



A PEOPLE'S HISTORY
OF THE
UNITED STATES

HARPERPERENNIAL  MODERNCCLASSICS

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Chapter 10

The Other Civil War

A sheriff in the Hudson River Valley near Albany, New York, about to go into the hills in the fall of 1839 to collect back rents from tenants on the enormous Rensselaer estate, was handed a letter:

. . . the tenants have organized themselves into a body, and resolved not to pay any more rent until they can be redressed of their grievances. . . . The tenants now assume the right of doing to their landlord as he has for a long time done with them, viz: as they please.

You need not think this to be children's play. . . . if you come out in your official capacity . . . I would not pledge for your safe return. . . . A Tenant.

When a deputy arrived in the farming area with writs demanding the rent, farmers suddenly appeared, assembled by the blowing of tin horns. They seized his writs and burned them.

That December, a sheriff and a mounted posse of five hundred rode into the farm country, but found themselves in the midst of shrieking tin horns, eighteen hundred farmers blocking their path, six hundred more blocking their rear, all mounted, armed with pitchforks and clubs. The sheriff and his posse turned back, the rear guard parting to let them through.

This was the start of the Anti-Renter movement in the Hudson Valley, described by Henry Christman in *Tin Horns and Calico*. It was a protest against the patroonship system, which went back to the 1600s when the Dutch ruled New York, a system where (as Christman describes it) “a few families, intricately intermarried, controlled the destinies of three hundred thousand people and ruled in almost kingly splendor near two million acres of land.”

The tenants paid taxes and rents. The largest manor was owned by the Rensselaer family, which ruled over about eighty thousand tenants and had accumulated a fortune of \$41 million. The landowner, as one sympathizer of the tenants put it, could “swill his wine, loll on his cushions, fill his life with society, food, and culture, and ride his barouche and five saddle horses along the beautiful river valley and up to the backdrop of the mountain.”

By the summer of 1839, the tenants were holding their first mass meeting.

The economic crisis of 1837 had filled the area with unemployed seeking land, on top of the layoffs accompanying the completion of the Erie Canal, after the first wave of railroad building ended. That summer the tenants resolved: “We will take up the ball of the Revolution where our fathers stopped it and roll it to the final consummation of freedom and independence of the masses.”

Certain men in the farm country became leaders and organizers: Smith Boughton, a country doctor on horseback; Ainge Devyr, a revolutionary Irishman. Devyr had seen monopoly of land and industry bring misery to the slumdweller of London, Liverpool, and Glasgow, had agitated for change, had been arrested for sedition, and fled to America. He was invited to address a Fourth of July rally of farmers in Rensselaerville, where he warned his listeners: “If you permit unprincipled and ambitious men to monopolize the soil, they will become masters of the country in the certain order of cause and effect. . . .”

Thousands of farmers in Rensselaer country were organized into Anti-Rent associations to prevent the landlords from evicting. They agreed on calico Indian costumes, symbol of the Boston Tea Party and recalling original ownership of the soil. The tin horn represented an Indian call to arms. Soon ten thousand men were trained and ready.

Organizing went on in county after county, in dozens of towns along the Hudson. Handbills appeared:

ATTENTION
ANTI-RENTERS! AWAKE! AROUSE! . . .
Strike till the last armed foe expires,
Strike for your altars and your fires—
Strike for the green graves of your sires,
God and your happy homes!

Sheriffs and deputy sheriffs trying to serve writs on farmers were surrounded by calico-clad riders who had been summoned by tin horns sounding in the countryside—then tarred and feathered. The *New York Herald*, once sympathetic, now deplored “the insurrectionary spirit of the mountaineers.”

One of the most hated elements of the lease gave the landlord the right to the timber on all the farms. A man sent onto a tenant’s land to gather wood for the landlord was killed. Tension rose. A farm boy was killed mysteriously, no one knew by whom, but Dr. Boughton was jailed. The governor ordered artillerymen into action, and a company of cavalry came up from New York City.

Petitions for an antirent bill, signed by 25,000 tenants, were put before the legislature in 1845. The bill was defeated. A kind of guerrilla war resumed in the country, between bands of “Indians” and sheriffs’ posses. Boughton was kept in jail seven months, four and a half months of that in heavy irons, before being released on bail. Fourth of July meetings in 1845 attended by thousands of farmers pledged continued resistance.

When a deputy sheriff tried to sell the livestock of a farmer named Moses Earle, who owed \$60 rent on 160 stony acres, there was a fight, and the deputy was killed. Similar attempts to sell livestock for rent payments were thwarted, again and again. The governor sent three hundred troops in, declaring a state of rebellion existed, and soon almost a hundred Anti-Renters were in jail. Smith Boughton was brought to trial. He was charged with taking papers from a sheriff but declared by the judge to have in fact committed “high treason, rebellion against your government, and armed insurrection” and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Those “Indians” found to be armed and disguised at Moses Earle’s farm, where the deputy had been killed, were declared by the judge to be guilty of murder, and the jury was so instructed. All were found guilty, and the judge sentenced four to life imprisonment and two to be hanged. Two of the leaders were told to write letters urging the Anti-Renters to disband, as their only chance to escape heavy sentences. They wrote the letters.

The power of the law thus crushed the Anti-Rent movement. It was intended to make clear that farmers could not win by fighting—that they must confine their efforts to voting, to acceptable methods of reform. In 1845, the Anti-Renters elected fourteen members to the state legislature. Governor Silas Wright now commuted to life imprisonment the two death sentences and asked the legislature to give relief to the tenants, to end the feudal system in the Hudson Valley. Proposals to break up the huge estates on the death of the owners were defeated, but the legislature voted to make illegal the selling of tenant property for nonpayment of rent. A constitutional convention that year outlawed new feudal leases.

The next governor, elected in 1846 with Anti-Rent support, had promised to pardon the Anti-Rent prisoners, and he did. Throngs of farmers greeted them on their release. Court decisions in the 1850s began to limit the worst features of the manorial system, without changing the fundamentals of landlord-tenant relations.

Sporadic farmer resistance to the collection of back rents continued into the 1860s. As late as 1869, bands of “Indians” were still assembling to thwart sheriffs acting for a rich valley landowner named Walter Church. In the early 1880s a deputy sheriff trying to dispossess a farmer on behalf of Church was killed by shotgun fire. By this time most leases had passed into the hands of the farmers. In three of the main Anti-Rent counties, of twelve thousand farmers, only two thousand remained under lease.

The farmers had fought, been crushed by the law, their struggle diverted into voting, and the system stabilized by enlarging the class of small landowners, leaving the basic structure of rich and poor intact. It was a common sequence in American history.

Around the time of the Anti-Renter movement in New York, there was excitement in Rhode Island over Dorr’s Rebellion. As Marvin Gettleman points out in *The Dorr Rebellion*, it was both a movement for electoral reform and an example of radical insurgency. It was prompted by the Rhode Island charter’s rule that only owners of land could vote.

As more people left the farm for the city, as immigrants came to work in the mills, the disfranchised grew. Seth Luther, self-educated carpenter in Providence and spokesman for working people, wrote in 1833 the “Address on the Right of Free Suffrage,” denouncing the monopoly of political power by “the mushroom lordlings, sprigs of nobility . . . small potato aristocrats” of Rhode Island. He urged non-cooperation with the government, refusing to pay taxes or to serve in the militia. Why, he asked, should twelve thousand working people in Rhode Island without the vote submit to five thousand who had land and could vote?

Thomas Dorr, a lawyer from a well-to-do family, became a leader of the suffrage movement. Working people formed the Rhode Island Suffrage Association, and in the spring of 1841 thousands paraded in Providence carrying banners and signs for electoral reform. Going outside the legal system, they organized their own “People’s Convention” and drafted a new constitution without property qualifications for voting.

In early 1842, they invited votes on the constitution; fourteen thousand voted for it, including about five thousand with property—therefore a majority even of those legally entitled to vote by the charter. In April they held an unofficial election, in which Dorr ran unopposed for governor, and six thousand people voted for him. The governor of Rhode Island in the meantime got the promise

of President John Tyler that in the case of rebellion federal troops would be sent. There was a clause in the U.S. Constitution to meet just that kind of situation, providing for federal intervention to quell local insurrections on request of a state government.

Ignoring this, on May 3, 1842, the Dorr forces held an inauguration with a great parade of artisans, shopkeepers, mechanics, and militia marching through Providence. The newly elected People's Legislature was convened. Dorr led a fiasco of an attack on the state arsenal, his cannon misfiring. Dorr's arrest was ordered by the regular governor, and he went into hiding outside the state, trying to raise military support.

Despite the protests of Dorr and a few others, the "People's Constitution" kept the word "white" in its clause designating voters. Angry Rhode Island blacks now joined the militia units of the Law and Order coalition, which promised that a new constitutional convention would give them the right to vote.

When Dorr returned to Rhode Island, he found several hundred of his followers, mostly working people, willing to fight for the People's Constitution, but there were thousands in the regular militia on the side of the state. The rebellion disintegrated and Dorr again fled Rhode Island.

Marital law was declared. One rebel soldier, captured, was blindfolded and put before a firing squad, which fired with blank bullets. A hundred other militia were taken prisoner. One of them described their being bound by ropes into platoons of eight, marched on foot 16 miles to Providence, "threatened and pricked by the bayonet if we lagged from fatigue, the rope severely chafing our arms; the skin off mine. . . . no water till we reached Greenville . . . no food until the next day. . . . and, after being exhibited, were put into the State prison."

A new constitution offered some reform. It still gave overrepresentation to the rural areas, limited the vote to property owners or those who paid a one-dollar poll tax, and would let naturalized citizens vote only if they had \$134 in real estate. In the elections of early 1843, the Law and Order group, opposed by former Dorrists, used intimidation of state militia, of employees by employers, of tenants by landlords, to get out their vote. It lost in the industrial towns, but got the vote of the agrarian areas, and won all major offices.

Dorr returned to Rhode Island in the fall of 1843. He was arrested on the streets of Providence and tried for treason. The jury, instructed by the judge to

ignore all political arguments and consider only whether Dorr had committed certain overt acts (which he never denied committing), found him guilty, whereupon the judge sentenced him to life imprisonment at hard labor. He spent twenty months in jail, and then a newly elected Law and Order governor, anxious to end Dorr's martyrdom, pardoned him.

