"REAPING THE WHIRLWIND":
The Origins of the Allegheny County Greenback Labor Party in 1877

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The political aftermath of the great strike of railroad workers in July 1877 has been little studied by historians. The government's violent suppression of the strike created a groundswell of protest and resentment that coalesced, under the leadership of local labor movements, into political action independent of the Democratic and Republican parties. After years of debate about political action, workers in dozens of cities across the nation drew together to make their grievances felt at the ballot box. In some areas political mobilization took the form of Socialist or Workingmen's tickets. In Pittsburgh, July 1877 saw the development of the Greenback Labor party under the leadership of the respected National Labor Tribune. The alliance between labor and the vocal currency reformers who were critical of the national banking system and the government's contraction of the currency created a curious hybrid. The Greenback Labor movement was to become the primary form through which the workers of Allegheny County found expression in the 1877-1878 elections.

There has been too much discussion of Greenbackism as a set

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of ideas and formulas to which the "labor intelligentsia" adhered in the 1860s and too little detailed study of the mass phenomena which won the support of tens of thousands of workers in 1877-1878. David Montgomery pointed the way with his treatment of early Greenbackism in its local context in *Beyond Equality*. John Bennett then broke new ground by examining Labor Greenbackism in the 1870s as part of his dissertation on the ironworkers' community of Woods Run in Pittsburgh. The Greenback Labor movement is best understood by tracing the debate within the local labor movement between 1866 and 1877 over independent political action. The evolution of labor opinion on politics and currency reform shows that the Greenbackism of the 1860s was by no means the same as the mass Greenback Labor phenomena of 1877-1878. This article discusses the drive for labor unity in politics in the aftermath of July 1877 and traces the formation of the local and state Greenback Labor party which went on to win a significant vote in the fall elections of 1877.

*Pittsburgh Labor and Political Action, 1866-1877*

Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, was the center of the nation's iron and steel industry as well as the crucible that forged a nascent labor movement. The modern labor movement of the Pittsburgh area began during the pre-Civil War depression of 1857-1859, which served as a catalyst for the organization of the iron puddlers, iron molders, and flint and window glass blowers. These early unions of skilled workers and the county's miners shared a common experience of industrial conflict and organization between 1860 and 1880 that "significantly shaped the outlook of skilled and unskilled." The growing labor unions of the Pittsburgh area also played a central role in the national labor movement in the post-Civil War years.

The working people of Allegheny County faced a radically different world after 1865. American society was being transformed on a vast scale by the explosive growth of industrial capitalism. The population of Pittsburgh and Allegheny City (today known as the North Side) tripled between 1860 and 1880, growing from 77,919 to

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235,062 in twenty years. Workers had to chart their way on an unknown path toward an uncertain destination. There were mistakes to be made, theories to be tested, and battles to be fought. What was the path to better conditions? Trade unionism or political action? Strikes or cooperative production? How should workers approach the ethnic, political, and skill differences among them? What was the relationship of the wage earner to other social groups such as the distant bankers, farmers, or small businessmen? And finally, how was their suffering and new-found position in society to be reconciled with the American dream — democracy and the philosophy of “equal rights”? During the years between 1866 and 1877 the issue of independent labor-based political action created much controversy, with views shifting over time. The evolution of Pittsburgh labor’s attitudes on this vital question is best seen through the career of the prominent labor leader Thomas A. Armstrong, editor of the weekly *National Labor Tribune*.

Thomas A. Armstrong was born to a Methodist family in Steubenville, Ohio, the son of an unsuccessful tailor. The young Armstrong learned the proud craft of the printer and moved to Allegheny City. In August 1866 he represented the Allegheny City Trades Assembly at the Baltimore meeting which founded the National Labor Union. When this, the first nationwide labor body in the United States, took up the controversial issue of political action, Armstrong favored creation of a national labor party “as soon as possible.” He also served on the five-member committee assigned to draft the meeting’s manifesto. When it appeared in 1867, the document called upon working men “to disregard the clap-trap issues of the past” and elect “representatives in the state and national councils from the ranks of labor.” The Chicago Congress of the following year, which Armstrong may have attended, adopted a declaration of principles which was largely currency reform and which reaffirmed the need for independent political action by the “producing classes.” The trade unionists of Pittsburgh hailed this appeal for the founding of labor parties. They denounced both the Democrats and the Republicans for failing to defend labor’s interests in two bitter 1867 strikes of local iron molders and puddlers. The majority Republican party also outraged the workers by blocking the renomination of Pittsburgh’s Radical Republican Mayor William McCarthy, a printing pressman. The fall elections of 1867 saw candidates running under the rubric of the newly formed

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Labor Reform party, the workers' first effort at political action independent of the established parties.\(^5\)

The fate of the National Labor Union, which fell increasingly under the dominance of nonlabor elements, spurred a change in Armstrong's position. The NLU's disintegration was marked by an increasing focus on currency reform and political action leading up to the abortive National Labor Reform party in 1872. By the July 1873 meeting of the Industrial Congress in Cleveland, Armstrong and Miles Humphries of Pittsburgh along with five other Ohio Valley labor leaders had come to oppose any new "political combinations." They cast the only negative votes against the proposal for a fiat currency which passed with fifty-two votes.\(^6\) Armstrong was not opposed to greenbacks, but he feared that the espousal of currency reform would lead the new body down the same path as the defunct National Labor Union. He and others had come to see political action as secondary to the development of labor's organized power through trade unionism.

