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0521433983 - Pure and Simple Politics: The American Federation of Labor and Political Activism, 1881-1917

Julie Greene

Excerpt

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Introduction

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) developed a distinctive and influential approach to political action. Rather than creating an independent party of American workers, akin to the British Labour Party or the German Social Democratic Party, AFL members and leaders struggled to find another route to political effectiveness. Along the way, they experimented with diverse political strategies, committing vast resources and generating passionate debates.

AFL President Samuel Gompers first articulated the political approach that would come to dominate the American labor movement. In the 1890s he argued forcefully, and ultimately successfully, that “party slavery” constituted a major source of tyranny in American life. Seeking to reject partisan commitments, the AFL turned to lobbying. In the early twentieth century, when an expanding federal bureaucracy and a growing anti-union movement among American employers together defeated AFL lobbying efforts, Gompers and other leaders reluctantly embarked on a more strenuous strategy. They ambitiously entered electoral politics, urging some two million AFL members across the nation to support pro-union candidates. Ultimately, they hoped to encourage class consciousness through a “strike at the ballot box.” The AFL leaders would soon learn, however, that achieving their political goals remained elusive.

At the heart of labor’s political effort stood several conundrums. In a political system dominated by the two major parties, should the Federation remain independent and eschew partisan alliances? Or should it ally with one of the major parties or even with an alternative like the Socialists? Could AFL leaders possibly engage in electoral politics without dividing their ranks or, equally fear-some, facing embarrassment if trade unionists refused to join the effort? And could AFL leaders encourage limited engagement in electoral politics without losing control over the political future of the labor movement? Rank-and-file trade unionists had their own ideas about the shape American labor politics should take. Many of them favored Socialist or Labor Party activities, whereas others simply wanted their local labor councils and state federations of labor, rather than the national leadership, to stand at the heart of any political movement.

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But how could rank-and-file unionists shape the political direction of their movement, lacking as they did the resources and influence possessed by national leaders? Such questions weighed heavily on the minds of trade unionists during the early twentieth century; answers would not come easily.

These political quandaries belie some of our common assumptions about the character and activities of the American Federation of Labor in its early decades. Since the early twentieth century, when John Commons and his colleagues wrote their classic studies, scholarship on American labor politics has been dominated by the view that the AFL rejected political action and pursued instead economic- and union-centered strategies. The AFL may have occasionally lobbied the government but beyond that, it is said, the Federation stayed out of politics.¹

But did it? With this question, I began researching the American Federation of Labor's activities during its early decades, from the origins of its predecessor, the Federation of Trades and Labor Unions, through the election of 1916. Much to my surprise, I found that the American Federation of Labor devoted a great deal of attention to political activity during its early decades, and this activity helped shape both American politics as well as the character of the AFL itself. Accordingly, this book explores the AFL's evolution during its early decades as a way to understand the origins, character, and significance of trade union-centered political action that so dramatically distinguishes the case of the United States from labor movements in other countries. It will trace the AFL's approach to electoral politics, its relationship to the party system, and its strategies of mobilization. Two key arenas will require a close focus: the relationships within the AFL, in which members and leaders debated political strategies and exposed their own differences along the way; and the relationship between the AFL and other groups, such as Democratic Party politicians, state bureaucrats, open-shop employers, and workers not invited to join what was, after all, a highly exclusivist trade union federation. I call the strategy developed by the AFL "pure and simple politics," and with this phrase I hope to suggest a number of things.