Armed force had failed, the ballot had failed, the courts had taken the side of the conservatives. The Dorr movement now went to the U.S. Supreme Court, via a trespass suit by Martin Luther against Law and Order militiamen, charging that the People's Government was the legitimate government in Rhode Island in 1842. Daniel Webster argued against the Dorrites. If people could claim a constitutional right to overthrow an existing government, Webster said, there would be no more law and no more government; there would be anarchy.

In its decision, the Supreme Court established (*Luther v. Borden*, 1849) a long-lasting doctrine: it would not interfere in certain "political" questions, to be left to executive and legislature. The decision reinforced the essentially conservative nature of the Supreme Court: that on critical issues—war and revolution—it would defer to the President and Congress.

The stories of the Anti-Renter movement and Dorr's Rebellion are not usually found in textbooks on United States history. In these books, given to millions of young Americans, there is little on class struggle in the nineteenth century. The period before and after the Civil War is filled with politics, elections, slavery, and the race question. Even where specialized books on the Jacksonian period deal with labor and economic issues they center on the presidency, and thus perpetuate the traditional dependency on heroic leaders rather than people's struggles.

Andrew Jackson said he spoke for "the humble members of society—the farmer, mechanics and laborers. . . ." He certainly did not speak for the Indians being pushed off their lands, or slaves. But the tensions aroused by the developing factory system, the growing immigration, required that the government develop a mass base of support among whites. "Jacksonian Democracy" did just that.

Politics in this period of the 1830s and 1840s, according to Douglas Miller, a specialist in the Jacksonian period (*The Birth of Modern America*), "had become increasingly centered around creating a popular image and flattering the common man." Miller is dubious, however, about the accuracy of that phrase "Jacksonian Democracy":

Parades, picnics, and campaigns of personal slander characterized Jacksonian politicking. But, although both parties aimed their rhetoric at the people and mouthed the sacred shibboleths of democracy, this did not mean that the common man ruled America. The professional politicians coming to the fore in the twenties and thirties, though sometimes self-made, were seldom ordinary. Both major parties were controlled largely by men of wealth and ambition. Lawyers, newspaper editors, merchants, industrialists, large landowners, and speculators dominated the Democrats as well as the Whigs.

Jackson was the first President to master the liberal rhetoric—to speak for the common man. This was a necessity for political victory when the vote was being demanded—as in Rhode Island—by more and more people, and state legislatures were loosening voting restrictions. As another Jacksonian scholar, Robert Remini (*The Age of Jackson*), says, after studying electoral figures for 1828 and 1832:

Jackson himself enjoyed widespread support that ranged across all classes and sections of the country. He attracted farmers, mechanics, laborers, professionals and even businessmen. And all this without Jackson being clearly pro- or antilabor, pro- or antibusiness, pro- or antilower, middle or upper class. It has been demonstrated that he was a strikebreaker [Jackson sent troops to control rebellious workers on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal], yet at different times . . . he and the Democrats received the backing of organized labor.

It was the new politics of ambiguity—speaking for the lower and middle classes to get their support in times of rapid growth and potential turmoil. The two-party system came into its own in this time. To give people a choice between two different parties and allow them, in a period of rebellion, to choose the slightly more democratic one was an ingenious mode of control. Like so much in the American system, it was not devilishly contrived by some master plotters; it developed naturally out of the needs of the situation. Remini compares the Jacksonian Democrat Martin Van Buren, who succeeded Jackson as President, with the Austrian conservative statesman Metternich: “Like Metternich, who was seeking to thwart revolutionary discontent in Europe, Van Buren and similar politicians were attempting to banish political disorder from the United States by a balance of power achieved through two well-organized and active parties.”

The Jacksonian idea was to achieve stability and control by winning to the Democratic party “the middling interest, and especially . . . the substantial yeomanry of the country” by “prudent, judicious, well-considered reform.” That is, reform that would not yield too much. These were the words of Robert Rantoul, a reformer, corporation lawyer, and Jacksonian Democrat. It was a forecast of the successful appeal of the Democratic party—and at times the Republican party—in the twentieth century.

Such new forms of political control were needed in the turbulence of

growth, the possibility of rebellion. Now there were canals, railroads, the telegraph. In 1790, fewer than a million Americans lived in cities; in 1840 the figure was 11 million. New York had 130,000 people in 1820, a million by 1860. And while the traveler Alexis de Tocqueville had expressed astonishment at “the general equality of condition among the people,” he was not very good at numbers, his friend Beaumont said. And his observation was not in accord with the facts, according to Edward Pessen, a historian of Jacksonian society (*Jacksonian America*).

In Philadelphia, working-class families lived fifty-five to a tenement, usually one room per family, with no garbage removal, no toilets, no fresh air or water. There was fresh water newly pumped from the Schuylkill River, but it was going to the homes of the rich.

In New York you could see the poor lying in the streets with the garbage. There were no sewers in the slums, and filthy water drained into yards and alleys, into the cellars where the poorest of the poor lived, bringing with it a typhoid epidemic in 1837, typhus in 1842. In the cholera epidemic of 1832, the rich fled the city; the poor stayed and died.

These poor could not be counted on as political allies of the government. But they were there—like slaves, or Indians—invisible ordinarily, a menace if they rose. There were more solid citizens, however, who might give steady support to the system—better-paid workers, landowning farmers. Also, there was the new urban white-collar worker, born in the rising commerce of the time, described by Thomas Cochran and William Miller (*The Age of Enterprise*):

Dressed in drab alpaca, hunched over a high desk, this new worker credited and debited, indexed and filed, wrote and stamped invoices, acceptances, bills of lading, receipts. Adequately paid, he had some extra money and leisure time. He patronized sporting events and theaters, savings banks and insurance companies. He read Day's *New York Sun* or Bennett's *Herald*—the “penny press” supported by advertising, filled with police reports, crime stories, etiquette advice for the rising bourgeoisie. . . .

This was the advance guard of a growing class of white-collar workers and professionals in America who would be wooed enough and paid enough to consider themselves members of the bourgeois class, and to give support to that class in times of crisis.

The opening of the West was being helped by mechanization of the farm. Iron plows cut plowing time in half; by the 1850s John Deere Company was turning out ten thousand plows a year. Cyrus McCormick was making a

thousand mechanical reapers a year in his factory in Chicago. A man with a sickle could cut half an acre of wheat in a day; with a reaper he could cut 10 acres.

Turnpikes, canals, and railroads were bringing more people west, more products east, and it became important to keep that new West, tumultuous and unpredictable, under control. When colleges were established out West, eastern businessmen, as Cochran and Miller say, were “determined from the start to control western education.” Edward Everett, the Massachusetts politician and orator, spoke in 1833 on behalf of giving financial aid to western colleges:

Let no Boston capitalist, then, let no man, who has a large stake in New England . . . think that he is called upon to exercise his liberality at a distance, toward those in whom he has no concern. . . . They ask you to give security to your own property, by diffusing the means of light and truth throughout the region, where so much of the power to preserve or to shake it resides. . . .

The capitalists of the East were conscious of the need for this “security to your own property.” As technology developed, more capital was needed, more risks had to be taken, and a big investment needed stability. In an economic system not rationally planned for human need, but developing fitfully, chaotically out of the profit motive, there seemed to be no way to avoid recurrent booms and slumps. There was a slump in 1837, another in 1853. One way to achieve stability was to decrease competition, organize the businesses, move toward monopoly. In the mid-1850s, price agreements and mergers became frequent: the New York Central Railroad was a merger of many railroads. The American Brass Association was formed “to meet ruinous competition,” it said. The Hampton County Cotton Spinners Association was organized to control prices, and so was the American Iron Association.

Another way to minimize risks was to make sure the government played its traditional role, going back to Alexander Hamilton and the first Congress, of helping the business interests. State legislatures gave charters to corporations giving them legal rights to conduct business, raise money—at first special charters, then general charters, so that any business meeting certain requirements could incorporate. Between 1790 and 1860, 2,300 corporations were chartered.

Railroad men traveled to Washington and to state capitals armed with money, shares of stock, free railroad passes. Between 1850 and 1857 they got 25 million acres of public land, free of charge, and millions of dollars in

bonds—loans—from the state legislatures. In Wisconsin in 1856, the LaCrosse and Milwaukee Railroad got a million acres free by distributing about \$900,000 in stocks and bonds to fifty-nine assemblymen, thirteen senators, the governor. Two years later the railroad was bankrupt and the bonds were worthless.

In the East, mill owners had become powerful, and organized. By 1850, fifteen Boston families called the “Associates” controlled 20 percent of the cotton spindleage in the United States, 39 percent of insurance capital in Massachusetts, 40 percent of banking resources in Boston.

In the schoolbooks, those years are filled with the controversy over slavery, but on the eve of the Civil War it was money and profit, not the movement against slavery, that was uppermost in the priorities of the men who ran the country. As Cochran and Miller put it:

Webster was the hero of the North—not Emerson, Parker, Garrison, or Phillips; Webster the tariff man, the land speculator, the corporation lawyer, politician for the Boston Associates, inheritor of Hamilton’s coronet. “The great object of government” said he “is the protection of property at home, and respect and renown abroad.” For these he preached union; for these he surrendered the fugitive slave.

They describe the Boston rich:

Living sumptuously on Beacon Hill, admired by their neighbors for their philanthropy and their patronage of art and culture, these men traded in State Street while overseers ran their factories, managers directed their railroads, agents sold their water power and real estate. They were absentee landlords in the most complete sense. Uncontaminated by the diseases of the factory town, they were also protected from hearing the complaints of their workers or suffering mental depression from dismal and squalid surroundings. In the metropolis, art, literature, education, science, flowered in the Golden Day; in the industrial towns children went to work with their fathers and mothers, schools and doctors were only promises, a bed of one’s own was a rare luxury.

Ralph Waldo Emerson described Boston in those years: “There is a certain poor-smell in all the streets, in Beacon Street and Mount Vernon, as well as in the lawyers’ offices, and the wharves, and the same meanness and sterility, and leave-all-hope-behind, as one finds in a boot manufacturer’s premises.” The preacher Theodore Parker told his congregation: “Money is this day the strongest power of the nation.”

