

THOMAS A. ARMSTRONG: A FORGOTTEN ADVOCATE OF LABOR

MILES S. RICHARDS

COMMUTERS passing by Allegheny Center on the North Side of Pittsburgh have perhaps noticed a statue standing at the junction of the North Commons with Federal Street. This ten-foot granite sculpture portrays a portly man attired in clothing of late-nineteenth-century vintage. The sculptured figure is clearly identified in boldly chiseled lettering as Thomas A. Armstrong. An inscription at the monument base reads: "An advocate of the Rights of Labor. Erected by the Workingmen of the United States. Brave Soldier and Upright Man. Equality and Justice to All."

Nearly a century after his death Armstrong is a largely forgotten figure. Yet he deserves our attention, for he was prominent in labor affairs in Pittsburgh and Allegheny City and was highly influential in trade union circles throughout the United States. He worked as chief editor of the *National Labor Tribune*, which became a forum for reform in the labor movement in the critical years after 1870 when labor leaders grappled with the questions raised by independent trade organizations, industrial unionism, and direct political action.

Thomas A. Armstrong's ancestors emigrated to Pennsylvania from Winchester, England, early in the eighteenth century. By 1798 his grandfather (also named Thomas) had married and settled in the town of Selinsgrove near Harrisburg. John Armstrong was born in this village on March 19, 1802. At the age of nineteen John traveled over the National Road from Harrisburg to Steubenville, Ohio, where he went to work for his maternal uncle, Alexander McDowell, as an apprentice tailor. After completing his training, John Armstrong established his own business which ultimately became very lucrative. In 1835 he married a local woman named Mary Thomas. Their third

Miles S. Richards received a B.S. and an M.A. in history from Edinboro University and in 1976 was a major contributor to *Between Two Rivers*, the publication of the Elizabeth Township Bicentennial Committee. For several years he was editor of *Two Rivers Bulletin*, the newsletter of the Elizabeth Township Historical Society. Mr. Richards is presently pursuing advanced historical studies at the University of South Carolina.—Editor

son, Thomas Aaron Armstrong, was born on August 15, 1840. At the urgings of business associates, the elder Armstrong invested in a local railroad corporation in 1851. Unfortunately, the company was poorly managed and went bankrupt three years later; consequently, John Armstrong and his fellow speculators faced severe economic hardship.¹

To aid the family finances the fourteen-year-old Thomas secured a job as a newsboy. Subsequently he became an apprentice to a printer in Steubenville. After his apprenticeship, however, Thomas moved to Pittsburgh to pursue his chosen craft. In 1857 he was hired as a typographer with the *Pittsburgh Chronicle-Telegraph*. A year later the rest of the family moved to Allegheny City (now the North Side of Pittsburgh) where they took up permanent residence at 212 Lacock Street.² Armstrong was to live in this two-story brick house for the remainder of his life.

Armstrong joined a craft that had been unionized in Pittsburgh for more than twenty years. Many local typographers had joined the National Typographical Union, an organization with solid international labor connections. Armstrong followed suit, and in 1859 he was admitted into full membership with Typographical Union Local No. 7. Throughout his career he credited his firm commitment to the labor movement to his roots with the Typographical Union, and, during his three decades of membership, he served the local in a variety of official capacities.³

The outbreak of the Civil War disrupted his dual career of typographer and trade union activist. Like the great majority of northern workers, Armstrong firmly opposed the Confederate secession. On August 11, 1862, he enlisted with the 139th Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment. His military record was particularly creditable, and in 1863 he earned a field promotion to the rank of sergeant. At the Battle of Cedar Creek, fought on October 19, 1864, Armstrong received severe chest wounds that permanently undermined his health.⁴ After being mustered out of the service in 1865, he returned home to Allegheny City. Despite his health problems, he fondly recalled his military years; moreover, he became active in the veteran organizations that formed after the war.⁵

1 *National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1876.

2 *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1887.

3 *100 Years as a Chartered Union: History of Pittsburgh Typographical Union No. 7* (Pittsburgh, 1952), 33; *National Labor Tribune*, Oct. 15, 1887.

4 *National Labor Tribune*, Aug. 24, 1882.

5 *Ibid.*, Oct. 15, 1882.

Armstrong, resuming his old job at the *Chronicle-Telegraph* shortly after completing his military service, became more involved in local labor concerns. He was appointed to the executive committee of Local No. 7 in 1866. Three years later he served on a committee of twelve that temporarily dissolved Local No. 7; this ploy enabled union members looking for employment in nonunion shops to attest honestly that their local had been broken up. Armstrong also represented the local for two years on the executive committee of the National Typographical Union and, with W. T. Gazzam, was a delegate to the 1872 convention of the International Typographical Union in Baltimore.⁶

Equally significant was Armstrong's association with a broad-based worker organization, the National Labor Union. As a representative of the Allegheny City Trades Assembly, Armstrong played a prominent role at the National Labor Union's convention that began in Baltimore on August 20, 1866. When the delegates took up the controversial issue of direct political action, Armstrong aligned with those favoring the immediate creation of a national labor party. He was on a five-member committee that drafted the official convention manifesto. This document called upon the workers to form a political party that would be independent of both Republicans and Democrats, who were perceived as being too dominated by "big business" to be of use to trade unionists in attaining their objectives.⁷

Armstrong was a visible if not key individual in the National Labor Union. While he did not attend the second national convention in Chicago in 1867, he persuaded the National Typographical Union to send several delegates. William H. Sylvis, president of the National Labor Union, in 1868 appointed Armstrong as one of the organization's three regional coordinators for Western Pennsylvania. During periodic visits to Pittsburgh, Sylvis worked closely with Armstrong, and the two men became close friends. When Sylvis suddenly died in 1869 Armstrong mourned his passing. In later years, warmly recalling Sylvis and his many contributions to the American labor movement, Armstrong maintained that he was one of the great influences upon his life.⁸

With the death of Sylvis, the National Labor Union lost its main unifying force, and a period of general disintegration began. The

6 *100 Years as a Chartered Union*, 30, 38, 109.