The working people of Allegheny County in the early 1870s were growing increasingly conscious of needs and interests that they saw as distinct from those of other sectors of society. The National Labor Tribune, founded during a printers' strike in 1873, was an expression of labor's strong conviction that it needed an independent voice of its own. The Labor Tribune survived the September 13, 1873, crash of Jay Cooke's banking house and grew during the difficult years of the "long depression" of 1873-1878. In 1874 Armstrong joined the newspaper's founder, a printer named John M. Davis, as a partner in charge of "mechanical affairs." The weekly's masthead declared its devotion to "the interests of labor and to the protection of home industries." The paper served as official organ of the iron puddlers' union, the Sons of Vulcan, and its successor, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. It was also the official newspaper of the Window Glass Artsman's National Association, the cigar makers, and various state and national cooperative efforts. The front page also proclaimed it the voice of the *****, the then secret Knights of Labor organization. John M. Davis had been inducted into the Knights in 1874 and a year later became the Master Workman of the independent-minded District Assembly Three in Western

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\(^6\) Montgomery, Beyond Equality, 443.
Pennsylvania. Armstrong was also an active Knight at this time.\textsuperscript{7}

The weekly \textit{National Labor Tribune} sought to educate and arouse the workers to stand up for themselves and organize their own strength. It called on every worker to “begin to think, think at work, in the busy mill, in the noisy workshop [or] in the solitude and blackness of the mines.” Its columns were filled with passionate debates among the advocates of trade unionism, political action, socialism, and cooperation. Carrying news of interest to the different crafts, the \textit{Tribune} also served as labor’s voice in debating the local Republican and Democratic newspapers or in opposing company stores, convict labor, or the Standard Oil monopoly. It won the support of thousands of ironworkers, miners, and others because, as a Poughkeepsie, New York, engineer wrote, the \textit{Labor Tribune} stood firm as an advocate “when the capitalists try to crush labor beneath their iron heels.”\textsuperscript{8}

The issue of independent political action grew in prominence with the deepening of the depression in the mid-1870s. The debate was reflected in the \textit{National Labor Tribune} as the 1876 national elections approached. The Allegheny County labor movement was still not eager to rush into independent labor political action. A representative meeting of some 4,000 was held in Pittsburgh in January 1876. Dissatisfaction with the political system was general, but the resolutions ranged from “support your friends and defeat your enemies” to independent political action. Unable to reach agreement, the issue was referred to a small labor council where it remained a moot point. John M. Davis and the \textit{Tribune} believed the workers were not yet ready for independent political ventures. He urged instead that the organization of the labor movement be strengthened — which paralleled the position of the Marxist versus Lassallean political action socialists.\textsuperscript{9}

The issue of politics and the relationship of labor and the Greenback movement was also hotly debated at the National Labor Congress which assembled in Pittsburgh in April 1876. Among those present were many of the future state leaders of the Greenback Labor party, including Armstrong and John M. Davis of the \textit{Tribune}, the Pittsburgh labor educator Andrew Burtt, the small manufacturer James E. Emerson of Beaver Falls, and James L. Wright of the Philadelphia Knights of Labor. Otto Weydemeyer of Pittsburgh, son of Karl

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{National Labor Tribune}, Jan. 6, 1877 (hereafter cited as \textit{NLT}) ; Terence V. Powderly, \textit{Thirty Years of Labor} (Columbus, Ohio, 1889), 189, 200.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{NLT}, Aug. 19, 1876, Oct. 13, 1877.

\textsuperscript{9} John W. Bennett, “Iron Workers in Woods Run and Johnstown: The Union Era” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1977), 278.
Marx's famous correspondent in the United States, advanced the socialist position. He opposed premature political action and urged that any ties with the Greenback currency reform movement be banned. The meeting's final resolution — reflecting the presence of many delegates with ties to existing parties or doubts about labor politics — held that "independent political action is extremely hazardous and detrimental to the labor interests; that the workingmen of the country should organize in Trade Unions and Labor Leagues first." The possibility of advancing labor's interests through the existing political parties was counseled until "thorough education and discipline is obtained" so as to make independent campaigns a success. The convention also endorsed protective tariffs and various Greenback measures which resulted in a walkout by the social democrats.\(^\text{10}\)

The existing two-party system was bitterly criticized by many union activists in Pittsburgh and elsewhere for failing to meet the needs of the workingman. In the local strike of molders and puddlers in 1867, neither the Democratic nor Republican parties raised their voices to condemn the importation of foreign strikebreakers. The political chicanery over the enforcement of eight-hour laws also soured many activists as did the militantly proemployer attitudes of the locally dominant Republican party machine. Politicians, "with their soft, fluent voices," the Tribune editorialized in 1876, did not have "even one word to tell us how to shorten our long hours of labor, to increase our miserable pittance of wages, to add one bite of bread to the table." Their silence was testimony to the fact that "both have been bought and owned by the banking and railroad interests."\(^\text{11}\)

The Labor Tribune still believed in 1876 that efforts should be made within the existing parties because "political prejudices" were still strong among the workers. In June, the paper reported that an organized effort by fifty labor activists to "secure the nomination of workingmen on the tickets of each of the parties" ended in failure. Not only were their candidates defeated, but enemies of the labor movement were nominated, including a notorious coal operator. Their frustration with the existing political system was intensified by the knowledge that "eight out of ten of the delegates" to both the local Democratic and Republican conventions "were hard-fisted workingmen." The disunity of the workers, the Tribune explained, was re-

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 277-78. Albert R. Parsons of Chicago was also present. Philip S. Foner, ed., The Autobiographies of the Haymarket Martyrs (New York, 1969), 31.

\(^{11}\) NLT, July 21, 1876.
sponsible for the lack of political influence and power by workers in the United States when compared with their English compatriots. The labor journal kept driving home the need for unity of the workers — not only in their mills or mines, not only in their respective trades or among the different sections of organized labor — but at the ballot box. “Unity among the workers is of prime importance, not necessarily as a political party, not that they should run men for office, but it is essential for the sake of compelling respect from legislative bodies and from all constituted authority.” At the very least, they advised, the workers should show “more interest . . . as to who and what they are voting for” by compelling the politicians “to answer yes or no to pointed questions affecting the interests of labor.”

