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Introduction

To write about the working class is to discuss many disparate individuals. At any moment in the American past the researcher encounters such variety in personal aspirations, talents, and sense of self among working people as to defy stereotypes. Moreover, socially prescribed differences in gender, race, religion, and nationality have influenced various workers' behavior in powerfully different ways. Instead of listening for the "voice of the working class," therefore, we must be attuned to many different voices, sometimes in harmony, but often in conflict with one another.

Nevertheless, it remains not only possible but imperative to analyze the American experience of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of conflicting social classes. The human relationships structured by commodity production in large collective enterprises devoted to private gain generated bondings and antagonisms that were, in one form or another, the daily experience of everyone involved. "As a worker yourself, you're 'inside' with a vengeance," noted Smith College graduate Alice Kimball of her sojourn in a Paterson silk mill.

> You face the same sense of wearing monotony. You too swallow your injured pride when you have to kow-tow to the boss. You rage like the others at any attempt to overthrow the precious eight hour day. And just like the rest you sit around when unemployed and watch your savings ooze away and wonder why industry runs on such a stupid basis when you want work and can't get it.[1]

Although the modern experience of class had its origin in the encounter with wage labor described by Kimball, class consciousness permeated social intercourse outside the workplace as well as within it. Married women caring for their children in bleak, congested neighborhoods and facing creditors, charity officials, and the ominous authority of the clergy were reminded of their class as regularly as were their husbands, daughters, and sons in the factories. Children learned early the differences be-

1. Alice Kimball, "In the Silk," *The World Tomorrow*, 6 (January 1923), 51.

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tween their parents' attire, bearing, and patterns of speech and those of the gentlemen and ladies who seemed to move with such grace and ease through the corridors of power and the emporiums of abundance.

Those daily experiences and visible social distinctions taught many workers that although others might wield social influence as individuals, workers' only hope of securing what they wanted in life was through concerted action. Although the personal bondings of families, migrant groups, young wage-earning women, craftsmen, strikers, voters, and rioters defined people's loyalties in different and often conflicting ways, all attachments were rooted in the shared presumption that individualism was appropriate only for the prosperous and wellborn. Nevertheless, to organize concerted action and to fashion a sense of social goals shared by all workers required deliberate human agency. Class consciousness was more than the unmediated product of daily experience. It was also a project. Working-class activists, and some individuals from other social strata who had linked their aspirations to the workers' movement, persistently sought to foster a sense of unity and purposiveness among their fellow workers through the spoken and printed word, strikes, meetings, reading circles, military drill, dances, athletic and singing clubs, and cooperative stores and to promote through those activities widely shared analyses of society and of paths to the "emancipation of labor." Both "history from the bottom up" and the common fixation on great leaders have obscured the decisive role of those whom twentieth-century syndicalists have called the "militant minority": the men and women who endeavored to weld their workmates and neighbors into a self-aware and purposeful working class.

The development of that project during the six decades between the abolition of chattel slavery and the closing down of mass immigration from Europe and Asia is the subject of this book. Its three basic points of reference are the human relationships that wage labor generated at the workplace, the changing structures of economic and political power fashioned by the evolution of nineteenth-century competitive industrial capitalism into twentieth-century imperialism, and the diverse styles of thought and activity by which working-class activists sought to interpret and improve the society in which they lived. No attempt is made here to offer a comprehensive history of American labor struggles. Indeed, some of the most familiar and important episodes, such as the strikes of 1877, the Haymarket affair, the Pullman boycott, the 1902 anthracite strike, the garment workers' uprisings of 1909–11, and the steel strike of 1919, will receive only passing mention. They have had well-deserved attention lavished on them by other historians in the past and will, I hope, enjoy still

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Excerpt
More information

more research in the future. The narrative history found in these pages is devoted primarily to less well-known chapters in American workers' experience, such as the struggles of textile and garment workers before 1900 and of railroad, mining, and electrical workers after that time. If famous events like the 1892 Homestead strike and the 1914 Colorado miners' strike are treated in detail, it is to learn from them how the relationship between the state and conflict in the workplace was changing.