7 John D. French, "Reaping the Whirlwind: The Origins of the Allegheny County Greenback Labor Party in 1877," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 64 (Apr. 1981): 99.

8 *National Labor Tribune*, June 27, 1882.

chief issue that split the membership was whether they should encourage the growth of an independent labor party. The more conservative elements preferred to support established national politicians who advocated organized labor's positions on important issues. In 1872 the National Labor Union gathered in Columbus, Ohio, for its final convention. The majority of the one hundred delegates had never attended any of the earlier gatherings. Only twenty-five of those in attendance were affiliated with the trade unions. The remainder were basically monetary reformers whose demands included the immediate abolition of the national banking system. Scant attention was accorded to such paramount labor demands as the establishment of the eight-hour working day. The delegate majority nominated for president of the United States Judge David Davis of Illinois, who was to head the official ticket of a new political entity, the National Labor Reform party. The union contingent expressed their opposition to this development by immediately withdrawing from the convention proceedings.⁹

Armstrong, by 1872, had lost all interest in the National Labor Union; consequently, when it disbanded in 1873 he was not especially dismayed. By then Armstrong had already found an alternative organization, the Industrial Congress. That new federation had been formed by a coalition of trade unionists at Chicago in July 1872. The founding members pledged to help promote the general growth of the labor movement and aid various unions in preparing strike strategies. They paid scant attention, however, to the issue of workers combining to create an independent labor party.¹⁰ An active participant in the Chicago proceedings, Armstrong was elected to the congress's national executive committee. He was also appointed to the task of building the Industrial Congress within Pennsylvania.¹¹

After returning home from Chicago, Armstrong found that Local No. 7 of the Typographers was preparing for a strike. In retaliation to the local's attempts to recruit numbers of nonunion printers, the newspaper publishers declared open warfare on the union. This tense atmosphere caused the rank-and-file membership of Local No. 7 to air long-standing grievances and culminated in October 1872 with a vote overwhelmingly in favor of a strike. The work stoppage proved to be long and bitter. When it ended in June 1873, the strikers

⁹ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* (New York, 1957), 1: 431.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 441.

¹¹ *National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 24, 1874.

gained few meaningful concessions, while Armstrong and other strike leaders were blacklisted in Western Pennsylvania.¹²

With the chances of finding work in the Pittsburgh area unlikely, Armstrong and a group of blacklisted associates formed a consortium. They wanted to establish an independent newspaper that would be published for the general benefit of the labor movement. After buying the needed printing equipment, they moved into offices at the corner of Third and Market streets in Pittsburgh. On November 21, 1873, the *Printers' Labor Tribune* was offered to the public for one penny a copy. Initially, there was uncertainty about the frequency of issues, but within two months it had been determined that all releases would be weekly. Under the official title it was declared that the journal was: "Devoted to the Interests of Labor and the Protection of Home Industries." This was a statement that appeared in every edition during Armstrong's lifetime. In the first printing the publishers of the newspaper promised, "We will make our appearance to the public with no pretensions. We will guarantee one thing, however, and that is a fair, honest, and upright vindication of labor."¹³ This was a firm pledge that Armstrong consistently sought to maintain for his readers.

Four days after ushering in the new year, the paper announced that it had assumed the title of *National Labor Tribune*. Simultaneously, it had been determined that the annual subscription price would be permanently set at two dollars. Also, all new issues were to go into circulation every Saturday.

For its first six months of existence the *National Labor Tribune* suffered from severe problems. Many subscribers had defaulted in their subscriptions because of numerous strikes and mass layoffs caused by the economic downturn in 1873. As a result, the paper had been deprived of a possible two thousand dollars in income. Various paying readers complained that paper deliveries were irregular. Finally, some unions charged that the journal had totally overlooked their organizational affairs. The editors attributed this last drawback to a shortage of able reporters. These difficulties appeared insurmountable for the majority of the owning consortium.

The paper announced on January 31, 1874, that a managerial reorganization had recently occurred by which John Armstrong had purchased the shares of eight of the original stockholders. All future operational decisions were to be divided between Thomas A. Arm-

¹² *Printers' Labor Tribune*, Nov. 22, 1873.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, 1873.

strong and Henry Palmer, an independently wealthy resident of Allegheny City. Palmer was to manage financial matters while Armstrong handled all technical arrangements. Both men were to collaborate upon setting editorial policies.¹⁴

By the end of 1874 the new management had rectified many of the problems that had plagued the young newspaper. An expanded reporting staff allowed the paper to comment upon labor developments at the local, state, and national levels. Through regular correspondents the *National Labor Tribune* could highlight the affairs of such important unions as the Miners' National Association. International affairs deemed vital to American workers were regularly analyzed. Faithful subscribers could also read guest articles that were prepared by a wide variety of respected labor commentators. The most consistent feature, however, was the weekly editorial that usually was written by Armstrong.

The belief was that the paper existed because working people throughout the United States desired a journal that reflected their views. The existing major newspapers were commonly perceived to be the mouthpieces of the industrial capitalists. The *National Labor Tribune* grew steadily during the critical five years of economic depression that followed the Panic of 1873. It served as the official organ of the Sons of Vulcan, as well as its successor in 1876, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. For many years it also promoted the Window Glass Artsmen National Association.¹⁵ Periodically, the paper was a spokesman for various short-lived state and national cooperative efforts such as the Pennsylvania Co-operative General Trading and Manufacturing Association.¹⁶ Under the title banner, it was proclaimed, too, that the *National Labor Tribune* was the voice of the ***** the then-secret Order of the Knights of Labor. In the early seventies Armstrong was a loyal Knight, and the order seemed to suit his philosophy of consolidating all workers in one large national organization.