The mass initiative toward third-party political activity during the depression came from the farmers of the West and led to the formation of a national Independent Greenback party in 1875. Although welcoming this development, the Tribune was nonetheless wary of the currency reformers in 1876. Negative judgments derived from the previous decade’s experiences undoubtedly explained their unenthusiastic response to the Greenback platform of June 1876. “These principles,” they said, “ought to prevail, not because they are altogether sound, but because they offer us a little temporary relief.” The editors expressed doubt as to the party’s prospects and criticized the free-trade beliefs of its presidential nominee, the famous humanitarian Peter Cooper. Pittsburgh’s labor leaders declared that they were not ready to surrender their “forces as generals of the Labor Reform army or even . . . to fight under the Greenback standard.” The Labor Reform movement, standing on the “principles of trade unionism,” had the right to ask, “What will our greenback people do to lessen the hours of labor or improve the conditions of workingmen? Greenbacks will do all this, you say, by furnishing constant employment and more wages. Are you sure?”

The National Labor Tribune did not find its goals reflected in the currency reform movement, and its editor mistrusted the classless appeal of pure Greenbackism. The newspaper even went on to launch a shrewd ideological attack on the political economy of Greenbackism. Echoing the historic criticisms of the Marxists and of the Boston eight-hour reformer Ira Steward, the Tribune concluded that “plenty

12 Ibid., June 10, July 22, Aug. 19, Dec. 16, 1876.
14 NLT, June 10, 1876.
of Greenbacks will not eradicate the evils which create the constant conflict between capital and labor." The newspaper pictured the Greenback movement as an expression of the growing concentration of capital in the United States. "The little $20,000 capitalists and manufacturers are pushed to the wall by the millionaires. They ask us to help them destroy the power of the millionaires to drive them to the wall." Their purpose, the paper went on, was "not primarily to help and benefit labor, but to get the same right and same power to get rich fast out of our labor as the millionaires now possess." 15

The National Labor Tribune was skeptical of nonlabor elements, "unsafe men" who were believed to have exploited labor's past political efforts for "selfish ends." Pittsburgh labor was no longer willing to support a political party led and shaped by others. "We must preserve our organization and not scatter it," the paper stressed. "We desire a party so organized that it will begin and keep on in a struggle for the entire and complete re-organization of our industries on a scientific basis." 16 The Greenback party of 1876 offered no such guarantees for labor, and the election returns showed negligible labor support. For the Tribune this confirmed the judgment of the April National Labor Congress that premature independent political action was to be avoided.

The Tribune did, however, share the suspicion of many workers that the government's financial policies — vocally criticized by many farmers and manufacturers — had directly contributed to the ongoing depression. As Samuel Gompers wrote in his autobiography, "We thought the government had entered into an unholy alliance with the goldbugs who to us represented the unscrupulous Wall Street exploiters." 17 After the 1876 elections, the Tribune began voicing its belief that an organized greenback movement with a labor platform — led by organized workingmen — was a real possibility. "A new, a people's party," the Tribune wrote in October, "is in process of formation now. It exists already, although unseen." The workers were considered ready for a political breakthrough more ambitious than the Greenback party as it was then constituted. The question for the future, the Tribune said, was whether "organized labor . . . [would] step into the councils of that party and shape its policy, define its purposes, fix its bearings, and give to it its soul?" To their "thoughtful

15 Ibid., Aug. 26, Sept. 9, 1876.
16 Ibid., Oct. 7, Sept. 9, 1876.
Socialist" friends who believed the greenback reform to be "a side issue," the Tribune replied that reform must be a step-by-step process which moved from remedying immediate evils to the larger ends of "industrial independence." The combination of Greenbackers and labor would start with the abolition of the national banking system, the newspaper went on, but it would not end until "the entire capital-istic system will be piece by piece overturned." 18

American workers during the "long depression" of the 1870s faced a bitter experience of unemployment, wage-cutting, lost strikes, and the wholesale destruction and weakening of the trade unions they had so carefully built the previous decade. Unionism and strikes seemed futile to many who concluded that only the vote offered salvation for the workingman. Even some of Armstrong's former associates in the National Labor Union became disillusioned with trade unionism. Among them was Detroit's Richard Trevellick, NLU president from 1869 to 1872. In 1877, Trevellick wrote that he had hoped that once the workers were organized they "would teach each other not to strike but to learn that the ballot box alone could save labor from slavery." 19 His response to the nation's crisis, in which he saw his union, the ship caulkers, disintegrate, was to immerse himself in the movement for monetary reforms. He was one of the handful of labor leaders who attended the 1875 founding convention of the Greenback party. 20

The Pittsburgh labor movement, however, never embraced this despairing conclusion because it contradicted its own experiences, especially in the iron and steel industry. The depression caused great suffering among the workers of Allegheny County, and there were bitter defeats such as the destruction of the local miners' union in 1874-1875. Yet there were also undoubted proofs of the power of unionism. The workers' weapon, the Pittsburgh movement had learned, was unity of purpose within each trade, the "amalgamation" of all trades in each industry, and unity of the unions of different industries. The skilled puddlers, organized in the Sons of Vulcan, forged such a unity that they were able to beat back a four-month lockout by their employers in the winter of 1874-1875. To consolidate the ironworkers' position, sentiment for unity grew in the three dif-
ferent craft unions in the industry, which had often scabbed on each other in the past. "Amalgamation" was the call of the Tribune's publishers as early as 1874. Results were forthcoming in August 1876 when the puddlers, roll hands, nailers, and helpers formed the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. The union remained a powerful force in Pittsburgh until it was smashed by Andrew Carnegie in the infamous Homestead Strike of 1892.21

Pittsburgh was the center of modern industry, and by the mid-1870s the local labor movement had developed a strong trade union consciousness in the course of mighty battles in the mines and mills. Unionism and political action both had a place in labor strategy, as the Tribune argued in a remarkable June 1877 article. Critics of unionism were attacked by pointing out that only a trade union and not a political party could strike for sixty days if needed to win its point. As an example, it cited the effect if "all the train men, engineers, firemen, conductors, brakemen, baggage men and porters of the A & Z railroad formed an amalgamation and agreed to stand by each other, to step down and out with each other." The Tribune also argued that "ultimate success in political action" was "dependent upon the unsuccessful federation of trades." 22

