830.

⁸ *Pittsburgh Mercury*, June 9, 1830.

⁹ *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), July 22, 1829; *Mechanic's Free Press* (Philadelphia), December 11, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, June 9, 1830; Erasmus Wilson, ed., *Standard History of Pittsburg*, 763 (Chicago, 1898). In the election of 1828 John Sheriff and John Irwin had been strong supporters of John Quincy Adams.

of securing the services of those, whose interests are identified with our own." They charged that the workingmen had been "too much influenced by feelings arising from party spirit, without sufficiently enquiring into the fitness and usefulness of the candidate."

In addition to laying bare the past errors of the workingmen they put forth the program which it was expected that those candidates who sought the votes of the workingmen would support. First and foremost would be "the protection of *National Industry*." And closely identified with this plank in their program was the demand for "a well regulated system of Internal Improvement." They called for "the establishment of a general system of education . . . and the abolition, as far as practicable, of charters and monopolies, and the suppression of lotteries in every shape and form."¹⁰

The subsequent history of this movement discloses not only the confused state of the political parties in Allegheny County but also lays open to question the sincerity of some of the individuals who were responsible for this new movement supposedly in behalf of the workingmen. A Working Men's convention was held in Pittsburgh on July 3 at which delegates from the various districts throughout the county were represented. General Robert T. Stewart, a former owner of the Sligo Iron Works and now a salt manufacturer, was nominated for Congress, "and . . . the nomination for the assembly made by the Democratic Republican party was concurred in."¹¹ A few days prior to the Working Men's convention, the Democratic Republicans had held their convention and nominated John Gilmore and James Patterson for Congress and Messrs. Craft, Kerr, Walker, and Arthurs for the Assembly.

The immediate effect of the concurrence of the Working Men's party in the Assembly ticket of the Democratic Republicans was to cause a split in its organization, and charges of fraud were immediately leveled against them. Four members of the Committee of Correspondence, Thomas Hazelton, Thomas Bakewell, John Sheriff, and John Irwin, immediately resigned from the organization. In an address "To the Farmers, Mechanics and Working Men of Allegheny County" they justified their action:

The committee endeavored to impress upon your minds the importance of selecting as candidates for the several offices then to be

¹⁰ *Pittsburgh Mercury*, June 9, 1830.

¹¹ *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), July 22, 1829, June 30, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, July 7, 1830.

filled, suitable persons, without respect to political distinctions—men who should be unfettered by party prejudices or engagements—whose exertions should be directed to the promotion of the general welfare, without regard to the advancement of the interests of any political party. . . . We leave to your candid and unbiassed judgement, to decide how far these and the other leading principles of the address were acted upon in the formation of the ticket adopted at the convention of delegates held on the 3d of this month, by whom we were placed on the committee of correspondence.¹²

The *Pittsburgh Gazette*, a Federalist paper, welcomed the disaffection of these four committeemen and declared that they were guided in their actions from a conviction "that some external influence was brought to bear upon and control the selection of this ticket." It also thought it very peculiar that these two conventions, the Democratic Republican and the Working Men's, having entirely different objects, should "*select precisely the same men for their tickets.*" If the fact that these two distinct political organizations should select the same persons for their tickets was not sufficient ground for suspicion, the *Gazette* was of the opinion that the identity of the individuals who composed it, was. It admitted that Messrs. Arthurs, Kerr, and Walker were "*actually workmen,*" but Craft's right to that name it felt was questionable. Yet in the balloting, the *Gazette* pointed out, Craft was nominated on the first ballot with 31 votes out of 40, while it took seven ballotings to secure Walker's nomination.¹³

This was the first episode in the development of this so-called Working-Men's party in Western Pennsylvania. If there was any doubt before of the genuineness of this movement, the tortuous proceedings of the subsequent events should drive them out. A second convention met in Butler on July 22, to nominate candidates to be supported by the Working Men for the district composed of Armstrong, Beaver, Butler, and Allegheny counties. Lewis Peterson and John McKnight were to represent Allegheny County at this convention, and were instructed "to support Gen. R. T. Stewart, to represent the county of Allegheny in Congress, in conjunction with any one the convention should agree upon to represent the counties of Armstrong, Butler and Beaver." McKnight found it inconvenient to attend and John B. Butler, the editor of the *Statesman* and an ardent supporter of Henry Clay, managed to have himself accepted as a substitute over the protests of

¹² *Pittsburgh Mercury*, July 21, 1830.