In his editorials Armstrong primarily sought to educate and arouse the workers to assert themselves and organize their own strength. Certainly these essays contain revealing insights into his thoughts upon important public policy issues of that era. Any understanding of Armstrong's thinking is predicated on the realization that he was genuinely concerned about labor's problems. When the

14 *National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 31, 1874.

15 French, "Reaping the Whirlwind," 100.

16 *National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 24, 1874.

"Long Depression" of the 1870s caused massive unemployment throughout the nation Armstrong advanced many plans to end it.

One of his solutions was the increased maintenance of a strong tariff system that would protect American domestic industries from foreign competitors. Such trade barriers would guarantee the jobs of countless thousands of workers. Armstrong strongly opposed the advocates of free trade which included the editors of Chicago's *Workingmen's Advocate*, another highly influential labor newspaper. As he stated, "Free trade in our country's history has thrice brought the workers of the nation to soup, cornbread and 50¢ a day. Free trade is the dream of a proud, monied commercial aristocracy who would reduce labor to the level of the pauper class of Europe." ¹⁷

Armstrong realized that capital invariably reacted to economic downturns by either slashing wages or implementing mass layoffs. During the depression years Armstrong encouraged workers to combat these by utilizing the strike option. Within his paper he gave strikes both wide publicity and strong support.¹⁸

He was equally vociferous in denouncing those involved in strike-breaking activities. Armstrong realized that employers usually sought strikebreakers from two basic sources. One group consisted of recent foreign migrants residing in large urban slums, while the other source was made up of unskilled rural blacks from the southern states. Armstrong consistently refused to admit that these people accepted such work as a means to escape abject poverty and deplorable living conditions. Nor was he willing to concede that the strikers and scabs belonged to a common working class. When commenting upon strikebreakers Armstrong invariably resorted to xenophobia and racism.

An example of Armstrong's extreme nativism appeared in an edition that was printed in March 1874. When superintendents of a mine owned by Carnegie Steel and located near Youngstown, Ohio, were faced with a strike, they transported from Cleveland a large number of scabs who happened to be Italian immigrants. Armstrong called this situation "an insult to American labor," adding, "That Italians are slovenly and hopelessly inefficient miners is a demonstrated fact." ¹⁹

In another article entitled "Negro Competition," which was published on June 27, 1874, Armstrong engaged in blatant racebaiting. During the previous month the Miners' Benevolent Association

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Apr. 21, 1877.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb. 8, 1874.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 7, 1874.

initiated a work stoppage in the Hocking Valley of southeastern Ohio. What happened afterward was graphically described: "They [management] at once dispatched agents to Louisville, Richmond, and Memphis to gather together some five hundred negroes. . . . vagrants who lived about wharves and brothels, eking precarious existences by picking up stray jobs when starvation stung them to it. This crowd, composed mostly of ignorant, dissolute villains from the dregs of these cities were hurried from their miserable filthy dens into the beautiful Hocking Valley." Armstrong believed it criminal that those he perceived as social misfits were working to the detriment of the strikers, whom he described in a most favorable manner. According to him, "Their labor adds wealth to the nation. They are supporters of our institutions, obey the laws, and pay all taxes."²⁰

Afro-Americans, though, were not the only racial minority that Armstrong fulminated against in his writings. On April 22, 1875, Armstrong first elucidated his thoughts about "John Chinaman." He was impressed with the activities of Denis Kearney, a California labor demagogue who built a career by exploiting the issue of Chinese immigration. Armstrong claimed: "Half the work in California is already being done by pigtailed who help underwork white men." Also, he observed: "These Chinese are not true consumers. They live like animals, save all they can, then go back to China where they spend what they earn here."²¹ In contrast, American workers labored hard, lived cleanly, and bought goods produced within the United States.

During an eastern lecture tour Kearney visited Pittsburgh in August 1878. Gladly acting as host, Armstrong gave Kearney good coverage in the *National Labor Tribune*. Although he readily admitted that "heathen Chinese laborers are only a mere curiosity here," he believed that Kearney's talks offered valuable lessons to Pittsburgh workers. First, it made them aware of the "vulgar peculiarities of these yellows." Second, it taught local organized labor "to be vigilant and not permit a comparable influx of negro do-nothings." If that happened Armstrong promised that he would emulate Kearney's example "by rising to my soapbox."²²

All too often Armstrong allowed racial prejudices to affect his perception of important events. He did not realize that he was unwittingly aiding industrialists, who often raised the black and immigrant issues to divert the attention of the labor movement from more pressing economic and social concerns.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, June 27, 1874.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Apr. 22, 1875, July 8, 1876.

²² *Ibid.*, Aug. 10, 1878.

On the other hand, when the nation went through one of its periodic flareups of war hysteria in the autumn of 1877 Armstrong refused to get caught up in the excitement. During October detachments of American cavalry troops fought several border skirmishes with Mexican troops. There followed a series of punitive raids into Mexico. Rumors were rampant that the army of Mexico planned to mobilize, invade Texas, and occupy several key border towns, including El Paso. By December many assumed that another Mexican war was inevitable. Armstrong did not support the advocates of war which included the *Workingmen's Advocate*. He declared, "I have no idea of being made a tool of the Wall Street gentry in this way. The editors of this journal do not propose to have its attention diverted by the booming of cannon on the Rio Grande from the main questions facing labor."²³

To Armstrong the major issue of the depression years was improving the lives of unemployed workers. His favorite solution was the opening of millions of acres of vacant frontier lands to idle eastern workingmen. Once they established western homesteads they would easily develop the necessary farming skills.