Politics also had an important place since there was "a very large class of workmen [who could] . . . be reached only through political action." A good example of this strategy combining trade unionism and political action was given regarding the railroad workers — a month prior to the general strike movement on the railroads. The railroad men, the Tribune said, would only be respected when they were "in a condition to stop traffic and transportation. . . . Possibly the suspension would be ordered by the amalgamation to extend to districts not directly interested. . . . Foolish laws to the contrary must be wiped out." This could only be achieved by a political party: "Hence, the necessity of political action." 23

The 1877 Railroad Strike and the Formation of the Greenback Labor Party

Prospects seemed dark and gloomy as the United States entered

22 NLT, June 23, 1877. Philip Foner has written about the failure of the labor leaders of the 1860s to see the direct relationship between trade unionism and labor's political influence and power. History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Volume I: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor (New York, 1972), 429-30.
23 NLT, June 23, 1877.
the fifth and worst year of the "long depression." A mood of despair and helplessness gripped many workers. "The crash that broke the months of strain," Samuel Gompers recalled in his autobiography, "came in the revolt of the railroad workers in July, 1877. . . . a declaration of protest in the name of American manhood against conditions that nullified the rights of American citizens." 24 The two-week series of strikes by 100,000 railroad workers was a massive, spontaneous, and unorganized rebellion against "the interlocking directorate of railroad executives, military officers and political officials which constituted the apex of the country's new power structure." The protests of 1877 "pointed clearly and directly against the exploitation of labor by capital" and won the support of millions of working people across the nation. 25 In some areas such as Pittsburgh, a major center of the hated Pennsylvania Railroad, the strike took on the character of a popular uprising. Forty-two local residents were killed, and the enraged populace responded with the systematic destruction of Pennsylvania Railroad property, including thirty-nine buildings, 104 engines, forty-six passenger cars, and 1,200 freight cars. 26

The state and federal governments, working with the employers, succeeded in crushing the railroad strike in an unequal struggle in which perhaps one hundred lives were lost across the nation. The suffering of the depression had built up a tremendous popular anger which surfaced during the strike. A Pennsylvania legislative committee investigating the strike noted that the laborers in the different mills, manufactories, mines and other industries in Pittsburgh and the vicinity, were also strongly in sympathy with the railroad workers, considering the cause of the railroad men as their cause, as their wages had also been reduced for the same causes. . . . They were not only willing but anxious to make a common fight against the corporations. 27

Although the first nationwide strike in United States history ended in defeat for labor, it still gave workers a sense of their own power. At the same time, the carnage which ended it — carried out by their elected government — was experienced as a betrayal and accentuated labor's feeling of being a group set apart from the rest of society.

The impact of the railroad riots in Pittsburgh, as a local Knights of Labor leader said a few years later, was to "solidify and organize

24 Gompers, Seventy Years, 138-40.
26 Foner, Great Uprising, 65.
27 Cited in Powderly, Thirty Years, 201.
the workingmen," especially for political action. A tremendous groundswell of protest and anger was felt in Pittsburgh in the aftermath of the massacre. Masses of workers were ready to move into action, but where were they to go? What were they to do? What was the road forward? The Tribune's headline in their first issue after the violence was clear: "Sowing the Wind! Reaping the Whirlwind! Pittsburgh in Sackcloth! Rumblings of a Volcano! Signs of Disquiet Everywhere! History Repeats Itself. The Ballot Our Remedy; The Bullet Our Wreck." Armstrong and his associates had argued in 1876 that successful labor political action required "a great emergency to bring the Labor vote together." It was now up to the labor movement to translate the unprecedented sentiment of mass protest among local workers, whether Republicans or Democrats, into the political breakthrough they had foreseen.

The National Labor Tribune reflected the radical discontent of the workers in one of its first issues in August 1877. It argued that American institutions were "old, decayed and rotten to the core. . . . they must perish or we must." The time for tinkering, patching, and mending was past. "We want no mere reform; we want change; complete, radical, entire change. . . . Any system of society which allows one man to accumulate millions while another cannot supply the meanest wants of life is, and must be radically wrong."

The articles foresaw a new era in which labor would not be subservient to either the Democratic or Republican parties, both being "in the hands of the national banks and corporation interests generally." Critical of the law-and-order editorials in the local newspapers, the Tribune vigorously denounced the public figures, in the pulpit and elsewhere, who were attacking the workers in the frenzied aftermath the strike left among many upper-class Americans. The Tribune also opposed the establishment of that "most certain foundation of oligarchy, a standing army."

The first steps toward political action were taken at a meeting in the South Side's Forty-fifth senatorial district. A subsequent meeting held on August fourth in the Bedford Hall in Pittsburgh issued the first call for the formation of an "independent movement to be called the Greenback Labor Party." This broader county-wide gathering

29 NLT, July 28, 1877, Oct. 7, 1876.
30 Ibid., Aug. 4, 1877.
31 Ibid., Aug. 1, 1877.
32 Perlman, "Upheaval," 242, reported that this is the first use of the term "Greenback Labor" that he had found.
focused on the grievances of the workers, "ground down beyond living rates in wages by the financial policy of the government and special legislation by the State." The meeting was presided over by a glassworker, Andrew C. Robertson, and a moldmaker, Joseph H. Burtt. The meeting's resolution called for a county convention to found a new party pledged to choose only candidates "known to be loyal to the wage worker." The meeting called for legislation "to protect the people against the ravages of monopolies," the repeal of "special legislation for the benefit of corporations," the abolition of prison labor, and imprisonment for infraction of state laws on the weighing, measuring, and screening of coal. 33

