Introduction

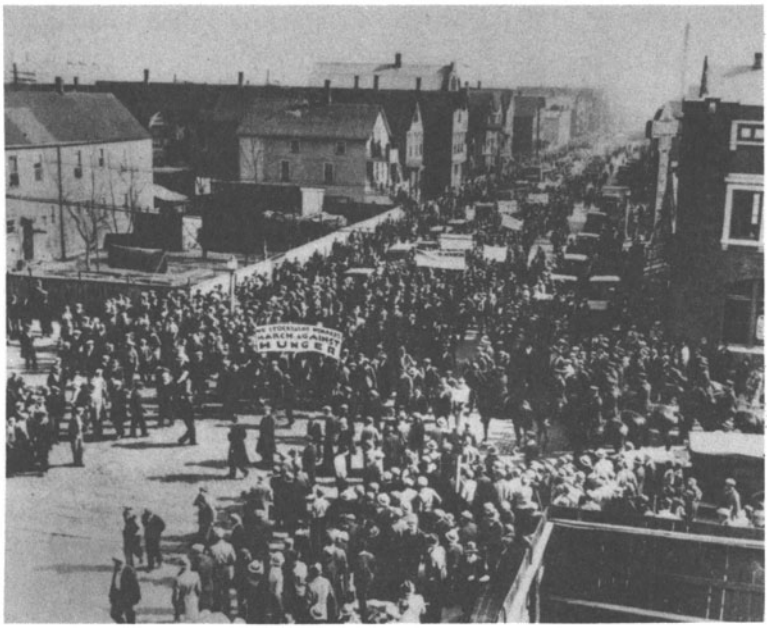

Plate 1. In the midst of the Great Depression, workers in Chicago's packinghouses, steel mills, and other mass production factories, many of whom were unemployed, demanded that the federal government come to their rescue. These stockyard workers paraded down the streets of the Back of the Yards neighborhood in late 1932 agitating for more government relief. A few years later, industrial workers would successfully organize themselves into unions to make demands of their employers as well.

Popular folklore of the Great Depression often celebrates how Americans, as individuals, coped with the greatest economic calamity in the nation's history, how they delayed planned marriages, sustained themselves with home gardens, and perhaps most notoriously, sold apples on street corners. But all too often these tales overlook the more political and collective responses many people made. During the 1930s, in an industrial city like Chicago, workers who rolled steel, packed meat, and built farm tractors not only found personal strategies to deal with hardship, they also joined together to undertake new kinds of political action. Men and women who had tried in vain to organize permanent unions in mass production factories before or had been raised on stories of failure now prided themselves on building viable unions at the long-time bastion of the open shop, U.S. Steel; in the meatpacking houses of Armour and Swift, nearly as wretched as Upton Sinclair had described them three decades earlier in his muckraking exposé, *The Jungle*; and in the farm implement plants of International Harvester, the Chicago-based manufacturer that symbolized the marriage of the industrial and agricultural Midwest. Workers in these companies and in others finally managed with the help of the newly formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to wage the nationwide offensive that was necessary to win union recognition from their powerful, national-scale employers. By 1940, one in three workers in Chicago manufacturing would be a union member where ten years earlier hardly any had been. Here, as in Detroit, Pittsburgh, Akron, and many other industrial cities in America, the men and women who made modern mass production possible were taking the risks to demand – and were winning – better pay, fairer working conditions, and recognition of their right to be represented by a union.[1]

Just as working-class Chicagoans – male and female, black and white, a large proportion immigrants from eastern and southern Europe or their children – were joining together to exert more control over their work lives, they were also asserting themselves in new ways in the larger political arena. During the 1930s, Chicago workers, along with men and women elsewhere in the nation, had begun to vote Democratic more consistently and in greater numbers than ever before, joining President Franklin Roosevelt's "New Democratic Coalition" to promote a notion of government that protected the well-being of ordinary Americans. Supporting the Democrats in Washington and Chicago, they felt, would ensure a more activist federal government committed to

providing the benefits that over time have become associated with "the welfare state." On the job and at the polls, working people throughout the country were speaking in a collective voice and having it heard.