Samuel Gompers coined the phrase "pure and simple" in 1893, at a time when, as president of the young AFL, he was already battling against Socialists for control over the institution. During this fight, he portrayed Socialists as "outsiders," regardless of their trade unionist credentials. "I cannot and will not prove false to my convictions," he proclaimed on one occasion, "that the trade unions pure and simple are the natural organizations of the wage workers to secure their present and practical improvement and to achieve their final

¹ Michael Rogin, "Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Antipolitical Doctrine," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 15 (4), July 1962, 521–35; David J. Saposs, "Voluntarism in the American Labor Movement," *Monthly Labor Review*, 77 (9), September 1954, 967–71; Ruth L. Horowitz, *Political Ideologies of Organized Labor* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1978); Marc Karson, *American Labor Unions and Politics, 1900–1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958); Philip Taft, *Labor Politics American Style: The California State Federation of Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

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emancipation.”² In the years since Gompers made this statement, “pure and simple” has become a common phrase for his brand of conservative unionism. For decades, the phrase was used mainly by radical critics of the AFL, who disdained what they perceived as the narrow and conservative outlook of Gompers and his allies. Today, the term remains pervasive in histories of the AFL, though ironically its meaning has grown less clear over time. It can refer generally to conservatism within the trade union movement, or to anti statism,³ or perhaps most commonly to a wholesale rejection of politics. Bruce Laurie writes in his insightful book on nineteenth-century labor, for example, that “Pure and simple unionism scorned social reform for the here and now, and sought to better conditions in the workplace within the framework of the existing order.” Norman Ware, on the other hand, an early historian of the AFL, equated pure and simple unionism with a complete rejection of politics and political ambitions.⁴

With the phrase “pure and simple politics,” I hope to suggest that any assumption like Ware’s is inaccurate. “Pure and simple” unionism should not be equated with nonpolitical unionism, nor should we perceive the AFL as the archetypal nonpolitical or antipolitical labor institution. In linking this study of a politically active organization with the concept of pure and simple, I hope to return us closer to Samuel Gompers’s original intention. The early AFL *was* a political organization, but quite distinctly in its own way. Pure and simple politics meant, first of all, that only trade union members and leaders should determine the shape of American labor politics. It entailed, secondly, a highly independent approach to political activity. Formally, AFL policy was strictly nonpartisan; in practice, it involved a close but contingent partnership with the Democratic Party that hinged on the party’s responsiveness. Thirdly, as scholars before me have demonstrated, AFL political policy remained resolutely antistatist during this period. Rather than seeking ambitious social reforms, AFL leaders sought to achieve their very modest goals within the existing political system.⁵

Exploring the evolution of American labor politics with a spotlight on the AFL requires that we situate ourselves in a particular context of working-class history. This project will examine the national level of American politics, for during this period, power moved upward from local and state levels and many working-class institutions began trying to influence national policymaking and

² Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1925), 1:385.

³ By using the term antistatist, I mean an approach to politics that opposes most forms of state intervention and perceives government as a negative influence that should remain as limited as possible. Antipolitics, on the other hand, refers to trade unionist strategies that reject activities in the political sphere as a means to achieve labor’s goals, preferring instead strictly economic action.

⁴ Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in 19th Century America* (Toronto: Hill and Wang, 1989), 177; Norman Ware, *The Labor Movement in the U.S., 1860–1890* (New York: Appleton, 1929), 42, 350.

⁵ See, for example, Louis Reed, *The Labor Philosophy of Samuel Gompers* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966); and Fred Greenbaum, “The Social Ideas of Samuel Gompers,” *Labor History*, 7 (1), Winter 1966, 35–61.

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politics. It will concentrate not on radical parties, but on America's trade union movement and particularly the AFL, for the latter dominated the labor movement by 1900 both politically and economically. Likewise, this project will highlight not the legislative arena, but rather the relationships between organized labor and the mainstream political parties. Workers achieved relatively little in shaping national legislation during this period, primarily because the antistatism of major leaders such as Samuel Gompers precluded a powerful role in that sphere. Instead, organized labor made its power felt more through its energetic political mobilization and nervous negotiations with the major parties. The American Federation of Labor trailblazed in these areas during the Progressive era, articulating organized labor's voice on political questions at the national level, forming an alliance with the Democratic Party, and attempting to offer political guidance to the mass of American workers.