The incipient Greenback Labor movement faced an articulate opposition from the socialists of Allegheny County, organized in the Workingmen's party of the United States. Local socialists also sought to give shape to the workers' discontent. On the South Side, a German-speaking section of the party with some strength and history drew 500 people to a meeting on August 4 with German and English speakers. 34 In Allegheny City, there was another German branch as well as a new and influential English-speaking group led largely by Irish laborers. In the third week of August, efforts to hold a Greenback Labor meeting in the ironworkers' community of Woods Run in Allegheny City's Ninth Ward were frustrated by the socialists. Greenbacker A. C. Robertson reported that the socialists had "captured half of Allegheny." 35 The Tribune's polemics with the socialists throughout August no doubt reflected the heated debates going on in the mills, workshops, and communities. "In the name of all well-conditioned, respectable labor," the labor weekly condemned the "wild schemes" and "extreme expressions" of the "few hobby riders who, wise in their own conceit, denounce everything and everybody." These attacks were also shaped by the Tribune's desire to blunt the frenzied

33 On Robertson, see Arthur G. Burgoyne, All Sorts of Pittburghers (Pittsburgh, 1892), 237. He went on to become an attorney. Burtt's occupation was found in the city directory. The most interesting plank adopted by the August 4 meeting called for amending the charters of all corporations worth more than $50,000 to require them to pay a minimum wage of $1.50 a day to their employees. The proposal was controversial and was tabled at a meeting of the Turtle Creek Greenback Labor Club later in the month and never reappeared in later platforms. NLT, Aug. 18, 1877.
34 NLT, Aug. 11, 1877.
antilabor and anticommmunist hysteria that raged in the press. "The so-called Social Democrats," the long-time labor reformer and school superintendent Andrew Burtt said, "were taking advantage of the movement in order to boost their party and some of the city papers are trying to mix the two parties." 16

The greatest challenge facing the Greenback Labor movement and its organ, the National Labor Tribune, was to unite the workers and to convince them "to do their own thinking and cut loose from the prejudices of the past." The workers had long been divided by diverging political loyalties rooted in ethnic ties, such as the traditional allegiance of the Welsh to the Republicans and the Irish to the Democratic party. It was also essential that the Greenback Labor drive gather momentum with the passing of weeks to assure that the mass sentiment did not dissipate in inactivity prior to the county convention in early September. Agitation was in full swing by mid-August, with more meetings being held than during many "hot campaigns." A large number were held on the south side of the Monongahela River where there were six meetings in one week alone, including a Concordia Gardens gathering "in which the Window Glass Blowers took part in a body." 17

The July upheaval helped workers to overcome long-time political rivalries. Normally Democratic or Republican workers would have found it difficult to vote for their traditional enemies. They could now give their support to a new political formation led by their own union leaders. This desire to overcome past divisions and to express the workers' united protest also helped to bring the Greenbackers and a section of the socialists together. In late August a meeting was held between the English-speaking section of the Workingmen's Party of the United States and representatives of the Greenback Labor party "for the purpose of consolidating the two labor elements in the county for political action at the coming election." English-speaking members in Allegheny City, who were to prove an important addition to the growing Greenback Labor movement, ratified the fusion. Four of their elected officers — J. S. Jeffreys, Daniel A. Fisher, James Shipman, and Thomas Purcell — represented Allegheny wards five, six, nine, and eleven respectively in the September county convention. With a longer trajectory in the socialist movement, the German and Bohemian social democrats of Pittsburgh and Allegheny City rejected

36 *NLT*, Aug. 11, 1877.
such a course.\textsuperscript{38} These former adherents of the First International such as Otto Weydemeyer had long rejected political action. They believed that labor's energies should be spent in building trade unions, the only purely class organizations of the workers, rather than dissipating their strength in classless political ventures that had no chance of success.

The German social democrats were not swayed by the split with Allegheny City's English-speaking socialists. At a September 2, 1877, meeting, Otto Weydemeyer denounced the Greenback-Labor efforts as a snare and a delusion. "Workingmen's ears are often tickled," he said, "by orators both in the pulpit and on the political stump, by the recital of their dignities as American citizens and the power of the ballot, but my friends the ballot has lost its power." The only solution, he argued, lay in the "Trade Union, the only thing that ever achieved any good for us." When a committee of the Third Ward Allegheny City Greenback Labor club made an appearance to urge the socialists to send a delegate to the upcoming convention, the meeting "refused to consider the proposition in any manner." \textsuperscript{39} Marxists such as Weydemeyer were a minority even within the national Workingmen's party, which was rapidly won over by the pull of political action after the July upheaval. By the end of 1877, the Marxists had abandoned the party and it had declared itself fully for political action.

The views of this small socialist group contrasted sharply with the message delivered at the opening Greenback Labor campaign rally at the end of August. The major address to the meeting in Diamond Square in Allegheny City was delivered by a small manufacturer, James E. Emerson, who symbolized the joining of labor and nonlabor supporters of currency reform. Emerson's long speech concentrated almost exclusively on monetary reform, spanning world history from 1172 to 1877 and everything from Plato to the interconvertible bond. A self-made man who employed thirty men at his Beaver Falls saw factory, Emerson stressed that all who labored by hand or brain, be

\textsuperscript{38} In 1876, the \textit{Labor Tribune} had noted the skepticism about political action among the German-language socialists in Pittsburgh. They speculated at that time that any "large accession of English-speaking members" would make the policy difficult to maintain because "the American naturally looks to politics to reform anything" (\textit{NLT}, Feb. 12, 1876). The dispute among local socialists can be followed in the \textit{Labor Standard} published in New Jersey. Letters from C. Saam, a German socialist from Allegheny City, and Otto Weydemeyer of Pittsburgh indicate that the move toward political action was opposed by the German sections of both Allegheny City and Pittsburgh as well as the Bohemian section of Allegheny City. \textit{Labor Standard}, Sept. 30, Oct. 21, 28, 1877.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Labor Standard}, Sept. 16, 1877.
they employee or employer, were workingmen. His speech advanced the classless appeal of the pure Greenbackism the Tribune had associated with the “little $20,000 manufacturers” the year before. “There . . . prevails,” he told the assembled workers, “an opinion amongst this class [wage earners] . . . that the question of interest or usury does not interest them; that it is one between them and their employers or between borrower and lender. But what a mistaken idea.” Emerson then went on to advance the argument — never pressed by the Tribune itself — that conflicts between the employer and his workers stemmed from the entrepreneur having to borrow money at high interest rates. In order to repay the loans, the employer had to take it out of the workers’ wages. Therefore, both groups had a common enemy — the banker — and a common goal — the restoration of prosperity through low interest rates. Emerson’s speech probably did not convert most of his listeners, but his argument was probably less important than the feeling of power and unity generated by the presence of 10,000 workers at the rally.40