Besides dispatching idle workers westward, Armstrong wished to send them into the southern states. To maximize their prospects of economic success, he urged laborers to pool their financial resources and form cooperative colonization societies. He estimated that if a thousand workers made monthly three-dollar payments for a year, a community of one hundred families could be created. Such communities were to be established on purchased land tracts within the southern states. Acreages with rich deposits of coal or iron were particularly desirable. One area that Armstrong specifically cited was the coal-rich Kanawha Valley of West Virginia. Similar mineral lodes were located throughout the mountains of Tennessee, Virginia, and Alabama. If workers' cooperatives were founded upon such tracts, potentially lucrative coal mining and iron production could be started.²⁴ Workingmen would profit handsomely from such ventures; moreover, according to Armstrong they would also be performing a vital national service.

A staunch protectionist, Armstrong strenuously opposed the tendency of foreign capitalists to invest their resources in the American South. In March 1877 he expressed his grave concern about a British industrial syndicate that had purchased several large land-

²³ *Ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1877.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Sept. 30, 1876.

holdings in Tennessee and Georgia. The lands were mineral rich and upon all of these the syndicate was busily constructing blast furnaces. To Armstrong this was symptomatic of a disturbing trend, because throughout the region European investors were securing thousands of acres, abounding in natural resources, for minimal outlays. What was even more infuriating was that these same lands were subsequently resold for ten to twenty times their original worth.²⁵

Armstrong foresaw that the South was about to begin a period of rapid industrialization. Such economic growth, he anticipated, would insure meaningful employment for countless American workmen. As he concluded, "There is more wealth in the southern soil and rivers than the gold mines of California."²⁶ He cautioned, though, that before any economic breakthroughs occurred southerners had to achieve a critical objective — the restoration of native white political dominance.

Reconstruction for Armstrong was an unmitigated disaster. In June 1877 he observed in the *National Labor Tribune* that the Republican politicians had been attempting to reconstruct the southern states for twelve years but with a distinct lack of success. To perpetuate their corrupt regimes they had manipulated "ignorant southern negroes." Armstrong concluded: "The only reconstruction possible is the birth of industries within these states." Such statements meant he was in full accord with Henry Grady and other proponents of the "New South." They implied, however, that Armstrong also shared the views of such notorious racists as Benjamin ("Pitchfork Ben") Tillman of South Carolina. It pleased him when white southerners began to employ violent measures to overthrow the last Reconstruction governments. He wrote, "The old war hatred still exists. Southern whites are still rebels against negro equality. . . . it is possible the smothered indignation of the whites may be burst into a flame which will end in the termination of this intolerable condition."²⁷

While Armstrong encouraged white southerners to assert their dominance, he was personally consolidating his control over the *National Labor Tribune*. On March 6, 1875, it was announced that because of political differences Henry Palmer had severed all ties with the paper. He was replaced by John M. Davis, a veteran activist in the National Typographical Union who had served the Knights of

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Mar. 31, 1877.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, May 5, 1877.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, June 12, Feb. 8, 1877.

Labor as the Master Workman of District Three in Western Pennsylvania. Davis subsequently became a part owner of the paper, but with the sudden death of John Armstrong on December 24, 1876, Thomas assumed a controlling interest. The relationship between Armstrong and Davis was frequently strained, although the partnership managed to survive until June 1877, when, for the stated reason of ill health, Davis withdrew from the journal; the suspicion remained, however, that Armstrong had forced him out. Thomas Telford, an old Armstrong associate in Local No. 7, bought Davis's stock and became a full managing partner, although Armstrong made the final decisions on most major questions. This managerial structure was destined to survive until Armstrong's death.²⁸

During its first decade Armstrong made the *National Labor Tribune* one of the most influential labor publications in the nation. By 1880 the paper had moved from its original location to more spacious quarters at 104 Fifth Avenue, which was on the corner of Smithfield Street. Also, by 1880 the official stationery of the newspaper proclaimed that it was the organ of thirteen major national trade organizations and associations.²⁹ Armstrong was unable, though, to aid in building an effective national trade organization.

After a good start the Industrial Congress had quickly deteriorated. Armstrong dutifully reported its promotional activities, but with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Increasingly, he had become critical of President Jackson H. Wright and the rest of the congress's national leadership, because they had abandoned their initial goal of creating a strong trade assembly. Instead they were intent upon reviving the efforts to organize another labor party. Furthermore, the Industrial Congress had become heavily involved in monetary politics. By 1875 Armstrong had come to regard all such political actions as distinctly secondary in importance to promoting trade unionism. He was convinced that the once promising Industrial Congress had degenerated into an aggregation of eccentric, middle-class reformers with no practical use to organized labor. In absolute disgust he described Wright and his associates as a "petty gang of aimless non-entities."³⁰ Nor did he attend when the last convention of the Industrial Congress met in Toledo in April 1875.

After his final break with the moribund congress, Armstrong

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Mar. 6, June 10, 1875, Jan. 6, June 30, July 14, 1877.

²⁹ Thomas A. Armstrong to Terence V. Powderly, Jan. 1, 1880, *Papers of Terence Vincent Powderly, 1864-1924*, 94 reels, microfilm (Glen Rock, N.J., 1974), reel 2.

³⁰ *National Labor Tribune*, Mar. 13, July 8, 1875.

for several years concentrated solely upon labor affairs in Western Pennsylvania. He continued to be active within Typographical Local No. 7. He belonged to the Knights of Labor, although he was frequently at odds with the leadership of District Three. Also, he became intimately involved with two other unions. Armstrong helped form the Machinery Molders Assembly No. 1030, and later advised its leadership on policy decisions. Because of his consistent support, the *National Labor Tribune* became the official organ of the Miners' National Association in 1877. Armstrong further aided this important union by serving as treasurer of its organizing fund for Western Pennsylvania, and when any of the locals in Pennsylvania initiated a work stoppage he handled all finances designated for strike relief.³¹ But it was the Greenback Labor party that ultimately absorbed most of his attention in the latter part of the 1870s.