The Historians and American Labor Politics

Scholars have long been interested in the political potential of American workers. In 1906, Werner Sombart cast a long shadow over our understanding of U.S. labor politics by framing the issue negatively in his essay titled "Why Is There No Socialism in America?" He answered his question by arguing that in the United States, class consciousness was wrecked on the shoals of material prosperity.⁶ Since that time, historians have directed their attention more to explaining the political incapacity of the working class and their unions than to exploring their actual political practices. Particularly in recent decades, diverse arguments have been offered to explain why class has played so small a role in American politics, why workers eschewed socialism, and why labor failed to exercise significant influence. In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the dominant school of political historiography argued that ethnic, cultural, and religious factors determined citizens' voting behavior in the years between 1870 and 1910, and thus that class was not a significant factor.⁷ More recently, legal historians have

⁶ Werner Sombart, *Why Is There No Socialism in America?*, trans Patricia M. Hocking and C. T. Husbands (White Plains, NY: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1976; originally 1906).

⁷ See, for example, Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1970); idem, *Continuity and Change in Electoral Politics, 1893-1928* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Robert Cherny, *Populism, Progressivism, and the Transformation of Nebraska Politics, 1885-1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981). For criticisms that this school neglected class as an influence on political behavior, see Allan Lichtman, "Critical Election Theory and the Reality of American Presidential Politics, 1916-1940," *American Historical Review*, 81 (1976), 317-51; idem, "Political Realignment and 'Ethnocultural' Voting in Late Nineteenth Century America," *Journal of Social History*, 16 (3), Spring 1983, 55-82. Richard L. McCormick, "Ethnocultural Interpretations of Nineteenth Century American Voting Behavior," *Political Science Quarterly*, 89 (2), June 1974, 351-77.

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argued that judicial hostility turned workers away from the political sphere: Because hard-won labor reforms could always be ruled unconstitutional by a judge, workers decided not to waste time on political mobilization.⁸ Now within women's history, an important new school is looking at white middle- and upper-class women's contributions to early twentieth-century state formation and particularly the origins of social welfare policies. As Kathryn Kish Sklar has written in a widely read article, between 1880 and 1915, "prodigious political mobilization by middle-class women formed the largest coalitions that broke through the malaise and restructured American social and political priorities at the municipal, state, and federal levels." Sklar builds her argument on a premise of working-class political failure. Seeking to highlight the remarkable role played by American women, she argues that gender acted as a "surrogate" for class in American politics.⁹

In each of the previous arguments, a presumed absence looms far larger than any working-class political presence. These and other studies have indeed helped us understand why workers failed to accomplish more politically in the decades from 1880 to 1930. Workers were divided by craft, skill, region, gender, ethnicity, and race. Working people also divided along political grounds. Disfranchisement excluded female, African-American, and recent immigrant workers from electoral politics. White male workers themselves divided their loyalties among the Democratic, Republican, or Socialist parties, or rejected politics altogether. Until the 1930s, this prevented them from uniting in sufficiently large numbers to exert a major influence on the course of American politics. Yet even if working people did not unite at the ballot box in the decades before the Great Depression, and even if they failed to build a Socialist or Labor Party capable of dominating working-class political culture, it does not follow that they engaged in no political activity or that their efforts had no impact at all.

During an earlier period in American labor historiography, scholars lavished more attention on the political activity of working-class institutions like the AFL. John R. Commons, Philip Taft, Selig Perlman, and other scholars linked to the Wisconsin school of labor scholarship documented the significant political presence maintained by AFL leaders. Yet they celebrated the AFL's emphasis on economic action and stressed the limits on its political action. This assessment shaped future decades of labor historiography. As Selig Perlman described the evolution of the AFL, its leaders rejected the political panaceas pursued by the

⁸ William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Victoria Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁹ Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Historical Foundations of Women's Power in the Creation of the American Welfare State, 1830-1930," in Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 45; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), rejects Sklar's surrogate argument, yet she agrees with Sklar in seeing working-class politics as an arena of failure and missed opportunity.