The Greenback Labor Party in the 1877 Election Campaign

The July upheaval in Pittsburgh and across the nation had revealed the existence of a chasm between social classes in the United States. The unprecedented strike polarized the nation, arraying the wage earners and many local communities against the forces of the powerful national corporations and their allies. The government’s violent repression also challenged the traditional idea that the democratic state should lie above the interests of any class or special interest. For a small minority of thoroughly radicalized workers this was to be expected. For the National Labor Tribune and many others, however, this growing division of classes was seen as a threat to their liberties and even the republican form of government itself.41

The National Labor Tribune, chastened by the July explosion, drew back from the brink. At the moment when the paper was taking unprecedented steps in organizing a political movement based on labor, it hurried to frame their protest and actions as an electoral effort to defend the true philosophy of democratic government. The present crisis, the Tribune argued, stemmed from bad laws passed in favor of special class interests. It rejected any open avowal of the workers

40 NLT, Sept. 1, 1877. The Tribune’s estimate is undoubtedly exaggerated, although it is worth noting that the largest claimed attendance for a local Greenback meeting in 1876 was only 2,000. NLT, Oct. 21, 1876.
41 Ibid., Aug. 11, 1877.
entering politics for their own class purposes as “clap trap demagoguism” and “utopian expressions.” “Good horse sense,” it counseled on the day of the county convention, teaches that the best political platform should “benefit the whole, and be as free as possible from pandering to class, whether the class be rich or poor.” The Tribune was convinced that it was fighting precisely such unfair use of government by a wealthy minority in the “Gilded Age” of robber barons and corruption. The paper also feared any polarization that would leave labor without allies in its fight with the employers — allies which they now sought in the political outsiders of the moment, the Greenback third party movement.

The Allegheny County convention of the Greenback Labor party was held on September 8, 1877, in the county courthouse in Pittsburgh. It was testimony to the breadth and depth the movement had achieved in less than six weeks. While only a handful of representatives of thirty-four clubs met in the 1876 Greenback convention, 204 delegates attended the founding meeting of the new party, representing thirty-four of Pittsburgh’s thirty-six wards, twelve of thirteen wards in Allegheny City, as well as fourteen boroughs and twenty-seven townships. J. H. Burtt was elected permanent chairman and Thomas A. Armstrong a member of the important credentials committee. Two Allegheny City socialists — Fisher and Shipman — were also elected as members of a large group of vice-presidents. As for the delegates, the majority “were from the mines, mills and workshops of Allegheny county,” as is borne out by checking the 139 delegates from Allegheny City and Pittsburgh against city directories. Of the seventy for whom some information on occupation is available, sixty-two were earners of wages or salaries. Of the fifty-six whose occupations could be safely identified, twenty-nine were craft workers, fifteen laborers, and twelve nonworkers. Among the crafts represented were heaters, puddlers, rollers, polishers, moldmakers, glassblowers, blacksmiths, printers, machinists, coopers, cabinetmakers, carpenters, miners, and marble polishers.

The convention’s platform broadened the party’s appeal, as the Tribune had urged, from the emphasis given to “wage earners” on August 4. The platform attacked “class legislation and mismanagement of national finances” and invited “all patriotic men to unite in the movement for industrial prosperity and financial reform.” Adopted, too, were the standard currency reform measures, as well as “control

42 Ibid., Sept. 8, 1877.
over corporate bodies,” aid to settlers on government land, and construction of highways for development and jobs. “A tariff protecting all home industries” was also favored, along with a graduated income tax. Of the fourteen planks on state and local policy, nine dealt with measures of direct interest to workers. There were planks calling for action on the workers’ major grievances such as company stores, excessive hours, accidents, child and prison labor, cheating in the coal mines, and dirty conditions at work. Others urged the abolition of conspiracy laws against unions and called for severe punishment of electoral fraud or interference. The assembled workers, furthermore, registered their opposition to “the paying of any losses sustained by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company in the riot of last July, because of its precipitation of the same, in its tyranny over its employees and unjust action toward our people in freight discrimination.”

The first motion before the convention, made by T. A. Armstrong, barred any person already nominated by the Republican or Democratic parties from being a Greenback Labor candidate. Passed by the assembly, it was no doubt aimed largely at the minority Democratic party which was attracted by the possibility of gaining formerly Republican votes for its own candidates. The nominations as finalized on the floor were General William Blakeley of Allegheny City for common pleas judge, William Reardon of Pittsburgh for district attorney, Emmett Cotton of the South Side for assistant district attorney, and John Large of Jefferson Township for director of the poor. General Blakeley, best known of the four, was a lawyer and founder of the Republican party with a distinguished Civil War military record. Reardon, born in County Cork, Ireland, was a young criminal lawyer. Cotton was described as “the youngest man at the bar, a self-made man working in one of our iron mills, and studying his profession when opportunities offer.” Large was a farmer.44 The group also selected delegates to the state convention of the Greenback party among whom were both Davis and Armstrong of the Tribune.45

Pittsburgh’s labor leaders could look with satisfaction at their progress in Allegheny County. With local candidates selected and a county platform that elucidated the workers’ grievances, the next step was to carry out a successful fusion with the nonlabor elements of the established currency reform movement. Preparations to intervene