Since 1865 domestic monetary reformers had been advocating that the paper currency (greenbacks) printed during the Civil War be exclusively utilized as legal tender. By thus inflating the money supply such theorists believed that the majority of debtors would be able to achieve solvency. In direct opposition were the advocates of tight fiscal policies who argued that metal coinage should be the only legitimate currency. When these "hard money" supporters convinced Congress to demonetize all greenback dollars there were understandably great protests from the inflationists. Because they steadfastly maintained that the reintroduction of paper currency would largely solve all major economic problems, the inflationary partisans, not surprisingly, gained the sobriquet of "Greenbackers."

The nucleus of this movement consisted of middle-class businessmen and farmers. Until the "Long Depression" organized labor had remained uninvolved in the monetary controversy. As unemployment deepened, however, unionists began to join the ranks of those urging the return of paper notes.³² Among the more prominent of such labor converts was Richard F. Trevellick of Detroit, an old friend of Armstrong, who had presided over the National Labor Union from 1869 to 1872.

Although he basically agreed with its inflationary aims, Armstrong was reluctant to affiliate himself with the Greenback movement. On June 10, 1876, in an editorial he noted that a coalition of financial reformers had convened a meeting in Indianapolis,

³¹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1887, Sept. 8, 1877.

³² John R. Commons, ed., *History of Labour in the United States* (New York, 1926), 1: 239.

Indiana. Most of the delegates were from such agrarian organizations as the Patrons of Husbandry (the Grange). Concluding that the two major parties were dominated by "hard money" interests, the delegates called for the formation of an independent third party. This new political grouping, named the Independent Greenback party, nominated as its national presidential candidate seventy-nine-year-old Peter Cooper, a veteran of many reform movements.³³

The wary Armstrong viewed the Independent Greenback party as "more a protest than an organized effort designed for longtime success." At first he seriously doubted whether Cooper and his associates were sympathetic to labor's basic interests, until a series of conversations with Cooper convinced him that such doubts were unfounded.³⁴

As the 1876 presidential campaign progressed, Armstrong, a longtime Republican, decided to break with the two-party system, formally endorsing Cooper's candidacy in September. Despite Armstrong's efforts the new party gained only 7,204 votes in Pennsylvania. These results were disappointing, but it was their third best showing nationally. Armstrong attributed this modest accomplishment to statewide labor support.³⁵ Still, it would take a dramatic development to force the mass of workers into a third-party movement. The great railroad strike of July 1877 proved to be the catalyst that precipitated a major reversal in the thinking of many of the working class.

The railroad workers initiated their strike on the nineteenth to protest the implementation of sharp wage reductions, and it quickly grew into what appeared to be a popular uprising against the Pennsylvania Railroad. Before the flames were extinguished, thirty-nine buildings had been destroyed and forty-two local residents had lost their lives. Appalled by the destruction, Armstrong served on a committee of safety put together by Pittsburgh Mayor William C. McCarthy, a former printing pressman behind whom Armstrong had successfully organized labor support in the election of February 17, 1874. From the outset the committee stressed that it would do nothing to undermine the strikers or block the redress of their grievances, but it did make clear that it would actively seek the protection of property and lives. The strike and the swiftness by which it was put down by the authorities convinced Armstrong and other

33 *National Labor Tribune*, June 10, 1876.

34 *Ibid.*, Aug. 26, 1876.

35 *Ibid.*, Sept. 9, Dec. 16, 1876.

labor leaders that independent political action was essential if workers were to attain their objectives without being destroyed in the process. While some turned to the Social Democratic or Workingmen's parties, Armstrong saw more possibilities in what was to become the Greenback Labor party.³⁶

During August public meetings were convened throughout the Pittsburgh area. At these gatherings the participants did much of the work necessary in building a political organization. Thomas A. Armstrong played a dominant role at many of these meetings, and his newspaper became the Greenback Labor party's official journal with in Pennsylvania.³⁷ Weekly columns faithfully described both the state and national progress of the local Greenback clubs, the party's structural backbone.

On September 8, 1877, the Allegheny County Convention of the Greenback Labor party was held in the old county courthouse building in Pittsburgh. At this conclave were 204 delegates representing municipalities from all over Allegheny County. Armstrong attended the sessions as a representative from the Fourth Ward of Allegheny City. He was a member of the important credentials committee and presented the first formal motion before the convention. His proposal barred any person already nominated by the major parties from gaining a Greenback Labor endorsement. This precautionary move was aimed largely at local Democratic politicians who were cultivating disaffected Republican voters. Most delegates evidently agreed with Armstrong because the motion carried easily. Inevitably, he was among the delegation selected for the party's state convention which met at Williamsport later that month.³⁸

By January 1878 Armstrong could be described as the leading member of the Greenback Labor Executive Committee of Allegheny County. Yet until the party held its 1878 state convention in Philadelphia, Armstrong had contented himself with working behind the scenes. At the convention in May, the trade union contingent sought to nominate him as the Greenback Labor candidate for governor of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, the delegate majority believed his labor record would make him unacceptable to most voters, and on the second ballot he was defeated by a three-to-one margin.³⁹

The ultimate nominee was Samuel R. Mason, a successful attor-

36 Allen Humphreys Kerr, "The Mayors and Records of Pittsburgh, 1816-1951," 166-67, 176; French, "Reaping the Whirlwind," 97.

37 *National Labor Tribune*, Aug. 25, 1877.

38 *Ibid.*, Sept. 15, 1877.