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Knights of Labor for a path to economic success paved by conservative business unionism.¹⁰ Although early trades unionists such as Gompers and Adolph Strasser began as Marxists, they soon discovered that class consciousness in America was and could only be limited. This new species of labor organization “grasped the idea, supremely correct for American conditions, that the economic front was the only front on which the labor army could stay united,” in the words of Selig Perlman, and this appraisal underpinned their successful, economic, trade unionism.¹¹

Historians influenced by the Wisconsin school elaborated these ideas into a larger claim that the AFL’s character derived from a consensus among its members and leaders that an antipolitical and especially antisocialist approach would best serve their interests. That consensus in turn derived primarily from the middle-class psychology of American workers. According to Marc Karson, “The American worker feels middle-class and behaves middle-class. To understand his politics, one must recognize his psychology, a large part of which is middle-class derived.” Their middle-class psychology led workers to support both American capitalism and individualism. “When Socialists criticize the self-interest and acquisitive spirit of capitalism, the worker feels under attack for within himself, he knows, burns the capitalistic spirit.”¹²

With the emergence of the “new labor history” in the 1960s, historians shifted their attention away from institutions, politics, and the state. Labor historians began examining community and workplace relationships at the expense of institutions. The impressive work published on politics by scholars such as Melvyn Dubofsky, John Laslett, Leon Fink, Mari Jo Buhle, and Nick Salvatore tended to explore moments of militancy and radicalism. As a result, the political activities of the Knights of Labor, the Socialist Party, or the Industrial Workers of the World have many students, whereas the politics of conservative or moderate workers for many years awaited their historians.¹³

¹⁰ Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1928), 198–9. See also John Commons et al., *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1918, 2 vols.). For other discussions of the AFL that indicate the influence of the Wisconsin school, see Gerald Grob, *Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865–1890* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961); Marc Karson, *American Labor Unions and Politics, 1900–1918* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958); and Selig Perlman, *History of Trade Unionism in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

¹¹ Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement*, 197–8.

¹² Karson, *American Labor Unions and Politics*, 290–6. For other “psychological” arguments about American workers, see Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement*; and Marc Karson, “The Psychology of Trade Union Membership,” *Mental Hygiene*, 41, January 1957, 87–93.

¹³ Examples of works in labor history focusing on politics include Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967); Leon Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); Melvyn Dubofsky,

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Several studies provide important exceptions to these trends in labor historiography by shifting our focus from the national to the state level of labor politics. In 1962, Michael Rogin employed the term “voluntarism” to describe an AFL “pragmatic philosophy” that urged workers to rely on “their own voluntary associations” and opposed alliances with a political party or state intervention. Rogin stressed the political consequences of voluntarism: It was an “antipolitical doctrine” that denied unions “the right to act politically.” According to Rogin, local and state labor movements broke with the antipolitical orientation of the national AFL leadership. They lobbied actively and pursued a broader spectrum of social legislation.¹⁴ Gary Fink’s excellent study of the Missouri State Federation of Labor, published in 1973, expanded on Rogin’s ideas. Like Rogin, Fink found that local labor leaders “placed a much greater emphasis upon the exercise of [their] potential political power and influence than did the national leadership.” He also argued that critical differences existed between the national and local levels of organized labor. Local workers rejected the antistatism of the national AFL, and they moved close to rejecting its emphasis on nonpartisan campaign strategies.¹⁵

In 1968, Philip Taft’s study of the California State Federation of Labor, which looked at the period after World War I, presented a very different interpretation. He argued that the California federation pursued a pragmatic and moderate political vision, one closer to the political vision of the AFL national leaders. Presenting labor politics as a sphere remarkably free from internal conflict, Taft proposed that national AFL leaders allowed local and state leaders to make their

We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1969); Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Richard Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875–1900* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Henry F. Bedford, *Socialism and the Workers in Massachusetts, 1886–1912* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966); William Dick, *Labor and Socialism in America: The Gompers Era* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1972); Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism: 1865–1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1966); James R. Green, *Grassroots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); John H. M. Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881–1924* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); Richard Schneirov, “The Knights of Labor in the Chicago Labor Movement and in Municipal Politics, 1877–1887,” Ph.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1984.