Even when this study carries us into the chambers of Washington's decision makers, however, its primary concern remains working life. The Belgian sociologist Henri de Man noted that the European workers he studied after World War I disagreed among themselves on many fundamental issues but spoke in remarkably similar ways about work. "As workers, the Christians felt exactly like the infidel socialists whose material conditions of life they shared," he wrote.[2] Both the shared sentiments and the fact that some workers were Christians and others infidel socialists, whereas still others disavowed both faiths, pose questions for historical analysis. As the self-educated coffin maker Ethelbert Stewart argued, history often witnessed a "transformation of [workers'] sentiments into customs" and of "trade interests into 'union principles,' " which "goes on so gradually before our eyes [when we study union] minute books that we can understand them better." Conversely, he added, the principles enshrined in the bylaws of early unions "have since become a part of the subconscious thought life of the 'union man,' and no longer printed or stated [in the twentieth century], because nobody in the union supposes it necessary to state basic principles."[3] Those customs, principles, and rules composed what Selig Perlman called "Labor's own 'home grown' ideology."[4]

The ethical norms governing workplace behavior, whether they were explicitly codified or covertly expressed at a given time or place, thus provide our first clues to the meaning of class for nineteenth-century workers. My analysis of those clues, however, has not led me to agree with Perlman's dictum: "It was from the intellectual that the anti-capitalist influences in modern society emanated."[5] On the contrary, as labor re-

2. Henri de Man, *Joy in Work,* translated by Edan and Cedar Paul (London, 1929), 64.
3. Ethelbert Stewart, *Documentary History of the Early Organization of Printers* (U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor, No. 61, Washington, D.C., 1905), 859.
4. Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1929), 6.
5. Ibid., 5.

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More information

former George E. McNeill wrote at the century's end, "The organization of laborers in Trades Unions recognizes the fact that mutualism is preferable to individualism."[6] That mutualism was the ethical seedbed for both the efforts of some workers to reform capitalism and the proposals of others to overthrow it. Even workers' reception and interpretation of social analyses and proposals that emanated from "intellectuals" can best be understood by reference to the workers' own codes of ethical behavior.

Nineteenth-century trade unions provide only a limited perspective on workers' codes and beliefs, however, because their adherents were usually from the ranks of craftsmen. In the two decades following the Civil War, trade-union activists endeavored simultaneously to organize members of their own crafts in defense of their wages and work rules and to act as the voice of the working class as a whole in a dialogue with bourgeois intellectuals and reformers concerning the future of America's republican institutions, a dialogue sometimes friendly but often acrimonious. Rarely could they succeed for long in the first task: Employers' resistance was all too often made effective by technological changes, periodic economic crises, and the arrival of new workers. And trade unionists' claims to be the voice of the producing classes were regularly mocked by politicians' firm grip on the votes of working-class constituencies and by angry protesting crowds of the working poor taking to the streets in defiance of the admonitions of labor organizations. Consequently, the work cultures of factory operatives and common laborers must be studied, as well as those of the skilled crafts, if the late-nineteenth-century working class is to be understood. The working lives of the operatives turn out to have been fashioned by their youth and by the socialization of the large numbers of women among those working youth. Examining their codes and solidarities carries us irresistibly into the neighborhoods. The working lives of laborers bore the stamp of their rural origins. Their exploration leads us into the relationship between the industrialized world and its rural periphery and into society's definitions of race and citizenship.

Craftsmen, operatives, and laborers alike were caught up, along with their employers, in a prolonged deflationary crisis between 1873 and 1897 that generated endemic conflict over wages and costs of production. Although workers' efforts to unify their own ranks during this conflict enjoyed only transitory success at best, their workplace, craft, and neigh-

6. George E. McNeill, "Philosophy of the Labor Movement," in Trades Council of New Haven, *Illustrated History of the Trades Council of New Haven* (New Haven, 1899), 212–13.

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More information

borhood solidarities presented formidable obstacles to business's goals and prompted industrialists to attempt reforms of both work relations and political life that might strengthen their hand. The increasingly militant assertiveness in many crafts made this quest for reform ever more urgent by the century's end, and the reorganization of business enterprise by the great merger movement made its realization possible.