The attempts at political stability, at economic control, did not quite work. The new industrialism, the crowded cities, the long hours in the factories, the sudden economic crises leading to high prices and lost jobs, the lack of food and water, the freezing winters, the hot tenements in the summer, the epidemics of disease, the deaths of children—these led to sporadic reactions from the poor. Sometimes there were spontaneous, unorganized uprisings against the

rich. Sometimes the anger was deflected into racial hatred for blacks, religious warfare against Catholics, nativist fury against immigrants. Sometimes it was organized into demonstrations and strikes.

“Jacksonian Democracy” had tried to create a consensus of support for the system to make it secure. Blacks, Indians, women, and foreigners were clearly outside the consensus. But also, white working people, in large numbers, declared themselves outside.

The full extent of the working-class consciousness of those years—as of any years—is lost in history, but fragments remain and make us wonder how much of this always existed underneath the very practical silence of working people. In 1827 an “Address . . . before the Mechanics and Working Classes . . . of Philadelphia” was recorded, written by an “Unlettered Mechanic,” probably a young shoemaker, who said:

We find ourselves oppressed on every hand—we labor hard in producing all the comforts of life for the enjoyment of others, while we ourselves obtain but a scanty portion, and even that in the present state of society depends on the will of employers.

Frances Wright of Scotland, an early feminist and utopian socialist, was invited by Philadelphia workingmen to speak on the Fourth of July 1829 to one of the first city-wide associations of labor unions in the United States. She asked if the Revolution had been fought “to crush down the sons and daughters of your country’s industry under . . . neglect, poverty, vice, starvation, and disease. . . .” She wondered if the new technology was not lowering the value of human labor, making people appendages to machines, crippling the minds and bodies of child laborers.

Later that year, George Henry Evans, a printer, editor of the *Workingman’s Advocate*, wrote “The Working Men’s Declaration of Independence.” Among its list of “facts” submitted to “candid and impartial” fellow citizens:

1. The laws for levying taxes are . . . operating most oppressively on one class of society. . . .
3. The laws for private incorporation are all partial . . . favoring one class of society to the expense of the other. . . .
The laws . . . have deprived nine tenths of the members of the body politics, who are not wealthy, of the equal
6. means to enjoy “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” . . . The lien law in favor of the landlords against tenants . . . is one illustration among innumerable others.

Evans believed that “all on arriving at adult age are entitled to equal property.”

A city-wide “Trades’ Union” in Boston in 1834, including mechanics from

Charlestown and women shoe binders from Lynn, referred to the Declaration of Independence:

We hold . . . that laws which have a tendency to raise any peculiar class above their fellow citizens, by granting special privileges, are contrary to and in defiance of those primary principles. . . .

Our public system of Education, which so liberally endows those seminaries of learning, which . . . are only accessible to the wealthy, while our common schools . . . are so illy provided for . . . Thus even in childhood the poor are apt to think themselves inferior. . . .

In his book *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, Edward Pessen says: “The leaders of the Jacksonian labor movement were radicals. . . . How else describe men who believed American society to be torn with social conflict, disfigured by the misery of the masses, and dominated by a greedy elite whose power over every aspect of American life was based on private property?”

Episodes of insurrection of that time have gone unrecorded in traditional histories. Such was the riot in Baltimore in the summer of 1835, when the Bank of Maryland collapsed and its depositors lost their savings. Convinced that a great fraud had taken place, a crowd gathered and began breaking the windows of officials associated with the bank. When the rioters destroyed a house, the militia attacked, killing some twenty people, wounding a hundred. The next evening, other houses were attacked. The events were reported in *Niles’ Weekly Register*, an important newspaper of that time:

Last night (Sunday) at dark, the attack was renewed upon Reverdy Johnson’s house. There was now no opposition. It was supposed that several thousand people were spectators of the scene. The house was soon entered, and its furniture, a very extensive law library, and all its contents, were cast forth, a bonfire made of them in front of the house. The whole interior of the house was torn out and cast upon the burning pile. The marble portico in front, and a great portion of the front wall were torn down by about 11 o’clock. . . . They proceeded to that of the mayor of the city, Jesse Hunt, esq. broke it open, took out the furniture, and burnt it before the door. . . .

During those years, trade unions were forming. (Philip Foner’s *History of the Labor Movement in the U.S.* tells the story in rich detail.) The courts called them conspiracies to restrain trade and therefore illegal, as when in New York twenty-five members of the Union Society of Journeymen Tailors were found guilty of “conspiracy to injure trade, riot, assault, battery.” The judge, levying fines, said: “In this favored land of law and liberty, the road to advancement is open to all. . . . Every American knows that or ought to know that he has no better friend than the laws and that he needs no artificial combination for his protection. They are of foreign origin and I am led to believe mainly upheld by foreigners.”

A handbill was then circulated throughout the city:

The Rich Against the Poor!

Judge Edwards, the tool of the aristocracy, against the people! Mechanics and working men! A deadly blow has been struck at your liberty! . . . They have established the precedent that workingmen have no right to regulate the price of labor, or, in other words, the rich are the only judges of the wants of the poor man.

At City Hall Park, 27,000 people gathered to denounce the court decision, and elected a Committee of Correspondence which organized, three months later, a convention of Mechanics, Farmers, and Working Men, elected by farmers and working people in various towns in New York State. The convention met in Utica, drew up a Declaration of Independence from existing political parties, and established an Equal Rights party.

Although they ran their own candidates for office, there was no great confidence in the ballot as a way of achieving change. One of the great orators of the movement, Seth Luther, told a Fourth of July rally: “We will try the ballot box first. If that will not effect our righteous purpose, the next and last resort is the cartridge box.” And one sympathetic local newspaper, the *Albany Microscope*, warned:

Remember the regretted fate of the working-men—they were soon destroyed by hitching teams and rolling with parties. They admitted into their ranks, broken down lawyers and politicians. . . . They became perverted, and were unconsciously drawn into a vortex, from which they never escaped.

The crisis of 1837 led to rallies and meetings in many cities. The banks had suspended specie payments—refusing to pay hard money for the bank notes they had issued. Prices rose, and working people, already hard-pressed to buy food, found that flour that had sold at \$5.62 a barrel was now \$12 a barrel. Pork went up. Coal went up. In Philadelphia, twenty thousand people assembled, and someone wrote to President Van Buren describing it:

This afternoon, the largest public meeting I ever saw assembled in Independence Square. It was called by placards posted through the city yesterday and last night. It was projected and carried on entirely by the working classes; without consultation or cooperation with any of those who usually take the lead in such matters. The officers and speakers were of those classes. . . . It was directed against the banks.

In New York, members of the Equal Rights party (often called the Locofocos) announced a meeting: “Bread, Meat, Rent, and Fuel! Their prices must come down! The people will meet in the Park, rain or shine, at 4 o’clock, P.M. on Monday afternoon. . . . All friends of humanity determined to resist monopolists and extortioners are invited to attend.” The *Commercial Register*, a New York newspaper, reported on the meeting and what followed:

At 4 o’clock, a concourse of several thousands had convened in front of the City Hall. . . . One of these orators . . . is reported to have expressly directed the popular vengeance against Mr. Eli Hart, who is one of our most extensive

flour dealers on commission. “Fellow citizens!” he exclaimed, “Mr. Hart has now 53,000 barrels of flour in his store; let us go and offer him eight dollars a barrel, and if he does not take it . . .”

A large body of the meeting moved off in the direction of Mr. Hart’s store . . . the middle door had been forced, and some twenty or thirty barrels of flour or more, rolled into the streets, and the heads staved in. At this point of time, Mr. Hart himself arrived on the ground, with a posse of officers from the police. The officers were assailed by a portion of the mob in Dey Street, their staves wrested from them, and shivered to pieces. . . .

Barrels of flour, by dozens, fifties and hundreds were tumbled into the street from the doors, and thrown in rapid succession from the windows. . . . About one thousand bushels of wheat, and four or five hundred barrels of flour, were thus wantonly and foolishly as well as wickedly destroyed. The most active of the destructionists were foreigners—indeed the greater part of the assemblage was of exotic origin, but there were probably five hundred or a thousand others, standing by and abetting their incendiary labors.

Amidst the falling and bursting of the barrels and sacks of wheat, numbers of women were engaged, like the crones who strip the dead in battle, filling the boxes and baskets with which they were provided, and their aprons, with flour, and making off with it. . . .

Night had now closed upon the scene, but the work of destruction did not cease until strong bodies of police arrived, followed, soon afterward, by detachments of troops. . . .

This was the Flour Riot of 1837. During the crisis of that year, 50,000 persons (one-third of the working class) were without work in New York City alone, and 200,000 (of a population of 500,000) were living, as one observer put it, “in utter and hopeless distress.”

There is no complete record of the meetings, riots, actions, organized and disorganized, violent and nonviolent, which took place in the mid-nineteenth century, as the country grew, as the cities became crowded, with working conditions bad, living conditions intolerable, with the economy in the hands of bankers, speculators, landlords, merchants.

In 1835, fifty different trades organized unions in Philadelphia, and there was a successful general strike of laborers, factory workers, bookbinders, jewelers, coal heavers, butchers, cabinet workers—for the ten-hour day. Soon there were ten-hour laws in Pennsylvania and other states, but they provided that employers could have employees sign contracts for longer hours. The law at this time was developing a strong defense of contracts; it was pretended that work contracts were voluntary agreements between equals.

Weavers in Philadelphia in the early 1840s—mostly Irish immigrants working at home for employers—struck for higher wages, attacked the homes of those refusing to strike, and destroyed their work. A sheriff’s posse tried to arrest some strikers, but it was broken up by four hundred weavers armed with muskets and sticks.

Soon, however, antagonism developed between these Irish Catholic weavers and native-born Protestant skilled workers over issues of religion. In May 1844 there were Protestant-Catholic riots in Kensington, a suburb of

Philadelphia; nativist (anti-immigrant) rioters destroyed the weavers' neighborhoods and attacked a Catholic church. Middle-class politicians soon led each group into a different political party (the nativists into the American Republican party, the Irish into the Democratic party), party politics and religion now substituting for class conflict.

The result of all this, says David Montgomery, historian of the Kensington Riots, was the fragmentation of the Philadelphia working class. It "thereby created for historians the illusion of a society lacking in class conflict," while in reality the class conflicts of nineteenth-century America "were as fierce as any known to the industrial world."