39 *Ibid.*, Jan. 19, May 11, 1878.

ney from Mercer County. His credentials were not calculated to impress the party labor supporters. Essentially, he was a political conservative and had long represented railway corporations in litigations. At the time of his nomination he was on retainer with the Pennsylvania Railroad. Never during his law practice had he ever served a labor client. Mason, though, had been involved in monetary politics since 1872 and had become well known as the "Father of the Greenback Party in Western Pennsylvania."⁴⁰ Despite this, his nomination must have been a bitter pill for both Armstrong and his union supporters to swallow.

During the campaign Armstrong loyally upheld the Greenback Labor ticket. He repeatedly denied ever having made hostile remarks about Mason during an interview conducted by a reporter from the *Philadelphia Times*. On May 18 he stated in the *National Labor Tribune*: "In a multitude of delegates and aspirants there must be disappointments but wisdom will be a general acquiescence to majority will."⁴¹ Regardless of Armstrong's efforts, Mason was decisively beaten in November.

Mason's defeat convinced everyone that much party building would be needed before a Greenback Labor candidate stood a chance of winning the governorship four years hence. Armstrong therefore devoted his efforts to organizing and strengthening the party and was rewarded with the gubernatorial nomination in 1882. Although there was little doubt Armstrong was the best person for the state's top office, party leaders had more trouble selecting a running mate for the position of lieutenant governor.

The preferred choice of most party organizers was Terence V. Powderly, the mayor of Scranton. He had twice been elected by decisive margins on Greenback Labor tickets, and among those in the party who were currently in public office he had the most voter appeal throughout Pennsylvania. In addition, as the Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, Powderly had tremendous prestige among organized labor. Dedicated Greenbackers were excited by the prospects of aligning their party in a political campaign with the Knights of Labor.

Armstrong and Powderly were not personally close; however, they had conducted an active correspondence for several years before 1882. The subject matter of their letters invariably involved routine topics of interest only to insiders within the union movement. For

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, May 11, 1878.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, May 18, 1878.

instance, in December 1880 Armstrong unsuccessfully urged Powderly to commission Richard Trellick as a field organizer for the Knights of Labor in Indiana.⁴² During the months before the state convention in May, the two men did not discuss their possible nominations.

Throughout the early months of 1882 many Greenback Labor leaders, including Frank S. Heath of Corry, Erie County, the state chairman, were urging Powderly to run. In contrast, prominent Knights demanded that their Grand Master Workman clearly express his intention of not seeking any state office. Robert D. Layton, the grand secretary, and the majority of the national hierarchy were determined that the order remain aloof from third-party politics. By late April Powderly had emphatically disavowed any desire to be lieutenant governor.⁴³

On May 18 the Greenback Labor party again held its state convention in Philadelphia. Armstrong was unanimously nominated on the first ballot. William Howard, a party stalwart from Northampton County, was selected to run as lieutenant governor. Both men promised the delegates that they would conduct a vigorous statewide campaign,⁴⁴ but in the months that followed, Howard was relegated to a distinctly minor role and made few public appearances.

In a letter dated June 9 Armstrong expressed his hope that Powderly would replace Howard on the ticket. "I regret exceedingly," he wrote, "that you feel unwilling to make this race with me this fall, for I feel assured we could make a good one." Up to the beginning of the convention Armstrong had believed Powderly would consent to run. He observed: "Even now you could be with me if you issue the wish." At the very least Armstrong expected Powderly to promote the campaign among the Pennsylvania Knights of Labor, adding, "I want all the votes I can get and for the whole ticket as well."⁴⁵

Later in June Armstrong dispatched a second note to his associate in Scranton. This letter is important because it provides insight into his thinking in the period immediately before the start of actual campaigning. He was gravely worried about the lukewarm support his candidacy was receiving among the Knights of Labor, and he re-

⁴² Armstrong to Powderly, Dec. 4, 1880, *Papers of Terence Vincent Powderly*, reel 2.

⁴³ Heath to Powderly, Mar. 22, 1882, *ibid.*, reel 3; Layton to Powderly, Apr. 6, 1882, *ibid.*; Powderly to James Wright, Apr. 27, 1882, *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *National Labor Tribune*, May 25, 1882.

⁴⁵ Armstrong to Powderly, June 9, 1882, *Papers of Terence Vincent Powderly*, reel 4.

iterated his desire that Powderly vigorously campaign for him: "If I get the vote of the order in this State I would be the next Governor easily." Also, Armstrong, revealing that his chronic bad health had been bothering him for nearly two months, expressed serious doubt whether he had the physical stamina to complete a statewide tour. He closed with this comment: "I expect to begin my pilgrimage of — or over — the State in July. Pity me!"⁴⁶

Armstrong was unable to begin his "pilgrimage" until August. He began his electoral efforts on the fifteenth at Dietrich Hall in Allegheny City and followed with a vigorous campaign unmatched by his rivals. Armstrong's stump rhetoric mainly concerned monetary reform, but he spoke on other issues. The party's platform included the establishment of the eight-hour working day in Pennsylvania, the repeal of all antistrike legislation, and the abolition of child labor in the state.⁴⁷

But the general campaign devolved into a battle of personalities rather than issues. Usually Armstrong reserved his fiercest remarks for Robert E. Pattison, the Democratic nominee, largely because the Democrats consistently assailed his character. For example, in a detailed editorial dated September 5 the Democratic editors of the *Pittsburgh Post* denounced Armstrong as an irresponsible radical who condoned labor violence. In retaliation, Armstrong's paper cited his solid war record while recalling that those running the *Post* had not displayed similar patriotism. Before the outbreak of the Civil War the *Post* editors "were keeping up a cowardly barrage of rebel editorials." While their "treasonous utterances" had slackened after the Battle of Bull Run, the *National Labor Tribune* suspected that they had never truly repudiated their southern principles.⁴⁸

Another charge that often surfaced was that Armstrong had entered the race only to assure the victory of the Republican candidate, James A. Beaver. To Armstrong, that allegation only underscored the shallowness of the entire Pattison campaign. In a speech at Brownsville, Fayette County, he roundly denounced both the Republicans and Democrats: "One harps on the past while the other is always crying fraud."⁴⁹

Alfred C. Pettit of the Prohibition party was the fourth candidate on the ballot, but his electoral efforts received little attention. He

⁴⁶ Armstrong to Powderly, June 26, 1882, *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *National Labor Tribune*, Aug. 24, 1882.