To better appreciate the significance of these political actions that in retrospect might seem quite moderate, it helps to consider how difficult it was for industrial workers to achieve them. Factory workers at these Chicago plants had tried before the 1930s to organize themselves in unions, but despite occasional short-term success, they had never managed to sustain broad-based unionization over a significant period of time. Workers' most recent, and successful, efforts had followed World War I. In Chicago's steel mills, packing plants, and agricultural equipment factories, manufacturing workers came close to building viable industrial unions, but they did not last. Fragmentation of workers along geographic, skill, ethnic, and racial lines – along with repression by employers and government and weak national union structures within the craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL) – led to the defeat of workers' once promising challenge.

Even before the 1919 era of labor militance, Chicago workers had launched campaigns to demand better wages, hours, and working conditions from their employers and the right to organize in unions, but weaknesses in their own organizations, resistance by bosses, and recurrent economic recessions had conspired to doom their drives. In the steel industry, unionization had been a conservative movement of skilled men whose strength rested on their control over the supply of steelmaking skills. While for the last quarter of the nineteenth century the native-born and northern European steelworkers who dominated in skilled jobs managed to impose their own standards of wages, hours, and work rules through their craft union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, mechanization made their skills increasingly obsolete by the early twentieth century. Steel companies then had little trouble destroying the union and hiring nonunion, unskilled, eastern and southern Europeans to do more of the work. The mass of steel workers never enjoyed protection by a union, and even the skilled elite who were unionized had lost their advantage by the early years of this century.[2]

Craft unions of skilled butchers in Chicago's packing plants proved more successful in incorporating the unskilled, new immigrants who were finding increasing opportunities for work in packing as in steel, but even their best efforts to challenge the autocracy of employers in the

period from 1900 to 1904 ultimately failed. Although union locals of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America for the first time cut across skill, ethnicity, and in a few cases, even race, persistent fragmentation by occupation, along with packers' ease in recruiting strikebreakers during the recession of 1904, meant defeat of the workers' strike and a return to miserable shop floor conditions.[3]

At the McCormick Company, the most important precursor to the International Harvester trust formed in 1902, an elite craft union of molders was also the dominant labor organization from 1862 until the issue of the eight-hour day rallied lesser-skilled workers to the Knights of Labor in 1886. For several months skilled and unskilled workers together carried out an effective strike. Then a bomb explosion at a mass meeting involving McCormick workers at Haymarket Square killed seven policemen and unleashed an enormous wave of employer repression and employee fear. As a result, unionization was effectively destroyed at McCormick by the end of 1886. Despite occasional reappearances, management's dogged determinism to exclude unions resulted in only one sixteen-month period during 1903–4 when the company recognized a union contract. When that labor agreement ended, International Harvester shut down for two weeks and reopened its doors on its own terms.[4]

The Chicago plants of U.S. Steel, Armour and Swift, and International Harvester all operated unhampered by labor challenges from these early years of the twentieth century until World War I, and then what workers managed to win during the war and its aftermath was mostly dissipated in the defeats of 1919–22. Although Chicago was one of the strongest union towns in the nation, with the Chicago Federation of Labor sheltering under its wing traditional craft unions and at certain times workers as unskilled as scrubwomen and box makers, mass production workers never managed to build lasting industrial unions there, or elsewhere, until the 1930s. Even the most famous victory of unskilled immigrant workers in the nation's history, the Lawrence Strike of 1912, did not survive as the model of solidarity among nationality groups that it had appeared to be during the three-month-long strike. Within a year after the radical strike leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had departed, union membership dropped to almost nothing, and employers were successfully playing one nationality against another as they made employment insecure for all workers in this Massachusetts textile town.[5]