The immigrants from Ireland, fleeing starvation there when the potato crop failed, were coming to America now, packed into old sailing ships. The stories of these ships differ only in detail from the accounts of the ships that earlier brought black slaves and later German, Italian, Russian immigrants. This is a contemporary account of one ship arriving from Ireland, detained at Grosse Isle on the Canadian border:

On the 18th of May, 1847, the "Urania", from Cork, with several hundred immigrants on board, a large proportion of them sick and dying of the ship-fever, was put into quarantine at Grosse Isle. This was the first of the plague-smitten ships from Ireland which that year sailed up the St. Lawrence. But before the first week of June as many as eighty-four ships of various tonnage were driven in by an easterly wind; and of that enormous number of vessels there was not one free from the taint of malignant typhus, the offspring of famine and of the foul ship-hold. . . . a tolerably quick passage occupied from six to eight weeks. . . .

Who can imagine the horrors of even the shortest passage in an emigrant ship crowded beyond its utmost capacity of stowage with unhappy beings of all ages, with fever raging in their midst . . . the crew sullen or brutal from very desperation, or paralyzed with terror of the plague—the miserable passengers unable to help themselves, or afford the least relief to each other; one-fourth, or one-third, or one-half of the entire number in different stages of the disease; many dying, some dead; the fatal poison intensified by the indescribable foulness of the air breathed and rebreathed by the gasping sufferers—the wails of children, the ravings of the delirious, the cries and groans of those in mortal agony!

. . . there was no accommodation of any kind on the island . . . sheds were rapidly filled with the miserable people. . . . Hundreds were literally flung on the beach, left amid the mud and stones to crawl on the dry land how they could. . . . Many of these . . . gasped out their last breath on that fatal shore, not able to drag themselves from the slime in which they lay. . . .

It was not until the 1st of November that the quarantine of Grosse Isle was closed. Upon that barren isle as many as 10,000 of the Irish race were consigned to the grave-pit. . . .

How could these new Irish immigrants, themselves poor and despised, become sympathizers with the black slave, who was becoming more and more the center of attention, the subject of agitation in the country? Indeed, most working-class activists at this time ignored the plight of blacks. Ely Moore, a New York trade union leader elected to Congress, argued in the House of Representatives against receiving abolitionist petitions. Racist hostility

became an easy substitute for class frustration.

On the other hand, a white shoemaker wrote in 1848 in the *Awl*, the newspaper of Lynn shoe factory workers:

. . . we are nothing but a standing army that keeps three million of our brethren in bondage. . . . Living under the shade of Bunker Hill monument, demanding in the name of humanity, our right, and withholding those rights from others because their skin is black! Is it any wonder that God in his righteous anger has punished us by forcing us to drink the bitter cup of degradation.

The anger of the city poor often expressed itself in futile violence over nationality or religion. In New York in 1849 a mob, largely Irish; stormed the fashionable Astor Place Opera House, where an English actor, William Charles Macready, was playing *Macbeth*, in competition with an American actor, Edwin Forrest, who was acting the same role in another production. The crowd, shouting “Burn the damn den of aristocracy,” charged, throwing bricks. The militia were called out, and in the violence that followed about two hundred people were killed or wounded.

Another economic crisis came in 1857. The boom in railroads and manufacturing, the surge of immigration, the increased speculation in stocks and bonds, the stealing, corruption, manipulation, led to wild expansion and then crash. By October of that year, 200,000 were unemployed, and thousands of recent immigrants crowded into the eastern ports, hoping to work their way back to Europe. The *New York Times* reported: “Every ship for Liverpool now has all the passengers she can carry, and multitudes are applying to work their passage if they have no money to pay for it.”

In Newark, New Jersey, a rally of several thousand demanded the city give work to the unemployed. And in New York, fifteen thousand people met at Tompkins Square in downtown Manhattan. From there they marched to Wall Street and paraded around the Stock Exchange shouting: “We want work!” That summer, riots occurred in the slum areas of New York. A mob of five hundred attacked the police one day with pistols and bricks. There were parades of the unemployed, demanding bread and work, looting shops. In November, a crowd occupied City Hall, and the U.S. marines were brought in to drive them out.

Of the country’s work force of 6 million in 1850, half a million were women: 330,000 worked as domestics; 55,000 were teachers. Of the 181,000 women in factories, half worked in textile mills.

They organized. Women struck by themselves for the first time in 1825. They were the United Tailoresses of New York, demanding higher wages. In 1828,

the first strike of mill women on their own took place in Dover, New Hampshire, when several hundred women paraded with banners and flags. They shot off gunpowder, in protest against new factory rules, which charged fines for coming late, forbade talking on the job, and required church attendance. They were forced to return to the mill, their demands unmet, and their leaders were fired and blacklisted.

In Exeter, New Hampshire, women mill workers went on strike (“turned out,” in the language of that day) because the overseer was setting the clocks back to get more time from them. Their strike succeeded in exacting a promise from the company that the overseers would set their watches right.

The “Lowell system,” in which young girls would go to work in the mills and live in dormitories supervised by matrons, at first seemed beneficent, sociable, a welcome escape from household drudgery or domestic service. Lowell, Massachusetts, was the first town created for the textile mill industry; it was named after the wealthy and influential Lowell family. But the dormitories became prisonlike, controlled by rules and regulations. The supper (served after the women had risen at four in the morning and worked until seven thirty in the evening) often consisted merely of bread and gravy.

So the Lowell girls organized. They started their own newspapers. They protested against the weaving rooms, which were poorly lit, badly ventilated, impossibly hot in the summer, damp and cold in the winter. In 1834, a cut in wages led the Lowell women to strike, proclaiming: “Union is power. Our present object is to have union and exertion, and we remain in possession of our own unquestionable rights. . . .” But the threat of hiring others to replace them brought them back to work at reduced wages (the leaders were fired).

The young women, determined to do better next time, organized a Factory Girls’ Association, and 1,500 went on strike in 1836 against a raise in boardinghouse charges. Harriet Hanson was an eleven-year-old girl working in the mill. She later recalled:

I worked in a lower room where I had heard the proposed strike fully, if not vehemently, discussed. I had been an ardent listener to what was said against this attempt at “oppression” on the part of the corporation, and naturally I took sides with the strikers. When the day came on which the girls were to turn out, those in the upper rooms started first, and so many of them left that our mill was at once shut down. Then, when the girls in my room stood irresolute, uncertain what to do . . . I, who began to think they would not go out, after all their talk, became impatient, and started on ahead, saying, with childish bravado, “I don’t care what you do, *I* am going to turn out, whether anyone else does or not,” and I marched out, and was followed by the others.

As I looked back at the long line that followed me, I was more proud than I have ever been since. . . .

The strikers marched through the streets of Lowell, singing. They held out a month, but then their money ran out, they were evicted from the boardinghouses, and many of them went back to work. The leaders were fired, including Harriet Hanson's widowed mother, a matron in the boardinghouse, who was blamed for her child's going out on strike.

Resistance continued. One mill in Lowell, Herbert Gutman reports, discharged twenty-eight women for such reasons as "misconduct," "disobedience," "impudence," "levity," and "mutiny." Meanwhile, the girls tried to hold on to thoughts about fresh air, the country, a less harried way of life. One of them recalled: "I never cared much for machinery. I could not see into their complications or feel interested in them. . . . In sweet June weather I would lean far out of the window, and try not to hear the unceasing clash of sound inside."

In New Hampshire, five hundred men and women petitioned the Amoskeag Manufacturing Company not to cut down an elm tree to make space for another mill. They said it was "a beautiful and goodly tree," representing a time "when the yell of the red man and the scream of the eagle were alone heard on the banks of the Merrimack, instead of two giant edifices filled with the buzz of busy and well-remunerated industry."

In 1835, twenty mills went on strike to reduce the workday from thirteen and a half hours to eleven hours, to get cash wages instead of company scrip, and to end fines for lateness. Fifteen hundred children and parents went out on strike, and it lasted six weeks. Strikebreakers were brought in, and some workers went back to work, but the strikers did win a twelve-hour day and nine hours on Saturday. That year and the next, there were 140 strikes in the eastern part of the United States.

The crisis that followed the 1837 panic stimulated the formation in 1845 of the Female Labor Reform Association in Lowell, which sent thousands of petitions to the Massachusetts legislature asking for a ten-hour day. Finally, the legislature decided to hold public hearings, the first investigation of labor conditions by any governmental body in the country. Eliza Hemingway told the committee of the air thick with smoke from oil lamps burning before sunup and after sundown. Judith Payne told of her sickness due to the work in the mills. But after the committee visited the mills—for which the company prepared by a cleanup job—it reported: "Your committee returned fully satisfied that the order, decorum, and general appearance of things in and around the mills could

not be improved by any suggestion of theirs or by any act of the legislature.”

The report was denounced by the Female Labor Reform Association, and they worked successfully for the committee chairman’s defeat at the next election, though they could not vote. But not much was done to change conditions in the mills. In the late 1840s, the New England farm women who worked in the mills began to leave them, as more and more Irish immigrants took their place.

Company towns now grew up around mills in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, using immigrant workers who signed contracts pledging everyone in the family to work for a year. They lived in slum tenements owned by the company, were paid in scrip, which they could use only at company stores, and were evicted if their work was unsatisfactory.

In Paterson, New Jersey, the first of a series of mill strikes was started by children. When the company suddenly put off their dinner hour from noon to 1:00 P.M., the children marched off the job, their parents cheering them on. They were joined by other working people in the town—carpenters, masons, machinists—who turned the strike into a ten-hour-day struggle. After a week, however, with the threat of bringing in militia, the children returned to work, and their leaders were fired. Soon after, trying to prevent more trouble, the company restored the noon dinner hour.

It was the shoemakers of Lynn, Massachusetts, a factory town northeast of Boston, who started the largest strike to take place in the United States before the Civil War. Lynn had pioneered in the use of sewing machines in factories, replacing shoemaker artisans. The factory workers in Lynn, who began to organize in the 1830s, later started a militant newspaper, the *Awl*. In 1844, four years before Marx and Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* appeared, the *Awl* wrote:

The division of society into the producing and the non-producing classes, and the fact of the unequal distribution of value between the two, introduces us at once to another distinction—that of capital and labor. . . . labor now becomes a commodity. . . . Antagonism and opposition of interest is introduced in the community; capital and labor stand opposed.