¹³ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 23, 1830.

Lewis Peterson, the other duly elected delegate. The *Allegheny Democrat* was vituperative in its denunciation of the proceedings and declared that John B. Butler was "a political schemer, a violent Clay man, one not possessing the least title of the requisites of a political working-man."¹⁴

This marked the further disintegration of the Working Men's party. Under the circumstances, Lewis Peterson, the regularly appointed delegate, found it impossible to join his colleagues from the other counties, and in the following letter to Messrs. A. Murphy, chairman, Wm. McClure and John B. Butler, secretaries, and the gentlemen composing the meeting of delegates at the courthouse, on July 3, 1830, disclosed in great detail the reasons for his action:

I rose and stated to the convention, that I objected to Mr. Butler's admission, on the following grounds: that Mr. B. had expressed himself, to me that he would do everything he could do in opposition to the nomination made at the court-house, where he was secretary, and where he participated in my appointment to represent the convention at Butler, with special instructions to support Gen. R. T. Stewart; that Mr. Butler had not been appointed at the court-house by the delegates, and that Judge Riddle, Judge Shaler, and Judge Pentland, had never attended any of the working men's meetings, nor participated with us on the occasion. The gentlemen delegates from Beaver admitted Mr. Butler as a delegate from Allegheny. I then informed the meeting, that I could not serve in conjunction with Mr. Butler, and should leave them and protest against their proceedings.¹⁵

Despite the absence of any officially appointed delegates from Allegheny County, the convention proceeded with its work and appointed John B. Butler, secretary. Walter Forward of Allegheny and John H. Shannon of Beaver County were unanimously nominated to be the Working Men's candidates in the coming congressional election. In an address to their fellow citizens they righteously stated that "THE WORKING MEN proscribe no party or class of men, whether political or religious. The ground they take is independent of all parties."¹⁶

Butler was the scene of another convention. The Democratic Republicans met there on the same day that delegates of the Working

¹⁴ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 27, August 6, 1830; *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), July 28, 1830; *Allegheny Democrat* (Pittsburgh), July 27, 1830.

¹⁵ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 6, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, August 11, 1830.

¹⁶ *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), July 28, 1830; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 30, 1830.

Men's party met to select Congressional candidates. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* found it disconcerting "that these two parties, professing to act upon directly *opposite principles*, and entirely *independent* of each other, should select the *very same day*, and the *same town* for holding their convention," and remarked "that there appears throughout the whole course of the *Working Men's party*, to be a singular and unaccountable connexion between the movements of this party which professes 'to take ground independent of all parties,' and that other party which professes to be *exclusively democratic*."¹⁷

The proceedings of the Working Men's convention were not without their effect on the gathering of the delegates to the Democratic Republican convention. Walter Forward, John Gilmore, and Gen. R. T. Stewart were nominated for the consideration of this body. David Lynch, the Allegheny County delegate, spoke very effectively and forcefully against the nomination of Forward. "I had become acquainted with the facts and circumstances in relation to the nomination of Mr. Forward, for the workingmen," he revealed, and "I thought that nomination an outrage upon the feelings, the sentiments, and the wishes of the working men of Allegheny County." He apparently was present when Lewis Peterson had denounced the appearance of John B. Butler at the Working Men's convention. "These facts [that the Allegheny delegation was specifically instructed to support the nomination of Gen. Stewart in the convention at Butler] were stated to Messrs. Adams and Logan by Mr. Peterson in my presence," David Lynch disclosed. "I made the convention of which I was a member acquainted with these artifices, as far as I was then acquainted with them; and I accordingly opposed the nomination of Mr. Forward."¹⁸ In the midst of the charges and counter charges, the Democratic Republican convention chose John Gilmore and James Patterson as its Congressional candidates.¹⁹ The irony of the situation did not escape the editor of the *Crawford Messenger*. He derisively noted that "there have been no less than three party Conventions—all professing to be democratic, yet strange as it may appear, the candidates selected for Congress by each, to wit: — Harmar Denny, Robert Stewart and John Gilmore, are staunch and

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 27, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, August 11, 1830.