¹⁴ Michael Rogin, “Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Antipolitical Doctrine,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 15 (4), July 1962, 523, 531. Voluntarism is a profoundly slippery term, meaning different things to different people. It seems derived from the language and concepts of AFL leaders like Samuel Gompers, but in fact he discussed voluntary relationships only in the last months of his life. Because of such problems, this study will not rely on the term or the concept of voluntarism. For more on the concept’s history, see Julia Greene, “The Strike at the Ballot Box: Politics and Partisanship in the American Federation of Labor, 1881 to 1917,” Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1990.

¹⁵ Gary Fink, *Labor’s Search for Political Order: The Political Behavior of the Missouri Labor Movement, 1890–1940* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973).

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own political decisions and the latter in turn sought simply to carry out the wishes of their rank-and-file members. The absence of a labor party in the United States, he concluded, derived from the lack of interest in such an effort exhibited by ordinary American workers.¹⁶

By the 1980s, labor historians had begun to rediscover politics and the state as an important sphere of working-class experience, so much so that the work carried out by Rogin, Taft, and Fink no longer seemed unusual. The movement began among political scientists as a small group of “new institutionalists” responded to the influence achieved by social historians.¹⁷ Soon the movement took shape in the rallying cry first articulated by Theda Skocpol in her essay “Bringing the State Back In.” Challenging social historians’ “society-centered” analysis of historical change, and their emphasis on social forces and phenomena, Skocpol proposed instead a “state-centered” methodology that envisions the state as autonomous and hence as a central causal agent in American society, economics, and politics.¹⁸

Skocpol’s influential work has encouraged labor historians to explore new aspects of workers’ relationship with politics and the state. David Montgomery’s 1987 synthesis of labor history, *The Fall of the House of Labor*, signaled this growing interest. Historians with diverse approaches, from Melvyn Dubofsky to Shelton Stromquist and Cecelia Bucki, as well as political scientists such as Amy Bridges, Karen Orren, and Martin Shefter, have all shed new light on working people’s politics. Unlike many earlier studies, these have not focused on radicalism, but on more moderate and widespread political approaches.¹⁹ Such work

¹⁶ Philip Taft, *Labor Politics American Style: The California State Federation of Labor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 4–7.

¹⁷ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life,” *American Political Science Review*, 78 (3), September 1984, 734–49; Rogers M. Smith, “Political Jurisprudence, the ‘New Institutionalism,’ and the Future of Public Law,” *American Political Science Review*, 82 (1), March 1988, 89–108.

¹⁸ Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,” in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschmeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3–37; Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*; Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

¹⁹ David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Shelton H. Stromquist, “The Crucible of Class: Cleveland Politics and the Origins of Municipal Reform in the Progressive Era,” *Journal of Urban History*, 23 (2), January 1997, 192–220; Cecelia F. Bucki, “The Pursuit of Political Power: Class, Ethnicity, and Municipal Politics in Interwar Bridgeport, 1915–1936,” Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1991; Joseph McCartin, “Labor’s Great War: American Workers, Unions, and the State, 1916–1920,” Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1990; Alan Dawley, “Workers, Capital, and the State in the Twentieth Century,” in J. Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris, eds., *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problem of Synthesis* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 152–200; Colin Davis, “Bitter Storm: The 1922 National Railroad Shopmen’s Strike,” Ph.D. diss., State

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as Michael Kazin's fine *Barons of Labor* have rekindled interest not only in politics, but also in the AFL. Exploring labor politics in San Francisco during the Progressive era, and following a line of argument pursued decades earlier by Gary Fink and Michael Rogin, Kazin demonstrated that workers there were politically and socially active and engaged.²⁰

Two recent studies, each coincidentally stressing a single factor of causation, bear with special relevance on the political history of the AFL. William Forbath, in *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*, and Gwendolyn Mink, in *Old Labor and New Immigrants*, both argued that historians need a new explanation for the exceptionalism of the American working class. How should we explain the triumph of conservative craft unionism that rejected broad visions of social and political change? Forbath and Mink found their explanations, respectively, in the courts and in immigration. According to Forbath, "judge-made law and legal violence limited, demeaned, and demoralized workers' capacities for class-based social and political action." Judicial hostility and repression made inclusive unionism and broad reform efforts seem costly, encouraging Samuel Gompers and his allies to stress economic action and only very narrow and limited political concerns.²¹