The economic crisis of 1857 brought the shoe business to a halt, and the workers of Lynn lost their jobs. There was already anger at machine-stitching replacing shoemakers. Prices were up, wages were repeatedly cut, and by the fall of 1859 men were earning \$3 a week and women were earning \$1 a week, working sixteen hours a day.

In early 1860, a mass meeting of the newly formed Mechanics Association demanded higher wages. When the manufacturers refused to meet with their committees, the workers called a strike for Washington's Birthday. That morning three thousand shoemakers met in the Lyceum Hall in Lynn and set up committees of 100 to post the names of scabs, to guard against violence, to make sure shoes would not be sent out to be finished elsewhere.

In a few days, shoeworkers throughout New England joined the strike—in Natick, Newburyport, Haverhill, Marblehead, and other Massachusetts towns, as well as towns in New Hampshire and Maine. In a week, strikes had begun in all the shoe towns of New England, with Mechanics Associations in twenty-five towns and twenty thousand shoe-workers on strike. Newspapers called it "The Revolution at the North," "The Rebellion Among the Workmen of New England," "Beginning of the Conflict Between Capital and Labor."

One thousand women and five thousand men marched through the streets of Lynn in a blizzard, carrying banners and American flags. Women shoebinders and stitchers joined the strike and held their own mass meeting. A New York *Herald* reporter wrote of them: "They assail the bosses in a style which reminds one of the amiable females who participated in the first French Revolution." A huge Ladies' Procession was organized, the women marching through streets high with snowdrifts, carrying signs: "American Ladies Will Not Be Slaves . . . Weak in Physical Strength but Strong in Moral Courage, We Dare Battle for the Right, Shoulder to Shoulder with our Fathers, Husbands, and Brothers." Ten days after that, a procession of ten thousand striking workers, including delegations from Salem, Marblehead, and other towns, men and women, marched through Lynn, in what was the greatest demonstration of labor to take place in New England up to that time.

Police from Boston and militia were sent in to make sure strikers did not interfere with shipments of shoes to be finished out of the state. The strike processions went on, while city grocers and provisions dealers provided food for the strikers. The strike continued through March with morale high, but by April it was losing force. The manufacturers offered higher wages to bring the strikers back into the factories, but without recognizing the unions, so that workers still had to face the employer as individuals.

Most of the shoeworkers were native-born Americans, Alan Dawley says in his study of the Lynn strike (*Class and Community*). They did not accept the social and political order that kept them in poverty, however much it was

praised in American schools, churches, newspapers. In Lynn, he says, “articulate, activist Irish shoe and leather workers joined Yankees in flatly rejecting the myth of success. Irish and Yankee workers jointly . . . looked for labor candidates when they went to the polls, and resisted strikebreaking by local police.” Trying to understand why this fierce class spirit did not lead to independent revolutionary political action, Dawley concludes that the main reason is that electoral politics drained the energies of the resisters into the channels of the system.

Dawley disputes some historians who have said the high rate of mobility of workers prevented them from organizing in revolutionary ways. He says that while there was a high turnover in Lynn too, this “masked the existence of a virtually permanent minority who played the key role in organizing discontent.” He also suggests that mobility helps people see that others are in similar conditions. He thinks the struggle of European workers for political democracy, even while they sought economic equality, made them class-conscious. American workers, however, had already gained political democracy by the 1830s, and so their economic battles could be taken over by political parties that blurred class lines.

Even this might not have stopped labor militancy and the rise of class consciousness, Dawley says, if not for the fact that “an entire generation was sidetracked in the 1860’s because of the Civil War.” Northern wage earners who rallied to the Union cause became allied with their employers. National issues took over from class issues: “At a time when scores of industrial communities like Lynn were seething with resistance to industrialism, national politics were preoccupied with the issues of war and reconstruction.” And on these issues the political parties took positions, offered choices, obscured the fact that the political system itself and the wealthy classes it represented were responsible for the problems they now offered to solve.

Class-consciousness was overwhelmed during the Civil War, both North and South, by military and political unity in the crisis of war. That unity was weaned by rhetoric and enforced by arms. It was a war proclaimed as a war for liberty, but working people would be attacked by soldiers if they dared to strike, Indians would be massacred in Colorado by the U.S. army, and those daring to criticize Lincoln’s policies would be put in jail without trial—perhaps thirty thousand political prisoners.

Still, there were signs in both sections of dissent from that unity—anger of

poor against rich, rebellion against the dominant political and economic forces.

In the North, the war brought high prices for food and the necessities of life. Prices of milk, eggs, cheese were up 60 to 100 percent for families that had not been able to pay the old prices. One historian (Emerson Fite, *Social and Industrial Conditions in the North During the Civil War*) described the war situation: “Employers were wont to appropriate to themselves all or nearly all of the profits accruing from the higher prices, without being willing to grant to the employees a fair share of these profits through the medium of higher wages.”

There were strikes all over the country during the war. The *Springfield Republican* in 1863 said that “the workmen of almost every branch of trade have had their strikes within the last few months,” and the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* said “striking for higher wages is now the rage among the working people of San Francisco.” Unions were being formed as a result of these strikes. Philadelphia shoemakers in 1863 announced that high prices made organization imperative.

The headline in *Fincher’s Trades’ Review* of November 21, 1863, “THE REVOLUTION IN NEW YORK,” was an exaggeration, but its list of labor activities was impressive evidence of the hidden resentments of the poor during the war:

The upheaval of the laboring masses in New York has startled the capitalists of that city and vicinity. . . .

The machinists are making a bold stand. . . . We publish their appeal in another column.

The City Railroad employees struck for higher wages, and made the whole population, for a few days, “ride on Shank’s mare.” . . .

The house painters of Brooklyn have taken steps to counteract the attempt of the bosses to reduce their wages.

The house carpenters, we are informed, are pretty well “out of the woods” and their demands are generally complied with.

The safe-makers have obtained an increase of wages, and are now at work.

The lithographic printers are making efforts to secure better pay for their labor.

The workmen on the iron clads are yet holding out against the contractors. . . .

The window shade painters have obtained an advance of 25 percent.

The horse shoers are fortifying themselves against the evils of money and trade fluctuations.

The sash and blind-makers are organized and ask their employers for 25 percent additional.

The sugar packers are remodelling their list of prices.

The glass cutters demand 15 percent to present wages.

Imperfect as we confess our list to be, there is enough to convince the reader that the social revolution now working its way through the land must succeed, if workingmen are only true to each other.

The stage drivers, to the number of 800, are on a strike. . . .

The workingmen of Boston are not behind. . . . In addition to the strike at the Charlestown Navy Yard. . . .

The riggers are on a strike. . . .

At this writing it is rumored, says the *Boston Post*, that a general strike is contemplated among the workmen in the iron establishments at South Boston, and other parts of the city.

The war brought many women into shops and factories, often over the objections of men who saw them driving wage scales down. In New York City, girls sewed umbrellas from six in the morning to midnight, earning \$3 a week, from which employers deducted the cost of needles and thread. Girls who made cotton shirts received twenty-four cents for a twelve-hour day. In late 1863, New York working women held a mass meeting to find a solution to their problems. A Working Women's Protective Union was formed, and there was a strike of women umbrella workers in New York and Brooklyn. In Providence, Rhode Island, a Ladies Cigar Makers Union was organized.

All together, by 1864, about 200,000 workers, men and women, were in trade unions, forming national unions in some of the trades, putting out labor newspapers.

Union troops were used to break strikes. Federal soldiers were sent to Cold Springs, New York, to end a strike at a gun works where workers wanted a wage increase. Striking machinists and tailors in St. Louis were forced back to work by the army. In Tennessee, a Union general arrested and sent out of the state two hundred striking mechanics. When engineers on the Reading Railroad struck, troops broke that strike, as they did with miners in Tioga County, Pennsylvania.

White workers of the North were not enthusiastic about a war which seemed to be fought for the black slave, or for the capitalist, for anyone but them. They worked in semislave conditions themselves. They thought the war was profiting the new class of millionaires. They saw defective guns sold to the army by contractors, sand sold as sugar, rye sold as coffee, shop sweepings made into clothing and blankets, paper-soled shoes produced for soldiers at the front, navy ships made of rotting timbers, soldiers' uniforms that fell apart in the rain.

The Irish working people of New York, recent immigrants, poor, looked upon with contempt by native Americans, could hardly find sympathy for the black population of the city who competed with them for jobs as longshoremen, barbers, waiters, domestic servants. Blacks, pushed out of these jobs, often were used to break strikes. Then came the war, the draft, the chance of death. And the Conscription Act of 1863 provided that the rich could avoid

military service: they could pay \$300 or buy a substitute. In the summer of 1863, a “Song of the Conscripts” was circulated by the thousands in New York and other cities. One stanza:

*We're coming, Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more
We leave our homes and firesides with bleeding hearts and sore
Since poverty has been our crime, we bow to thy decree;
We are the poor and have no wealth to purchase liberty.*

When recruiting for the army began in July 1863, a mob in New York wrecked the main recruiting station. Then, for three days, crowds of white workers marched through the city, destroying buildings, factories, streetcar lines, homes. The draft riots were complex—antiblack, antirich, anti-Republican. From an assault on draft headquarters, the rioters went on to attacks on wealthy homes, then to the murder of blacks. They marched through the streets, forcing factories to close, recruiting more members of the mob. They set the city’s colored orphan asylum on fire. They shot, burned, and hanged blacks they found in the streets. Many people were thrown into the rivers to drown.

On the fourth day, Union troops returning from the Battle of Gettysburg came into the city and stopped the rioting. Perhaps four hundred people were killed. No exact figures have ever been given, but the number of lives lost was greater than in any other incident of domestic violence in American history.

Joel Tyler Headley (*The Great Riots of New York*) gave a graphic day-by-day description of what happened:

Second Day. . . . the fire-bells continually ringing increased the terror that every hour became more widespread. Especially was this true of the negro population. . . . At one time there lay at the corner of Twenty-seventh Street and Seventh Avenue the dead body of a negro, stripped nearly naked, and around it a collection of Irishmen, absolutely dancing or shouting like wild Indians. . . . A negro barber’s shop was next attacked, and the torch applied to it. A negro lodging house in the same street next received the visit of these furies, and was soon a mass of ruins. Old men, seventy years of age, and young children, too young to comprehend what it all meant, were cruelly beaten and killed. . . .