¹⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 13, 1830.

¹⁹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 27, 1830.

unwavering *federalists*—all however, we presume, ‘dyed in the wool,’ to the Jackson Faith.”²⁰

The *Gazette* at this time raised a question which, with the appearance of the Working Men’s parties and so many aspirants for office who professed to be and to support the cause of the workingman, had confounded many. “We know not precisely the line which the working men wish to draw between those who *are* and those who *are not working men*,” complained this western paper.²¹ In Philadelphia the same question had been raised, and one who wrote under the signature of “A regular bred Mechanic” had asked the *Mechanic’s Free Press* “for a definition of the term working man.” In its reply the *Mechanic’s Free Press* acknowledged “that some difference of opinion exists as to the right of a voice in the meetings of ‘Working Men.’ . . . To give a comprehensive definition even of so common a term, is harder than some are aware. . . . Perhaps we shall not be far from the mark in saying, that ‘working men are those engaged in productive industry.’” But the most perplexing aspect of this question remained unanswered: that is, should “the term . . . exclude employers”? To this the Philadelphia Workingmen’s paper gave an equivocal but correct answer. “Most employers,” it contended, “unite in their own persons two distinct classes of society.”²² To those editors who enthusiastically supported the Working Men’s party in Western Pennsylvania the *Gazette* addressed two pleas: “Who are *working men*?—Who are *not workingmen*?” But the questions went begging for an answer.

The confusion which was the Working Men’s party in this part of the state did not end with the Butler convention. On the twenty-fourth of August a Working Men’s meeting was held in Armstrong County to take effective steps to ensure “the success of the workingmen’s party.” They denounced the attempt made “to force upon the working men, a congressional nomination entirely at variance with their wishes and interests” by “a late convention of *two individuals* at Butler, through the *intrigue and management of a citizen of Allegheny county*.” It was further stated “that this meeting have not, *under any circumstances*, sufficient confidence in the political view, integrity and capacity of *Walter Forward and John R. Shannon*, and that they are

²⁰ *Crawford Messenger* (Meadville), July 29, 1830.

²¹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 23, 1830.

²² *Mechanic’s Free Press* (Philadelphia), September 12, 1829.

not such men as are calculated to advance the interests of the working men of this district." Not only did they expressly reject these candidates but suggested that "a working man's convention . . . be held at Butler on Friday the 27th inst," and recommended that the delegates be instructed to support "General R. T. Stewart and the Hon. John Gilmore." Thus the way was paved for another Working Men's convention.²³

It met on August 27 at Butler to select candidates who would represent the true interests of the workingmen. Delegates from Allegheny, Armstrong, and Butler counties were present. Lewis Peterson of Allegheny, Philip Clingensmith of Armstrong, and Robert Carnahan of Butler were the officers of the convention. The Beaver County delegation did not attend. With apparently no opposition the convention resolved unanimously to "recommend *John Gilmore* and *Robert T. Stewart Esqrs.* to the suffrages of their fellow citizens of this Congressional district at the approaching election."²⁴ The *Allegheny Democrat* was convinced that this convention truly represented the interests of the workingmen. Said the editor:

We are happy to see the results of the Working Men's Convention. The honest and candid of all parties were convinced that this party had been most basely defrauded in the surreptitious convention held on the 23d July—and will acknowledge that it behooved them to avow their wishes in a manner that could not be mistaken and by organs that could be confided in. That convention held on the 27th instant fully and truly represented the sentiments of the working-men . . . and we . . . therefore expect that Ticket nominated will receive the united support of the Farmer and Mechanic.²⁵

In an attempt to clear up some of the confusion which prevailed and to demonstrate to the public that this gathering truly represented the will of the workingmen, a long statement was prepared for the edification of the public. Once again the events surrounding the July 22 convention were retraced in great detail so as to point out the illegality of that proceeding. It was charged that the convention of July 22 "*was not a convention* of delegates of the working men of the district. It did not express their sentiments, nor were its members the regularly nominated delegates of that respectable body of citizens." Furthermore it was stated that this rump convention had arrogated to itself the "re-

²³ *Pittsburgh Mercury*, September 3, 1830.