44 See ibid., Sept. 30, 1877, on the candidates. On Reardon, see The Twentieth Century Bench and Bar of Pennsylvania (Chicago, 1903), 2: 899. On Blakeley, see Biographical Review of Pittsburg and the Vicinity (Boston, 1897), 24: 9-11. On Cotton, see Twentieth Century Bench, 2: 937.
45 NLT, Sept. 15, 1877.
within the Greenback movement had begun prior to the July riots, apparently on the initiative of the state Knights of Labor. The Tribune reported in July 1877 that a declaration of principles was being drafted for a political effort that would “begin among the labor associations” and, it was hoped, be adopted by the Greenbackers.\footnote{Ibid., June 6, 1877. My interpretation differs from the fragmentary treatment given the Harrisburg convention in Ralph Ricker, The Greenback-Labor Party in Pennsylvania (Bellefonte, Pa., 1966), 34-35.}

To enhance their leverage in the new situation created by the railroad strike, the Knights of Labor initiated a Harrisburg meeting of a “United Labor Party” two days after the Allegheny County convention in September 1877. The meeting of thirty to forty delegates, mainly from Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, served as a bargaining chip in planning for the regular Greenback convention to be held nine days later in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The platform adopted was similar to that of the Allegheny County convention but it also included several new items. It endorsed cooperation in both distribution and production and favored the establishment of courts of arbitration by disinterested persons because “all strikes are equally disastrous to both labor and capital.”\footnote{Norman Ware has characterized the Pittsburgh Knights as being “western, aggressive, rough, politically minded, and influenced somewhat by socialist thought” while the Philadelphia Knights were “conservative, law-abiding, and dominated by middle-class ideals.” The absence of the arbitration and cooperation planks in Allegheny County’s platform provides substantiating evidence. Both the National Labor Tribune and the Pittsburgh Trades Assembly in the fall of 1877 opposed proposals by the Republican governor to set up boards of arbitration to settle labor disputes. They did not believe it possible to find disinterested parties, preferring arbitrators appointed by the two parties in negotiations. Norman Ware, The Labor Movement in the United States, 1860-1895 (1929; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass., 1959), 35.} Interestingly enough, the coal miners’ demand for penalties for cheating by their employers in weighing coal was omitted. After negotiating with representatives of the regular Greenback party, a provisional slate was nominated consisting of a Columbia County judge, William Ellwell, for supreme judge, John M. Davis, Master Workman of the Pittsburgh Knights, for auditor general, and James L. Wright, a founder of the Philadelphia Knights, for state treasurer.

The platform adopted by the September 19 state convention of the new Greenback Labor party was largely concerned with currency measures. The only concrete measure of direct relief offered the workers was a plank to outlaw payment in scrip or orders against a company store. Another plank called for repeal of laws against “peaceful combinations and associations” of labor and the establishment of a system of arbitrators, acting under authority of law, who would settle...
"all disputes as to wages, manner, time and mode of work." The state nominations went to Judge Benjamin F. Bentley of Lycoming County for supreme judge, small manufacturer James E. Emerson for auditor general, and James L. Wright for state treasurer. Wright, born in Ireland in 1818, was active in Philadelphia labor activities from 1837 on and was one of the handful of founders of the Knights of Labor in 1870 with Uriah S. Stephens.48

The Allegheny County labor movement was now ready to embark on the fall campaign in a serious way. The drive for votes was carried to the public through the pages of the National Labor Tribune and in mass meetings and rallies organized by newly established party clubs in the wards and precincts of the two cities. The Twenty-ninth Ward on the South Side led off in organizing for the campaign while Pittsburgh's 137-member Sixth Ward Club organized a rally at Forbes and Magee with a claimed attendance of 3,000. The campaign was also strong in Allegheny City where a hall seating 2,500 was reserved for indoor rallies in case of rain. A street rally in Allegheny the week before the election drew a reported crowd of 2,000. German workingmen were also involved in the campaign. At a meeting in Spiketown (now the Carrick area), 200 German-American workers vowed not to patronize businesses that supported the Republican German language newspaper, the Freiheits Freund. Organization also took root in a number of areas outside Pittsburgh and Allegheny, but not among the county's farmers to judge by reports in the Tribune. In McKeesport, the miners of the Robbins and Jenkins coal works formed a club of several dozen and erected a hall to serve as both a campaign headquarters and a school. The steelworkers at Andrew Carnegie's pioneering Edgar Thomson steelworks were to play an early and prominent role in the Greenback Labor movement. They had walked out in solidarity with the railroad men during their July strike and went on to poll the widest margin of victory of any borough in the November election.49

48 On Wright, see George E. McNeil, The Labor Movement, the Problem of Today (New York, 1891). The Pennsylvania Knights of Labor probably supplied the bulk of the labor leadership, support, and votes to the Greenback Labor movement. Uriah S. Stephens himself served on the state executive committee of the new party, attended the February 1878 Toledo convention, and accepted a congressional nomination in 1878. NLT, Oct. 13, 1877, Mar. 2, 1878. A full understanding of the Knights' role will require studies of Greenback Labor activity in Philadelphia and in the state's mining counties. It is of special interest given the active role the Knights played in local politics in the 1880s. 49 NLT, July 20, Oct. 6, 20, 27, Nov. 3, 17, Sept. 1, 8, 1877; Foner, Great Uprising, 67.
The railroad strike and its aftermath crystallized the workers' sense of common interest and gave a tremendous impetus to the drive for independent political action by labor. The earlier pure Greenback party effort in 1876 had met with negligible labor support in Pennsylvania. Polling 1 percent of the state vote, the majority of the Greenback party's 7,209 votes were drawn from the rural agricultural counties of the northern portion of the state.\textsuperscript{50} The \textit{National Labor Tribune's} 1876 prediction of a political breakthrough in the making was proven prophetic by the electoral success of the three-month-old fusion of labor and Greenback movements in the November 1877 elections. There was a sevenfold increase of the third-party vote in the state with the Greenback Labor party winning 52,988 votes or 10 percent of the statewide total. The bulk of the supporters of the new party were now drawn from the major urban centers and the anthracite mining centers. Allegheny County contributed 14 percent of the Greenback Labor vote, second only to the anthracite mining county of Luzerne which registered 27 percent of the state support for the Greenback Labor cause. Philadelphia County was next with 9 percent, Schuylkill with 7 percent, and Berks, Blair, Dauphin, Lycoming, and Northampton counties each providing more than a thousand votes to the Greenback state candidates.\textsuperscript{51}