There were antidraft riots—not so prolonged or bloody—in other northern cities: Newark, Troy, Boston, Toledo, Evansville. In Boston the dead were Irish workers attacking an armory, who were fired on by soldiers.

In the South, beneath the apparent unity of the white Confederacy, there was also conflict. Most whites—two-thirds of them—did not own slaves. A few thousand families made up the plantation elite. The Federal Census of 1850 showed that a thousand southern families at the top of the economy received

about \$50 million a year income, while all the other families, about 660,000, received about \$60 million a year.

Millions of southern whites were poor farmers, living in shacks or abandoned outhouses, cultivating land so bad the plantation owners had abandoned it. Just before the Civil War, in Jackson, Mississippi, slaves working in a cotton factory received twenty cents a day for board, and white workers at the same factory received thirty cents. A newspaper in North Carolina in August 1855 spoke of “hundreds of thousands of working class families existing upon half-starvation from year to year.”

Behind the rebel battle yells and the legendary spirit of the Confederate army, there was much reluctance to fight. A sympathetic historian of the South, E. Merton Coulter, asked: “Why did the Confederacy fail? The forces leading to defeat were many but they may be summed up in this one fact: The people did not will hard enough and long enough to win.” Not money or soldiers, but will power and morale were decisive.

The conscription law of the Confederacy too provided that the rich could avoid service. Did Confederate soldiers begin to suspect they were fighting for the privileges of an elite they could never belong to? In April 1863, there was a bread riot in Richmond. That summer, draft riots occurred in various southern cities. In September, a bread riot in Mobile, Alabama. Georgia Lee Tatum, in her study *Disloyalty in the Confederacy*, writes: “Before the end of the war, there was much disaffection in every state, and many of the disloyal had formed into bands—in some states into well-organized, active societies.”

The Civil War was one of the first instances in the world of modern warfare: deadly artillery shells, Gatling guns, bayonet charges—combining the indiscriminate killing of mechanized war with hand-to-hand combat. The nightmare scenes could not adequately be described except in a novel like Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. In one charge before Petersburg, Virginia, a regiment of 850 Maine soldiers lost 632 men in half an hour. It was a vast butchery, 623,000 dead on both sides, and 471,000 wounded, over a million dead and wounded in a country whose population was 30 million.

No wonder that desertions grew among southern soldiers as the war went on. As for the Union army, by the end of the war, 200,000 had deserted.

Still, 600,000 had volunteered for the Confederacy in 1861, and many in the Union army were volunteers. The psychology of patriotism, the lure of adventure, the aura of moral crusade created by political leaders, worked

effectively to dim class resentments against the rich and powerful, and turn much of the anger against “the enemy.” As Edmund Wilson put it in *Patriotic Gore* (written after World War II):

We have seen, in our most recent wars, how a divided and arguing public opinion may be converted overnight into a national near-unanimity, an obedient flood of energy which will carry the young to destruction and overpower any effort to stem it. The unanimity of men at war is like that of a school of fish, which will swerve, simultaneously and apparently without leadership, when the shadow of an enemy appears, or like a sky-darkening flight of grasshoppers, which, also all compelled by one impulse, will descend to consume the crops.

Under the deafening noise of the war, Congress was passing and Lincoln was signing into law a whole series of acts to give business interests what they wanted, and what the agrarian South had blocked before secession. The Republican platform of 1860 had been a clear appeal to businessmen. Now Congress in 1861 passed the Morrill Tariff. This made foreign goods more expensive, allowed American manufacturers to raise their prices, and forced American consumers to pay more.

The following year a Homestead Act was passed. It gave 160 acres of western land, unoccupied and publicly owned, to anyone who would cultivate it for five years. Anyone willing to pay \$1.25 an acre could buy a homestead. Few ordinary people had the \$200 necessary to do this; speculators moved in and bought up much of the land. Homestead land added up to 50 million acres. But during the Civil War, over 100 million acres were given by Congress and the President to various railroads, free of charge. Congress also set up a national bank, putting the government into partnership with the banking interests, guaranteeing their profits.

With strikes spreading, employers pressed Congress for help. The Contract Labor Law of 1864 made it possible for companies to sign contracts with foreign workers whenever the workers pledged to give twelve months of their wages to pay the cost of emigration. This gave the employers during the Civil war not only very cheap labor, but strikebreakers.

More important, perhaps, than the federal laws passed by Congress for the benefit of the rich were the day-to-day operations of local and state laws for the benefit of landlords and merchants. Gustavus Myers, in his *History of the Great American Fortunes*, comments on this in discussing the growth of the Astor family’s fortune, much of it out of the rents of New York tenements:

Is it not murder when, compelled by want, people are forced to fester in squalid, germ-filled tenements, where the sunlight never enters and where disease finds a prolific breeding-place? Untold thousands went to their deaths in these unspeakable places. Yet, so far as the Law was concerned, the rents collected by the Astors, as well as by other

landlords, were honestly made. The whole institution of Law saw nothing out of the way in these conditions, and very significantly so, because, to repeat over and over again, Law did not represent the ethics or ideals of advanced humanity; it exactly reflected, as a pool reflects the sky, the demands and self-interest of the growing propertied classes. . . .

In the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, the law was increasingly interpreted in the courts to suit the capitalist development of the country. Studying this, Morton Horwitz (*The Transformation of American Law*) points out that the English commonlaw was no longer holy when it stood in the way of business growth. Mill owners were given the legal right to destroy other people's property by flood to carry on their business. The law of "eminent domain" was used to take farmers' land and give it to canal companies or railroad companies as subsidies. Judgments for damages against businessmen were taken out of the hands of juries, which were unpredictable, and given to judges. Private settlement of disputes by arbitration was replaced by court settlements, creating more dependence on lawyers, and the legal profession gained in importance. The ancient idea of a fair price for goods gave way in the courts to the idea of caveat emptor (let the buyer beware), thus throwing generations of consumers from that time on to the mercy of businessmen.

That contract law was intended to discriminate against working people and for business is shown by Horwitz in the following example of the early nineteenth century: the courts said that if a worker signed a contract to work for a year, and left before the year was up, he was not entitled to any wages, even for the time he had worked. But the courts at the same time said that if a building business broke a contract, it was entitled to be paid for whatever had been done up to that point.

The pretense of the law was that a worker and a railroad made a contract with equal bargaining power. Thus, a Massachusetts judge decided an injured worker did not deserve compensation, because, by signing the contract, he was agreeing to take certain risks. "The circle was completed; the law had come simply to ratify those forms of inequality that the market system produced."

It was a time when the law did not even pretend to protect working people—as it would in the next century. Health and safety laws were either nonexistent or unenforced. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1860, on a winter day, the Pemberton Mill collapsed, with nine hundred workers inside, mostly women. Eighty-eight died, and although there was evidence that the structure had never been adequate to support the heavy machinery inside, and that this was known to the construction engineer, a jury found "no evidence of criminal

intent.”

Horwitz sums up what happened in the courts of law by the time of the Civil War:

By the middle of the nineteenth century the legal system had been reshaped to the advantage of men of commerce and industry at the expense of farmers, workers, consumers, and other less powerful groups within the society. . . . it actively promoted a legal redistribution of wealth against the weakest groups in the society.

In premodern times, the maldistribution of wealth was accomplished by simple force. In modern times, exploitation is disguised—it is accomplished by law, which has the look of neutrality and fairness. By the time of the Civil War, modernization was well under way in the United States.

With the war over, the urgency of national unity slackened, and ordinary people could turn more to their daily lives, their problems of survival. The disbanded armies now were in the streets, looking for work. In June 1865, *Fincher's Trades' Review* reported: “As was to be expected, the returned soldiers are flooding the streets already, unable to find employment.”

The cities to which the soldiers returned were death traps of typhus, tuberculosis, hunger, and fire. In New York, 100,000 people lived in the cellars of the slums; 12,000 women worked in houses of prostitution to keep from starving; the garbage, lying 2 feet deep in the streets, was alive with rats. In Philadelphia, while the rich got fresh water from the Schuylkill River, everyone else drank from the Delaware, into which 13 million gallons of sewage were dumped every day. In the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, the tenements fell so fast, one after another, that people said it sounded like an earthquake.

A movement for the eight-hour day began among working people after the war, helped by the formation of the first national federation of unions, the National Labor Union. A three-month strike of 100,000 workers in New York won the eight-hour day, and at a victory celebration in June 1872, 150,000 workers paraded through the city. The *New York Times* wondered what proportion of the strikers were “thoroughly American.”

Women, brought into industry during the war, organized unions: cigarmakers, tailoresses, umbrella sewers, capmakers, printers, laundresses, shoeworkers. They formed the Daughters of St. Crispin, and succeeded in getting the Cigarmakers Union and the National Typographical Union to admit women for the first time. A woman named Gussie Lewis of New York became corresponding secretary of the Typographers' Union. But the cigarmakers and

typographers were only two of the thirty-odd national unions, and the general attitude toward women was one of exclusion.

In 1869, the collar laundresses of Troy, New York, whose work involved standing “over the wash tub and over the ironing table with furnaces on either side, the thermometer averaging 100 degrees, for wages averaging \$2.00 and \$3.00 a week” (according to a contemporary account), went on strike. Their leader was Kate Mullaney, second vice-president of the National Labor Union. Seven thousand people came to a rally to support them, and the women organized a cooperative collar and cuff factory to provide work and keep the strike going. But as time went on, outside support dwindled. The employers began making a paper collar, requiring fewer laundresses. The strike failed.

The dangers of mill work intensified efforts to organize. Work often went on around the clock. At a mill in Providence, Rhode Island, fire broke out one night in 1866. There was panic among the six hundred workers, mostly women, and many jumped to their deaths from upper-story windows.

In Fall River, Massachusetts, women weavers formed a union independent of the men weavers. They refused to take a 10 percent wage cut that the men had accepted, struck against three mills, won the men’s support, and brought to a halt 3,500 looms and 156,000 spindles, with 3,200 workers on strike. But their children needed food; they had to return to work, signing an “iron-clad oath” (later called a “yellow-dog contract”) not to join a union.