²⁴ *Pittsburgh Mercury*, September 1, 1830.

²⁵ *Allegheny Democrat* (Pittsburgh), August 31, 1830.

sponsibility of nominating candidates for this large congressional district," and then proceeded to act "in defiance of the positive instructions of the convention of delegates for Allegheny county, where twenty-one townships and wards were represented, as well as in the total absence of all representation from Butler and Armstrong counties."

In contrast it was pointed out that the convention now assembled consisted of officially selected and instructed delegates. They pointed with pride to their candidates. The fact that Robert Stewart had formerly owned extensive iron works and now was engaged in the manufacture of salt, it was asserted, definitely identified him with the working men of the district. Gilmore's long career of public service and his experience in legislative proceedings admirably fitted him for this task, they claimed, without making any effort to associate him in any specific way with the working men.²⁶

By October the political picture had cleared somewhat. John Shannon and James Patterson withdrew their names from the list of candidates so that there remained five candidates in the field. The Democratic Republican and the Working Men's tickets according to the *Mercury* were identical; that is, Robert T. Stewart and John Gilmore were the candidates. But the *Gazette* and the *Statesman* printed their names with no party designation. Harmar Denny and William Ayres were the candidates of the Antimasonic party, and Walter Forward was humorously referred to by some of the papers as the "Worked Men's" candidate.²⁷

The campaign was desultory with no real issues being discussed by any of the candidates. It was more a campaign of personalities than issues with the names of Jackson and Clay figuring prominently in the contest. The *Gazette* hinted that Stewart's candidacy was "to aid Mr. Gilmore," since "it is absolutely demonstrable that the success of Gilmore is tantamount to the defeat of Stewart." John B. Butler, the editor of the *Statesman* and one of the founders of the Working Men's party, was accused by the *Allegheny Democrat* of campaigning "against Gen. R. T. Stewart, the regularly nominated candidate of the Workingmen's party, to which he [the editor] professes to belong; and tacitly supports Harmar Denny Esq., the anti-masonic candidate." Further-

²⁶ *Pittsburgh Mercury*, September 1, 1830.

²⁷ *Statesman* (Pittsburgh), September 6, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, September 8, October 6, 1830.

more it was rumored that Gilmore's friends in Butler and Beaver counties were working against Stewart and for Walter Forward.²⁸

When the final returns of the election were in it was revealed that Denny and Gilmore had won the coveted seats. But Stewart, the original Working Men's candidate, did surprisingly well considering the meager support and the strong opposition which there was to his candidacy. His total vote in the four counties composing the congressional district was 4,017, while John Gilmore received 4,744, and Harmar Denny, 6,296. The other candidate, Walter Forward, who had been branded as an ardent supporter of Henry Clay, was given only 3,667 votes. In the city of Pittsburgh where the heaviest concentration of industry was located and where one would expect to find the largest number of propertyless voters, Denny nosed out Stewart by 79 votes only. He received 637 votes from the four wards in the city while Stewart received 558. Gilmore was given 455 votes and Forward, 411. But party labels meant very little and it was the identity of the individual candidate which had the greater drawing power.²⁹

The Working Men's party in Western Pennsylvania was but an episode in that factional strife which had characterized the politics of the state since 1816.³⁰ Its existence was brief and torn by internal strife. Clay and Jackson partisans were its midwives and in the ensuing struggle for the control of the "child" the supporters of Jackson won out. This party barely survived one election, but this was probably its whole purpose for being. As far as can be determined, at no time during its short life were there any bona fide workingmen associated with this movement, and their only contribution to the party was its name. Some abortive attempts were made later to organize "a political Association of Working Men" in Pittsburgh but nothing ever came of these efforts.³¹

²⁸ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 5, 1830; *Allegheny Democrat* (Pittsburgh), September 21, 1830.

²⁹ *Pittsburgh Gazette*, October 19, 1830; *Pittsburgh Mercury*, October 20, 1830.

³⁰ For a keen and lucid analysis of this aspect of Pennsylvania politics, see Philip S. Klein, *Pennsylvania Politics, a Game without Rules*, 353 ff. (Philadelphia, 1940).

³¹ *Working Man's Advocate*, December 4, 1830, May 21, 1831.