Just as Chicago's factory workers did not have labor unions to voice their complaints and defend their rights until the thirties, so too most of them expected little from government, particularly the federal government. Many immigrant workers were not even citizens, and those who could vote often used their ballots to buy concrete services from the precinct captain and ward boss responsible to their particular ethnic neighborhood. Electoral politics was a local, at most a city, affair. The federal government, even as it grew in importance during the twentieth century, seemed of another world, having little significance for or interest in their survival. Voting in national elections during the 1930s for a political party they felt articulated their particular class interests represented a big change for industrial workers. Given this history of impotence at the workplace and in national politics, what may look today like only minor challenges to the status quo in capitalist industry or in the two-party system during the 1930s felt like real power to many working-class people. Their perceptions need to be considered alongside other kinds of historical analysis in making a full assessment of the strengths and limitations of workers' incorporation into American politics through the CIO and the Democratic Party.

This book is devoted to explaining how it was possible and what it meant for industrial workers to become effective as national political participants in the mid-1930s, after having sustained defeats in 1919 and having refrained from unionism and national politics during the 1920s. Why did workers suddenly succeed in the thirties as both CIO trade unionists and Democratic Party faithfuls? Certainly, changes in the larger political environment mattered; repressive measures like government's and employers' use of Red Scare tactics in 1919 and facilitating factors such as the Wagner Act of 1935 influenced whether workers' political efforts failed or flourished. But I will argue in this book that these external influences by no means tell the whole story, that their effectiveness in thwarting or encouraging workers' efforts depended as much on working people's own inclinations as on the strengths of their opponents or allies. This book will contend that what matters most in explaining why workers acted politically in the ways they did during the mid-thirties is the change in workers' own orientation during the 1920s and 1930s. Working-class Americans underwent a gradual shift in attitudes and behavior over the intervening decade and a half as a result of a wide range of social and cultural experiences. Daily life both inside and outside the workplace and factors as diverse as where workers

turned for help in good times and bad, how they reacted to their employers' "welfare capitalist" schemes, and whether they were enticed by the new chain stores, motion picture palaces, and network radio shows or preferred the comfort of more familiar ethnic associations all are important in analyzing how workers' politics evolved. To understand why a bacon packer risked her job in the depths of the depression by joining a union or why a Polish immigrant steelworker registered and voted for the first time in 1936 requires investigation into many facets of workers' lives during the 1920s and the early depression that might not at first glance have seemed relevant.

In the course of taking a close look at the multiple ways that the lives of working-class people changed between 1919 and 1939, this book sheds new light on aspects of the social history of the interwar era that might not otherwise get attention or be considered in connection with each other. Chapters on the 1920s explore the fate of workers' ethnic identity after massive immigration stopped with World War I and the restrictive legislation that followed it, the way workers encountered the explosion of mass consumption and mass culture, and how large employers' ideological commitment to "welfare capitalism" was experienced by those at whom it was aimed. Similarly, for the 1930s, investigation into what the Great Depression meant to its working-class victims, how workers viewed the New Deal, and why they came to identify with the CIO gives a new perspective to phenomena that frequently are analyzed more in terms of institutional policy than popular experience. Historical study of the twentieth century at times, moreover, has erected artificial barriers between people's experiences at work, in the community, and with politics; between different ethnic and racial groups; and between decades such as the twenties and thirties. People's lives, however, cross over these boundaries. If we are to understand the complexity of those lives, we must strive to do the same.

Just as people's lives are not easily isolated in space and time, so their social identities are also multifaceted. It is my view that no simple affiliation with a particular social class, ethnic group, race, or gender alone determined behavior. People in Chicago combined identities as working class, immigrants or their offspring, black or white, and men or women in different ways at different times. Periods such as when these Chicago workers began to act politically during the 1930s involved subtle shifts in how people viewed themselves. This study will address itself to how people recombined their multiple identities in ways

that led them to undertake new kinds of collective action, how, for example, workers' self-images as ethnic and working class became more compatible as a result of the upheavals of the Great Depression.