The \textit{National Labor Tribune}, Thomas A. Armstrong, and the Allegheny County labor movement were able to sustain the deep sense of anger and protest engendered by the July upheavals in the three months before the November 1877 elections. Eighteen Greenback Labor meetings were reported in the \textit{Tribune} for the month of August, twenty during September, and forty-four meetings in October as the elections approached. The new party could feel justifiably proud of its showing at the polls that fall. While the Greenback presidential candidate had received a mere 769 votes in the county in 1876, both the state and local Greenback Labor candidates made a strong showing in 1877. They received between 6,480 and 8,666 votes, a range of 20 to 27 percent of the total vote in the county. The fledgling party did especially well in the working-class communities of the South Side where the Republican and Democratic parties were defeated in nine wards. The county candidates also carried the Sixth, Ninth, and Twelfth wards in Allegheny City. They fared best in the Ninth Ward Woods Run community of ironworkers, where the Greenback Labor


\textsuperscript{51} NLT, Nov. 24, 1877.
party won 44 percent of the vote drawing both traditionally Democratic and Republican voters. The party's success was based on a coalition of unionized ironworkers and Irish socialists and nationalists who were able to overcome the ethnic and religious divisions of the community. Local candidates also carried at least six boroughs, including Braddock, and nine townships in the county.\textsuperscript{52}

\textbf{Conclusion}

This article has examined currency reform in the post-Civil War era by focusing on the mass phenomena of the late 1870s in its local social context. It has shown that the Greenback Labor movement was clearly distinguished from the pure nonlabor Greenbackism whose classless ideas had been influential among many labor leaders in the 1860s. The Allegheny County labor movement had developed a healthy skepticism toward the nonlabor elements which had contributed to the demise of the National Labor Union. As early as 1872, Pittsburgh labor had rejected any notion that political action was a substitute for the central task of building unions as the primary means of advancing the wage earners' interests.

The cadres and activists of the Allegheny County labor movement developed a strong trade union consciousness in the course of mighty battles with their employers. A class perception of the world made sense as many workers came to see unity as the key to the successful defense of their interests. Pittsburgh's labor leaders sought to extend this unity into the political arena since they were, by no means, apolitical "pure and simple" trade unionists. Labor leaders like Thomas A. Armstrong chafed at the political deal offered to the divided workers by the local party machines. Organized labor's discontent with the existing political system was expressed as early as 1867, but it did not embrace large numbers of local workers until 1877 when the "long depression" had eroded traditional forms of integration into the Republican and Democratic parties.

The labor upheaval of July 1877 touched off a buildup of growing anger and frustration among thousands of workers. The violence with which it was crushed polarized the nation and made the identity of workers as workers far more salient among the vast majority who

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., Nov. 25, 1876, Nov. 17, 1877. The ward structure of 1877-1878 does not correspond to the system used today. See \textit{Atlas of the City of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania} (Pittsburgh, 1911). The fledgling party carried Wards 17, 18, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 33, and 34 for its local candidates. In some cases, these wards did not carry the party's state candidates. \textit{Small's Legislative Handbook} (1878), 327-36. On Woods Run, see Bennett, "Iron Workers," 273.
had previously voted Democratic or Republican. The aftermath of July saw a plunge into political activity across the nation in which working people sought to translate their anger, outrage, and newfound sense of power and unity into success at the polls. The National Labor Tribune, the Pittsburgh Knights of Labor, and the local labor movement moved quickly to galvanize this sentiment into a new political formation — the Greenback Labor party of Allegheny County.

A chasm between social classes stood revealed in the glow of the vast conflagration of Pennsylvania Railroad property in Pittsburgh. It stirred the anger of workers and gave them a sense of power. At the same time, it chastened many who saw a dramatic proof of the power of the new corporate giants at the state and national levels. The National Labor Tribune, speaking in the name of “well conditioned, respectable labor,” saw a threat in the unruly and destructive actions of the mob and drew back from provoking a bloody confrontation between the workers and their employers and the state. The skilled workers of Pittsburgh such as the iron puddlers and glassblowers had much to lose in a world in which cooperation of classes was no longer possible. They feared for their own position and for the liberties of the Republic. Their sense of betrayal by the government was to be met through the tradition of the ballot box. As they moved toward a political organization based on labor’s interests and grievances they presented their case in the language of a defense of the accepted philosophy of true republican government. Skilled workers rejected the radicalism of the socialists who loomed in the commercial press as a vast subversive conspiracy bent on establishing an American replica of the Paris Commune of 1871. They likewise downplayed the railroad strike itself and moved to cement alliances — on their terms — with the dissident nonlabor elements of the Greenback movement. Directing themselves in a systematic and organized way, they successfully brought their followers to the polls in November 1877 and repeated that success in 1878, the peak year of the national Greenback Labor movement. Seeking to “reap the whirlwind” unleashed by events, Pittsburgh’s workers and their unions protested the massacres that ended the nation’s first railroad strike. The Greenback Labor party did not bring a realignment of American politics as so many had hoped. Nevertheless, the defection of thousands of workers from their traditional political loyalties was testimony to an emerging sense of their own distinctiveness. It was also an expression of dissatisfaction with the existing political system which pointed towards the intense labor-based political activity of the 1880s.