Black workers at this time found the National Labor Union reluctant to organize them. So they formed their own unions and carried on their own strikes—like the levee workers in Mobile, Alabama, in 1867, Negro longshoremen in Charleston, dockworkers in Savannah. This probably stimulated the National Labor Union, at its 1869 convention, to resolve to organize women and Negroes, declaring that it recognized “neither color nor sex on the question of the rights of labor.” A journalist wrote about the remarkable signs of racial unity at this convention:

When a native Mississippian and an ex-confederate officer, in addressing a convention, refers to a colored delegate who has preceded him as “the gentleman from Georgia” . . . when an ardent and Democratic partisan (from New York at that) declares with a rich Irish brogue that he asks for himself no privilege as a mechanic or as a citizen that he is not willing to concede to every other man, white or black . . . then one may indeed be warranted in asserting that time works curious changes. . . .

Most unions, however, still kept Negroes out, or asked them to form their own locals.

The National Labor Union began to expend more and more of its energy on political issues, especially currency reform, a demand for the issuance of paper money: Greenbacks. As it became less an organizer of labor struggles, and more a lobbyist with Congress, concerned with voting, it lost vitality. An observer of the labor scene, F. A. Sorge, wrote in 1870 to Karl Marx in England: “The National Labor Union, which had such brilliant prospects in the beginning of its career, was poisoned by Greenbackism and is slowly but surely dying.”

Perhaps unions could not easily see the limits to legislative reform in an age where such reform laws were being passed for the first time, and hopes were high. The Pennsylvania legislature in 1869 passed a mine safety act providing for the “regulation and ventilation of mines, and for the protection of the lives of the miners.” Only after a hundred years of continuing accidents in those mines would it be understood how insufficient those words were—except as a device to calm anger among miners.

In 1873, another economic crisis devastated the nation. It was the closing of the banking house of Jay Cooke—the banker who during the war had made \$3 million a year in commissions alone for selling government bonds—that started the wave of panic. While President Grant slept in Cooke’s Philadelphia mansion on September 18, 1873, the banker rode downtown to lock the door on his bank. Now people could not pay loans on mortgages: five thousand businesses closed and put their workers on the street.

It was more than Jay Cooke. The crisis was built into a system which was chaotic in its nature, in which only the very rich were secure. It was a system of periodic crisis—1837, 1857, 1873 (and later: 1893, 1907, 1919, 1929)—that wiped out small businesses and brought cold, hunger, and death to working people while the fortunes of the Astors, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Morgans, kept growing through war and peace, crisis and recovery. During the 1873 crisis, Carnegie was capturing the steel market, Rockefeller was wiping out his competitors in oil.

“LABOR DEPRESSION IN BROOKLYN” was the headline in the New York *Herald* in November 1873. It listed closings and layoffs: a felt-skirt factory, a picture-frame factory, a glass-cutting establishment, a steelworks factory. And women’s trades: milliners, dressmakers, shoebinders.

The depression continued through the 1870s. During the first three months of 1874, ninety thousand workers, almost half of them women, had to sleep in

police stations in New York. They were known as “revolvers” because they were limited to one or two days a month in any one police station, and so had to keep moving. All over the country, people were evicted from their homes. Many roamed the cities looking for food.

Desperate workers tried to get to Europe or to South America. In 1878, the SS *Metropolis*, filled with laborers, left the United States for South America and sank with all aboard. The New York *Tribune* reported: “One hour after the news that the ship had gone down arrived in Philadelphia, the office of Messrs. Collins was besieged by hundreds of hunger-bitten, decent men, begging for the places of the drowned laborers.”

Mass meeting and demonstrations of the unemployed took place all over the country. Unemployed councils were set up. A meeting in New York at Cooper Institute in late 1873, organized by trade unions and the American section of the First International (founded in 1864 in Europe by Marx and others), drew a huge crowd, overflowing into the streets. The meeting asked that before bills became law they should be approved by a public vote, that no individual should own more than \$30,000; they asked for an eight-hour day. Also:

Whereas, we are industrious, law-abiding citizens, who had paid all taxes and given support and allegiance to the government,

Resolved, that we will in this time of need supply ourselves and our families with proper food and shelter and we will send our bills to the City Treasury, to be liquidated, until we shall obtain work. . . .

In Chicago, twenty thousand unemployed marched through the streets to City Hall asking “bread for the needy, clothing for the naked, and houses for the homeless.” Actions like this resulted in some relief for about ten thousand families.

In January 1874, in New York City, a huge parade of workers, kept by the police from approaching City Hall, went to Tompkins Square, and there were told by the police they couldn’t have the meeting. They stayed, and the police attacked. One newspaper reported:

Police clubs rose and fell. Women and children ran screaming in all directions. Many of them were trampled underfoot in the stampede for the gates. In the street bystanders were ridden down and mercilessly clubbed by mounted officers.

Strikes were called in the textile mills of Fall River, Massachusetts. In the anthracite coal district of Pennsylvania, there was the “long strike,” where Irish members of a society called the Ancient Order of Hibernians were accused of acts of violence, mostly on the testimony of a detective planted

among the miners. These were the “Molly Maguires.” They were tried and found guilty. Philip Foner believes, after a study of the evidence, that they were framed because they were labor organizers. He quotes the sympathetic *Irish World*, which called them “intelligent men whose direction gave strength to the resistance of the miners to the inhuman reduction of their wages.” And he points to the *Miners’ Journal*, put out by the coal mine owners, which referred to the executed men this way: “What did they do? Whenever prices of labor did not suit them they organized and proclaimed a strike.”

All together, nineteen were executed, according to Anthony Bimba (*The Molly Maguires*). There were scattered protests from workingmen’s organizations, but no mass movement that could stop the executions.

It was a time when employers brought in recent immigrants—desperate for work, different from the strikers in language and culture—to break strikes. Italians were imported into the bituminous coal area around Pittsburgh in 1874 to replace striking miners. This led to the killing of three Italians, to trials in which jurors of the community exonerated the strikers, and bitter feelings between Italians and other organized workers.

The centennial year of 1876—one hundred years after the Declaration of Independence—brought forth a number of new declarations (reproduced by Philip Foner in *We the Other People*). Whites and blacks, separately, expressed their disillusionment. A “Negro Declaration of Independence” denounced the Republican party on which they had once depended to gain full freedom, and proposed independent political action by colored voters. And the Workingmen’s party of Illinois, at a July 4 celebration organized by German socialists in Chicago, said in its Declaration of Independence:

The present system has enabled capitalists to make laws in their own interests to the injury and oppression of the workers.

It has made the name Democracy, for which our forefathers fought and died, a mockery and a shadow, by giving to property an unproportionate amount of representation and control over Legislation.

It has enabled capitalists . . . to secure government aid, inland grants and money loans, to selfish railroad corporations, who, by monopolizing the means of transportation are enabled to swindle both the producer and the consumer . . .

It has presented to the world the absurd spectacle of a deadly civil war for the abolition of negro slavery while the majority of the white population, those who have created all the wealth of the nation, are compelled to suffer under a bondage infinitely more galling and humiliating. . . .

It has allowed the capitalists, as a class, to appropriate annually 5/6 of the entire production of the country. . . .

It has therefore prevented mankind from fulfilling their natural destinies on earth—crushed out ambition, prevented marriages or caused false and unnatural ones—has shortened human life, destroyed morals and fostered crime, corrupted judges, ministers, and statesmen, shattered confidence, love and honor among men, and made life a

selfish, merciless struggle for existence instead of a noble and generous struggle for perfection, in which equal advantages should be given to all, and human lives relieved from an unnatural and degrading competition for bread. .

..

We, therefore, the representatives of the workers of Chicago, in mass meeting assembled, do solemnly publish and declare . . .

That we are absolved from all allegiance to the existing political parties of this country, and that as free and independent producers we shall endeavor to acquire the full power to make our own laws, manage our own production, and govern ourselves, acknowledging no rights without duties, no duties without rights. And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the assistance and cooperation of all workingmen, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our means, and our sacred honor.

In the year 1877, the country was in the depths of the Depression. That summer, in the hot cities where poor families lived in cellars and drank infested water, the children became sick in large numbers. The *New York Times* wrote: “. . . already the cry of the dying children begins to be heard. . . . Soon, to judge from the past, there will be a thousand deaths of infants per week in the city.” That first week in July, in Baltimore, where all liquid sewage ran through the streets, 139 babies died.

That year there came a series of tumultuous strikes by railroad workers in a dozen cities; they shook the nation as no labor conflict in its history had done.

It began with wage cuts on railroad after railroad, in tense situations of already low wages (\$1.75 a day for brakemen working twelve hours), scheming and profiteering by the railroad companies, deaths and injuries among the workers—loss of hands, feet, fingers, the crushing of men between cars.

At the Baltimore & Ohio station in Martinsburg, West Virginia, workers determined to fight the wage cut went on strike, uncoupled the engines, ran them into the roundhouse, and announced no more trains would leave Martinsburg until the 10 percent cut was canceled. A crowd of support gathered, too many for the local police to disperse. B. & O. officials asked the governor for military protection, and he sent in militia. A train tried to get through, protected by the militia, and a striker, trying to derail it, exchanged gunfire with a militiaman attempting to stop him. The striker was shot in his thigh and his arm. His arm was amputated later that day, and nine days later he died.

Six hundred freight trains now jammed the yards at Martinsburg. The West Virginia governor applied to newly elected President Rutherford Hayes for federal troops, saying the state militia was insufficient. In fact, the militia was not totally reliable, being composed of many railroad workers. Much of the

U.S. army was tied up in Indian battles in the West. Congress had not appropriated money for the army yet, but J. P. Morgan, August Belmont, and other bankers now offered to lend money to pay army officers (but no enlisted men). Federal troops arrived in Martinsburg, and the freight cars began to move.

In Baltimore, a crowd of thousands sympathetic to the railroad strikers surrounded the armory of the National Guard, which had been called out by the governor at the request of the B. & O. Railroad. The crowd hurled rocks, and the soldiers came out, firing. The streets now became the scene of a moving, bloody battle. When the evening was over, ten men or boys were dead, more badly wounded, one soldier wounded. Half of the 120 troops quit and the rest went on to the train depot, where a crowd of two hundred smashed the engine of a passenger train, tore up tracks, and engaged the militia again in a running battle.

By now, fifteen thousand people surrounded the depot. Soon, three passenger cars, the station platform, and a locomotive were on fire. The governor asked for federal troops, and Hayes responded. Five hundred soldiers arrived and Baltimore quieted down.