⁴⁸ *Pittsburgh Post*, Sept. 5, 1882; *National Labor Tribune*, Sept. 9, 1882.

⁴⁹ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, Oct. 21, 1882.

was mentioned periodically in the *National Labor Tribune*, especially when his travels intersected with Armstrong's itinerary. There was mild concern, though, in some quarters that Pettit would draw away votes from Armstrong among middle-class reformers.⁵⁰

As election day approached, various members of the opposition press feared an upset victory by Armstrong. On October 19 the *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette* stated that during the previous evening he had addressed a large and exuberant crowd at Armory Hall in Scranton. It was reported, too, that politicians from the competing parties believed Armstrong would carry all the counties within the anthracite coalfields. The *Pittsburgh Post* on November 5 bemoaned that a poll conducted in Jefferson Township, Fayette County, presented a grim outlook: Of the four hundred registered voters there all but fifteen supported the Greenback Labor party.⁵¹

Armstrong's partner at the *National Labor Tribune*, Thomas Telford, doubted, however, whether victory was likely because he sensed that too many trade unionists were apathetic toward the campaign. In June the conservative leadership of the Trades and Labor Council in Philadelphia had opted to remain officially neutral during the election. Throughout the electoral period persistent reports claimed that Powderly was supporting the Democrats. To quell these rumors Powderly issued an official denial on September 7. Later that month, after fierce internal debate, District No. 3 of the Knights of Labor refused to support the Armstrong candidacy; moreover, they elected a slate of officers who were his avowed political enemies. Since this was Armstrong's home district, these two repudiations rankled him deeply. A disgusted Telford wrote on October 27 that if Armstrong "owns anything like the vote which the party expects, he will be the next Governor of Pennsylvania. If not. . . it will be a significant commentary upon the intelligence of the state's workers."⁵²

The election results confirmed Telford's misgivings. The final popular tally was 355,741 votes for Pattison, 315,589 votes for Beaver, and only 33,978 votes for Armstrong.⁵³ It was a hard political blow to Armstrong, particularly after an exhausting campaign that

⁵⁰ *National Labor Tribune*, Sept. 23, 1882.

⁵¹ *Pittsburgh Commercial Gazette*, Oct. 19, 1882; *Pittsburgh Post*, Nov. 5, 1882.

⁵² Powderly to Robert D. Layton, June 18, 1882, *Papers of Terence Vincent Powderly*, reel 4; Terence V. Powderly press dispatch, Sept. 7, 1882, *ibid.*; Gilbert Rockwood to Powderly, Sept. 28, 1882, *ibid.*; *National Labor Tribune*, Oct. 27, 1882.

⁵³ *National Labor Tribune*, Dec. 10, 1882.

had greatly drained his strength. He largely withdrew from active leadership in Greenback Labor party affairs and scaled down his work load at the *National Labor Tribune*. After 1882 Telford increasingly assumed direct control over the paper.

During the last five years of his life, Armstrong developed other interests. He became involved in the local chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R.), the primary national veterans group. He also attended meetings that resulted in the establishment of the Pittsburgh Press Club. Armstrong was among the nearly one hundred men in attendance at the club's grand opening on March 17, 1885, and his signature is on the original charter. At the time of his death he was on the club's board of directors.⁵⁴

As Armstrong moved farther away from direct labor advocacy in his declining years, he came to be viewed by the Pittsburgh business community as more of an ally than an adversary. And his last serious effort in labor matters seemed to bear this out. Beginning in early 1885 the Pittsburgh Syndicate of Coal and Coke Operators had engaged in a bitter wage dispute with the Miners and Laborers Amalgamated Association of Westmoreland County. The union represented the workers of nearly a dozen coke plants around the town of Scottdale. Finally, when both sides agreed to binding arbitration, Judge John R. Jackson of Columbus, Ohio, was chosen as the umpire. In April 1887 Jackson ruled that no wages could be raised until there was a matching advance in the selling price of coke.

The coke workers bitterly denounced the ruling, while the Scottdale local, led by John Byrne, prepared to strike. Armstrong decided to intervene because he believed the coke workers were making a grave mistake. During his last years he had developed great doubts about the usefulness of work stoppages and had gained more respect for arbitration. In an editorial of May 21, 1887, he said that the strike "is a weapon which should be used only as a last resort after every reasonable resource has been exhausted."⁵⁵

Armstrong stressed to Byrne and his associates that they had agreed to arbitration and therefore were duty bound to accept the results. Armstrong regretted they had not benefited from the decision, but he stressed that it was vital that the principle of arbitration be preserved. To him this was the method by which all future labor disputes should be settled. In a letter to William Mullin, a militant leader, he said: "Go slow. You cannot afford to sacrifice yourself

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Oct. 8, 1887.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, May 21, 1887.

after an agreement. To strike now would be disastrous to the best interests of all."⁵⁶

Armstrong's comments were coldly received in Scottdale. The would-be peacemaker was publicly denounced by Byrne and Mullin as a traitor to their cause. Various other labor leaders, including Armstrong's old friend P. J. McGuire, the president of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, repeated this sentiment. Not surprisingly, his warmest support came from Henry Clay Frick, the most powerful figure within the Pittsburgh Syndicate of Coal and Coke Operators. In a letter, Frick commended Armstrong for "his bold stand," adding, "we can only say to you and others who have the interests of the workers at heart. Prevail upon them to return to work and carry out the agreements made with us."⁵⁷ In early June the strikers gave in to pressure, accepted the arbitration terms, and returned to work.