I have focused my investigation in Chicago. It became clear early in my research that the important factors to explore in understanding the sources of workers' politics during the thirties did not differ substantially by region. Despite minor variations, there was one national story to be told. The most revealing contrasts were not between one city and another but rather between worker communities and factories within a city like Chicago. This narrower focus, moreover, allowed me to investigate how workers constructed complex interrelationships between different spheres of experience – between their workplaces and neighborhoods, political and social lives, ethnic and mainstream cultures. A local study, which permitted me to probe diverse arenas of popular experience, seemed the most promising strategy.

Chicago's prominence made it an obvious choice. It was the second largest industrial area in the nation during the interwar period. Its multiethnic and interracial work force also proved to be an analytical advantage. Chicago's factories were staffed with people born in southern and eastern Europe and, increasingly as years passed, with their children. From World War I through the 1920s, moreover, these Poles, Slavs, Czechs, Italians, and Jews were increasingly joined on the shop floor by blacks and Mexicans. Rather than limit my scope, a focus on Chicago offered the opportunity to examine multiple races, ethnicities, work environments, and neighborhoods. Chicago presented the analytical possibilities of comparative history within its borders.

Furthermore, Chicago had a special advantage as the best documented city in the United States during the interwar period. With the University of Chicago as the major center of social science research, sociologists like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, political scientists like Charles Merriam and Harold Gosnell, and social service professionals like Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge – and hundreds of their students – investigated a vast range of issues in their urban laboratory of Chicago. Aside from Helen and Robert Lynd's *Middletown* and its sequel, *Middletown in Transition*, all major social science research during the 1920s and 1930s took Chicago as its locale. Even the Hawthorne studies, the pioneering investigation of worker–management interaction by Harvard Business School researchers under Elton Mayo, focused on a Chicago area plant of the Western Electric

Company. So long as their biases are recognized, these diverse contemporary studies of Chicago life can serve social historians like myself as revealing windows into working-class experience.

Despite the special advantages of a Chicago locale, a study like mine that seeks to understand changes in workers' attitudes and behavior faces inherent difficulties. Attitudes of nonelite groups are notoriously hard to document. And workers' behavior in ordinary rather than crisis moments is often invisible. In this investigation I was drawn, therefore, to what was visible, particularly to scrutinizing the way that workers related to the institutions that impinged on their lives. Patterns of loyalty to ethnic organizations, welfare agencies, employers, stores, banks, and theaters, to say nothing of more traditional kinds of allegiances to political parties and unions, revealed the choices that workers made in living out their lives. Whether a worker saved at an ethnic bank, bought company stock, preferred ethnic to commercial radio programs, or depended on the county for charity became a way of entering the often elusive territory of people's attitudes. When information was not available on patterns of workers' patronage, the changes that these kinds of institutions underwent in the course of the twenties and thirties suggested to me the kinds of pressures they were under to survive and in this way revealed something of the priorities of their patrons. Although I would have wanted to know what working people of the era actually said about their ethnic benefit societies, new chain stores, and the Democratic Party, I often had to tease out their attitudes by closely analyzing the institutions themselves.

This book tells the story of how industrial workers in one American city made sense of an era in our recent history when the nation moved from a commitment to welfare capitalism to a welfare state, from a determination to resist the organization of its industrial work force to tolerating it, and from diverse social worlds circumscribed by race, ethnicity, class, and geography to more homogeneous cultural experiences brought about by the triumph of mass culture, mass consumption, mass unionization, and mass politics. What these large changes meant for this particular group of Americans is the subject of this book. But in another way, the subject is broader. For the way steelworkers at U.S. Steel's South Works, packinghouse workers at Armour and Company, and tractor assemblers at International Harvester brought wide-ranging social and cultural experiences to bear on their political choices serves as a case study of the complicated process through which all individuals

come to adopt new ideological perspectives. How people live, work, spend leisure time, identify socially, and do a myriad of other things shapes their political perspectives, with *political* understood in the broadest sense. It is my hope that this exploration into how one group of Americans came to act politically in new ways will make us more aware of the possibilities for other groups – as well as more sensitive to the subtle influences on ourselves.