Pure and Simple Politics will complement Forbath's study by focusing on the major parties and the ways that turn-of-the-century partisan culture shaped the political environment in which the AFL operated. It differs in seeing the evolution of American labor politics as caused by many factors rather than simply the judiciary. Furthermore, I will argue, Forbath's approach does not help us explain the trade unionists' aggressive political activism around the injunction and other issues. Judicial hostility helped push trade unionists into more, rather than less, political engagement.

For her part, Gwendolyn Mink holds that immigration "played the decisive role in formulating an American version of labor politics." Exploring immigration's influence with an emphasis on demographic change, the split labor market, segmentation of the American working class, and nativism among white native-born workers, Mink demonstrates how waves of immigration from Europe

University of New York at Binghamton, 1989; Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Martin Shefter, "Trade Unions and Political Machines," in Ira Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 197–278. A fine example and summary of the growing literature on labor politics is David Brody's essay "The Course of American Labor Politics," in idem, *In Labor's Cause: Main Themes on the History of the American Worker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 43–80. See also David Brody, "The American Worker in the Progressive Era," in his *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the 20th Century Struggle*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–47.

²⁰ Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 3–7, 277–90.

²¹ Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement*, 3, 25, 168.

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and Asia reinforced occupational and ethnic divisions within the working class. Ultimately, in Mink's view, these forces gave rise both to the craft exclusionism of the AFL and its conservative political orientation: "racial nativism became a driving force behind union politics" and AFL voluntarism became its ideological formulation. Mink's argument on the demographic and segmenting impact of immigration is useful, but the interpretation of the relationship between immigration and AFL politics in *Pure and Simple Politics* will diverge significantly from hers. Although the AFL leaders clustered around Samuel Gompers certainly cared deeply about immigration restriction, it never became a central force or a litmus test for determining their political alliances, nor can it explain why the Federation entered politics so energetically after 1903. Other issues like judicial hostility and even the eight-hour day for government workers ranked much higher in the hierarchy of political issues on which AFL leaders concentrated.²²

Unlike studies proposing a single-factor explanation, this project interprets the political evolution of organized labor in the United States as deriving from a variety of factors, influences, and contingencies. The unusual nature and character of the American state, with the courts and political parties exercising such a powerful role, greatly shaped the labor movement. Far from a static force during these years, the federal government underwent a transformation as the executive branch expanded its powers and intervened more directly both in domestic and international affairs. In addition, anti-union employers' organizations aggressively mobilized in the years after 1900, contesting labor's power on shop floors across the country and, increasingly, through skilled use of the courts, the parties, and the U.S. Congress. These forces not only helped push politics to the center of labor's agenda, they also shaped the specific political strategies labor activists developed for combatting their enemies and achieving their visions.

Yet the working class and its institutions stand at the heart of this story. Working people in the United States by the turn of the twentieth century were profoundly divided amongst and against themselves. Immigration and the gradual entrance of women, children, and African Americans into the work force reshaped the gender and racial characteristics of the class. By 1900, one could

²² For an example of immigration's subordinate position in the AFL's political universe, one might consult "Labor's Protest to Congress," *American Federationist* (hereafter cited as *AF*), 15 (4), April 1908, 261–6, the document generated by the AFL to list its main demands during the critical campaign year of 1908. Immigration is not mentioned in the document. Similarly, after the 1912 election, Gompers visited President-elect Woodrow Wilson to discuss labor's political goals, and again immigration was not on the list (see Chapter Eight). I am not arguing that immigration never mattered to AFL members and leaders, but rather that it played a less central role than various other issues. Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 67 and 53. See also Julia Greene's review of *Old Labor and New Immigrants* by Gwendolyn Mink, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 34, Fall 1988, 122–6.