The intervention in the Scottdale dispute ultimately was too much for Armstrong. By July his health had declined to the point that he had suspended most activities. But late that month he was persuaded to visit some cousins in Colorado, and he returned in apparent good health.

On September 10 Armstrong carried the war colors of the 139th Pennsylvania Veterans Volunteers in a two-mile parade through the downtown of Braddock. Probably this march led directly to his death, because two days later he suffered a severe heart attack in his office. He was immediately taken home where for the next three weeks he attempted a recovery. Although ambulatory, he tended to remain within his second-floor room. Then, during the evening of October 1, 1887, Armstrong suddenly died after experiencing another coronary. Friends attributed his death "to fatigue and the lingering effects of his war wounds."⁵⁸ Being severely overweight had certainly not aided his general health either.

The funeral was held on October 6 at the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Pittsburgh where Armstrong had been a member for more than thirty years. After the service the casket was carried to the Union Depot where it was deposited aboard a special funeral train bound for Steubenville and final interment.⁵⁹

After Armstrong's death the print media of Pittsburgh made

⁵⁶ Thomas A. Armstrong to William Mullin, Apr. 30, 1887, *National Labor Tribune*.

⁵⁷ Henry Clay Frick to Thomas A. Armstrong, Apr. 30, 1887, *ibid*.

⁵⁸ *National Labor Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1887.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Oct. 15, 1887.

considerable analysis of his record. While praising his moderation, most writers conveniently forgot that twenty years earlier he had been blacklisted. His old enemies at the *Pittsburgh Post* thought he was "a wise, conservative, and prudent advisor of organized labor. He had a thorough contempt for huckstering, labor politicians and professional agitators." The *Chronicle-Telegraph* said: "Pittsburgh employing capital will soon appreciate that a conservative force is gone." Armstrong's partner, Thomas Telford, best characterized him when he wrote, "He was not an extremist because he believed in being practical. He looked to the practical rather than enthusiastic sentimentalism to obtain objectives. He was conservative in that he laid his lines of action within the bounds of probable success."⁶⁰

Fourteen days after his death the *National Labor Tribune* announced the formation of the "Thomas A. Armstrong Monument Association." This group intended to raise funds for the construction of a commemorative statue in his native Allegheny City. Its membership included many distinguished union leaders and labor sympathizers. Among the members were Terence V. Powderly, P. J. McGuire, Henry George, Daniel De Leon, John Swinton, and Adolph Strasser. After two years they had raised ten thousand dollars. The firm of A. E. Windsor and Company was commissioned to construct a ten-foot granite statue at a site in West Park near the nexus of West Ohio Street and Sherman Avenue.

At 2:00 P.M. on November 28, 1889 (Thanksgiving Day), the statue was formally dedicated. An estimated crowd of two thousand persons attended the ceremony. Being a lifelong bachelor, Armstrong had left no children; consequently, he was represented by his mother, two sisters, and a nephew, Thomas Armstrong Highberger. After the speechmaking, Highberger, as the nearest male relative, pulled a ripcord to unveil the monument. For several years loyal friends placed flowers at the statue base, but eventually this custom was abandoned.⁶¹

Armstrong's memorial remained at its original location until one night in early June 1969 when an automobile speeding through the park collided with the statue and toppled the figure from its base. A short piece in the *Post-Gazette* of June 11, 1969, commented upon the incident and featured a photograph of the fallen monument. After-

⁶⁰ *Pittsburgh Post*, Oct. 6, 1887; *Pittsburgh Chronicle-Telegraph*, Oct. 14, 1887; *National Labor Tribune*, Oct. 8, 1887.

⁶¹ *National Labor Tribune*, Oct. 15, 1887, Dec. 7, 1889; interview with William M. Rimmel, Nov. 21, 1981. Mr. Rimmel, a lifelong North Side resident, was formerly the assistant city editor of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*.



This memorial to Thomas A. Armstrong was erected in 1889. The statue remained at its original location in West Park on the city's North Side until 1969 when it was hit and damaged by a car. Robert Gabriel of the Pittsburgh Arts and Crafts Center restored the statue, and the memorial was reerected at the corner of Federal Street and North Commons in 1975.

ward city park employees deposited the damaged statue in a storage lot behind the Pittsburgh Aviary. Several years later Robert Gabriel of the Pittsburgh Arts and Crafts Center decided to restore the statue to its original appearance. Careful research helped Gabriel accomplish this goal, and the refurbished Armstrong memorial has been standing at its current site since 1975.⁶²

The conscientious efforts of Robert Gabriel have preserved a tangible reminder of Armstrong. Most other visible traces, though, have disappeared. Evidently the surviving members of Armstrong's family have either died or moved away from Western Pennsylvania, while the house on Lacock Street was demolished several years ago to make room for a parking lot. The *National Labor Tribune* printed its last edition well over fifty years ago, although most copies of this important paper have been preserved on microfilm.

As for Thomas A. Armstrong himself, his place as a central figure in the labor movement of Western Pennsylvania is assured. Using the *National Labor Tribune* as a voice, Armstrong fought hard for the worker. That he defined the wage-earner as white, Anglo-Saxon, and preferably male, and that his quest for workers' rights essentially ended with his unsuccessful bid for the Pennsylvania governorship in 1882 should not overshadow the single-minded devotion to a cause that brought him little personal fame or fortune. Armstrong should be remembered as a loyal organizer and propagandist who helped define a framework for labor organization in one of its most crucial, formative periods.

⁶² *Pittsburgh Press*, June 8, 1975. See also, Vernon Gay and Marilyn Evert, *Discovering Pittsburgh's Sculpture* (Pittsburgh, 1983), 15.