The rebellion of the railroad workers now spread. Joseph Dacus, then editor of the St. Louis *Republican*, reported:

Strikes were occurring almost every hour. The great State of Pennsylvania was in an uproar; New Jersey was afflicted by a paralyzing dread; New York was mustering an army of militia; Ohio was shaken from Lake Erie to the Ohio River; Indiana rested in a dreadful suspense. Illinois, and especially its great metropolis, Chicago, apparently hung on the verge of a vortex of confusion and tumult. St. Louis had already felt the effect of the premonitory shocks of the uprising. . . .

The strike spread to Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Again, it happened outside the regular union, pent-up anger exploding without plan. Robert Bruce, historian of the 1877 strikes, writes (*1877: Year of Violence*) about a flagman named Gus Harris. Harris refused to go out on a “double-header,” a train with two locomotives carrying a double length of cars, to which railroaders had objected because it required fewer workers and made the brakemen’s work more dangerous:

The decision was his own, not part of a concerted plan or a general understanding. Had he lain awake that past night, listening to the rain, asking himself if he dared quit, wondering if anyone would join him, weighing the chances? Or had he simply risen to a breakfast that did not fill him, seen his children go off shabby and half-fed, walked brooding through the damp morning and then yielded impulsively to stored-up rage?

When Harris said he would not go, the rest of the crew refused too. The

strikers now multiplied, joined by young boys and men from the mills and factories (Pittsburgh had 33 iron mills, 73 glass factories, 29 oil refineries, 158 coal mines). The freight trains stopped moving out of the city. The Trainman's Union had not organized this, but it moved to take hold, called a meeting, invited "all workingmen to make common cause with their brethren on the railroad."

Railroad and local officials decided that the Pittsburgh militia would not kill their fellow townsmen, and urged that Philadelphia troops be called in. By now two thousand cars were idle in Pittsburgh. The Philadelphia troops came and began to clear the track. Rocks flew. Gunfire was exchanged between crowd and troops. At least ten people were killed, all workingmen, most of them not railroaders.

Now the whole city rose in anger. A crowd surrounded the troops, who moved into a roundhouse. Railroad cars were set afire, buildings began to burn, and finally the roundhouse itself, the troops marching out of it to safety. There was more gunfire, the Union Depot was set afire, thousands looted the freight cars. A huge grain elevator and a small section of the city went up in flames. In a few days, twenty-four people had been killed (including four soldiers). Seventy-nine buildings had been burned to the ground. Something like a general strike was developing in Pittsburgh: mill workers, car workers, miners, laborers, and the employees at the Carnegie steel plant.

The entire National Guard of Pennsylvania, nine thousand men, was called out. But many of the companies couldn't move as strikers in other towns held up traffic. In Lebanon, Pennsylvania, one National Guard company mutinied and marched through an excited town. In Altoona, troops surrounded by rioters, immobilized by sabotaged engines, surrendered, stacked arms, fraternized with the crowd, and then were allowed to go home, to the accompaniment of singing by a quartet in an all-Negro militia company.

In Harrisburg, the state capital, as at so many places, teenagers made up a large part of the crowd, which included some Negroes. Philadelphia militia, on their way home from Altoona, shook hands with the crowd, gave up their guns, marched like captives through the streets, were fed at a hotel and sent home. The crowd agreed to the mayor's request to deposit the surrendered guns at the city hall. Factories and shops were idle. After some looting, citizens' patrols kept order in the streets through the night.

Where strikers did not manage to take control, as in Pottsville,

Pennsylvania, it may well have been because of disunity. The spokesman of the Philadelphia & Reading Coal & Iron Company in that town wrote: “The men have no organization, and there is too much race jealousy existing among them to permit them to form one.”

In Reading, Pennsylvania, there was no such problem—90 percent were native-born, the rest mostly German. There, the railroad was two months behind in paying wages, and a branch of the Trainman’s Union was organized. Two thousand people gathered, while men who had blackened their faces with coal dust set about methodically tearing up tracks, jamming switches, derauling cars, setting fire to cabooses and also to a railroad bridge.

A National Guard company arrived, fresh from duty at the execution of the Molly Maguires. The crowd threw stones, fired pistols. The soldiers fired into the crowd. “Six men lay dead in the twilight,” Bruce reports, “a fireman and an engineer formerly employed in the Reading, a carpenter, a huckster, a rolling-mill worker, a laborer. . . . A policeman and another man lay at the point of death.” Five of the wounded died. The crowd grew angrier, more menacing. A contingent of soldiers announced it would not fire, one soldier saying he would rather put a bullet through the president of Philadelphia & Reading Coal & Iron. The 16th Regiment of the Morristown volunteers stacked its arms. Some militia threw their guns away and gave their ammunition to the crowd. When the Guardsmen left for home, federal troops arrived and took control, and local police began making arrests.

Meanwhile the leaders of the big railway brotherhoods, the Order of Railway Conductors, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, the Brotherhood of Engineers, disavowed the strike. There was talk in the press of “communistic ideas . . . widely entertained . . . by the workmen employed in mines and factories and by the railroads.”

In fact, there was a very active Workingmen’s party in Chicago, with several thousand members, most of them immigrants from Germany and Bohemia. It was connected with the First International in Europe. In the midst of the railroad strikes, that summer of 1877, it called a rally. Six thousand people came and demanded nationalization of the railroads. Albert Parsons gave a fiery speech. He was from Alabama, had fought in the Confederacy during the Civil War, married a brown-skinned woman of Spanish and Indian blood, worked as a typesetter, and was one of the best English-speaking orators the Workingmen’s party had.

The next day, a crowd of young people, not especially connected with the rally of the evening before, began moving through the railroad yards, closed down the freights, went to the factories, called out the mill workers, the stockyard workers, the crewmen on the Lake Michigan ships, closed down the brickyards and lumberyards. That day also, Albert Parsons was fired from his job with the *Chicago Times* and declared blacklisted.

The police attacked the crowds. The press reported: "The sound of clubs falling on skulls was sickening for the first minute, until one grew accustomed to it. A rioter dropped at every whack, it seemed, for the ground was covered with them." Two companies of U.S. infantry arrived, joining National Guardsmen and Civil War veterans. Police fired into a surging crowd, and three men were killed.

The next day, an armed crowd of five thousand fought the police. The police fired again and again, and when it was over, and the dead were counted, they were, as usual, workingmen and boys, eighteen of them, their skulls smashed by clubs, their vital organs pierced by gunfire.

The one city where the Workingmen's party clearly led the rebellion was St. Louis, a city of flour mills, foundries, packing houses, machine shops, breweries, and railroads. Here, as elsewhere, there were wage cuts on the railroads. And here there were perhaps a thousand members of the Workingmen's party, many of them bakers, coopers, cabinetmakers, cigarmakers, brewery workers. The party was organized in four sections, by nationality: German, English, French, Bohemian.

All four sections took a ferry across the Mississippi to join a mass meeting of railroad men in East St. Louis. One of their speakers told the meeting: "All you have to do, gentlemen, for you have the numbers, is to unite on one idea—that the workingmen shall rule the country. What man makes, belongs to him, and the workingmen made this country." Railroaders in East St. Louis declared themselves on strike. The mayor of East St. Louis was a European immigrant, himself an active revolutionist as a youth, and railroad men's votes dominated the city.

In St. Louis, itself, the Workingmen's party called an open-air mass meeting to which five thousand people came. The party was clearly in the leadership of the strike. Speakers, excited by the crowd, became more militant: ". . . capital has changed liberty into serfdom, and we must fight or die." They called for nationalization of the railroads, mines, and all industry.

At another huge meeting of the Workingmen's party a black man spoke for those who worked on the steamboats and levees. He asked: "Will you stand to us regardless of color?" The crowd shouted back: "We will!" An executive committee was set up, and it called for a general strike of all branches of industry in St. Louis.

Handbills for the general strike were soon all over the city. There was a march of four hundred Negro steamboat men and roustabouts along the river, six hundred factory workers carrying a banner: "No Monopoly—Workingmen's Rights." A great procession moved through the city, ending with a rally of ten thousand people listening to Communist speakers: "The people are rising up in their might and declaring they will no longer submit to being oppressed by unproductive capital."

David Burbank, in his book on the St. Louis events, *Reign of the Rabble*, writes:

Only around St. Louis did the original strike on the railroads expand into such a systematically organized and complete shut-down of all industry that the term general strike is fully justified. And only there did the socialists assume undisputed leadership. . . . no American city has come so close to being ruled by a workers' soviet, as we would now call it, as St. Louis, Missouri, in the year 1877.

The railroad strikes were making news in Europe. Marx wrote Engels: "What do you think of the workers of the United States? This first explosion against the associated oligarchy of capital which has occurred since the Civil War will naturally again be suppressed, but can very well form the point of origin of an earnest workers' party. . . ."

In New York, several thousand gathered at Tompkins Square. The tone of the meeting was moderate, speaking of "a political revolution through the ballot box." And: "If you will unite, we may have here within five years a socialistic republic. . . . Then will a lovely morning break over this darkened land." It was a peaceful meeting. It adjourned. The last words heard from the platform were: "Whatever we poor men may not have, we have free speech, and no one can take it from us." Then the police charged, using their clubs.

In St. Louis, as elsewhere, the momentum of the crowds, the meetings, the enthusiasm, could not be sustained. As they diminished, the police, militia, and federal troops moved in and the authorities took over. The police raided the headquarters of the Workingmen's party and arrested seventy people; the executive committee that had been for a while virtually in charge of the city was now in prison. The strikers surrendered; the wage cuts remained; 131

strike leaders were fired by the Burlington Railroad.

When the great railroad strikes of 1877 were over, a hundred people were dead, a thousand people had gone to jail, 100,000 workers had gone on strike, and the strikes had roused into action countless unemployed in the cities. More than half the freight on the nation's 75,000 miles of track had stopped running at the height of the strikes.

The railroads made some concessions, withdrew some wage cuts, but also strengthened their "Coal and Iron Police." In a number of large cities, National Guard armories were built, with loopholes for guns. Robert Bruce believes the strikes taught many people of the hardships of others, and that they led to congressional railroad regulation. They may have stimulated the business unionism of the American Federation of Labor as well as the national unity of labor proposed by the Knights of Labor, and the independent labor-farmer parties of the next two decades.

In 1877, the same year blacks learned they did not have enough strength to make real the promise of equality in the Civil War, working people learned they were not united enough, not powerful enough, to defeat the combination of private capital and government power. But there was more to come.