At the dawn of the present century the practice of scientific management, which had long gestated in the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, gained widespread popularity among business executives and blended harmoniously with the ideals of "rationalization," "organization," "efficiency," and "science in the service of democracy" that dominated the public discourse of the time. The phrase "Drift and Mastery"[7] coined by the young Walter Lippmann captured the spirit in which business leaders who uprooted nineteenth-century working-class practices and codes celebrated their own reforms. But if employers' conflicts with craft practices had prepared them to welcome scientific management, their encounters with the rapidly expanding numbers of machine operatives led them to embrace personnel management as well. The role of the state also changed. Its task in industrial disputes during the earlier age of laissez-faire had been essentially one of repressing disorder and guaranteeing owners the use of their property without interference from protesting workers. In the new age of rationalized and consolidated enterprise, that repressive task remained important, but it was supplemented by the need to devise solutions. That undertaking politicized industrial conflict in the minds of all participants. It also prompted men of affairs to experiment with the National Civic Federation and then to marshal their forces behind the promise of the Rockefellers' Colorado Industrial Plan as formulas for industrial peace that would not inhibit the drive of business enterprises for efficiency and mastery within their own domain.

The labor movement assumed a new shape at the same time. With the abrupt quadrupling of union membership between 1897 and 1903, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) for the first time secured its place as the "House of Labor." During the previous decade and a half it had been, at best, one of several important centers of labor organizing. Most city trades assemblies had included union locals that bore no AFL affiliation, as well as those that were affiliated. Dual unionism had been not an offense against the labor movement but standard practice. Although many unions large and small continued to function independent of the AFL after 1900, and the Industrial Workers of the World openly chal-

7. Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York, 1914).

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Excerpt
More information

lenged its right to speak for America's workers, the federation not only dwarfed the independent organizations in size but also came to represent in the minds of most union activists the arbiter of what was or was not "bona fide" trade unionism. No government agency then determined what unions were to be certified, what bargaining units recognized, and what practices tolerated or banned. The federation claimed for itself authority to define legitimate union behavior, and it fiercely contested court injunctions and proposed legislation that threatened that claim.

Before the 1920s the house of labor had many mansions. Although most of its leading officers endorsed Samuel Gompers's vision of "pure and simple unionism," its ranks teemed with socialists, Catholic activists, single taxers, and philosophical anarchists. All of them agreed that their hopes of reshaping the American republic in accordance with the aspirations of its working class could best be achieved by working within labor's own, self-legitimizing federation. There were others who disagreed, believing the conservative hand of craft-union practice an intolerable impediment to the organizing of mass-production workers. After 1909, strikes and union membership grew rapidly both inside and outside the bounds of legitimacy defined by the AFL.

The tensions within and surrounding the federation were magnified by the outbreak of world war. Mobilization of the economy for war production locked the administrative structures of business and government tightly together, while full employment augmented workers' ability to win strikes and improve their terms of employment. Simultaneously, the temporary ascendancy of the Democratic Party in Washington had made it solicitous of working-class votes and spurred the formation of a labor bloc within the party. Workers of all types gained a new sense of power, and with it new (or newly articulated) desires. New styles of organization within the workplace, often energized by radicals, challenged the scientifically managed enterprise on its own turf and threatened the "bona fide" practices of craft unions at the same time. Between 1916 and 1922, when levels of strike participation soared far above those of any other period thus far in the country's history, workers' demands became too heady for the AFL or even the Socialist Party to contain and too menacing for business and the state to tolerate.

By the end of the depression of 1920–2, American workers' militancy had been deflated, trade unionism largely excluded from larger corporate enterprises, and the left wing of the workers' movement isolated from effective mass influence. Rationalization of business could then proceed with indispensable government support, and the very composition of the labor force could be subjected to federal management by the immigration-restriction laws. Although AFL membership had shrunk by a third be-

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Excerpt
More information

tween 1920 and 1923, the federation remained considerably larger than it had been before the war. The battles through which it had passed, however, had imposed a new orthodoxy on its counsels. Wartime demands for nationalization of industries, a six-hour day, government guarantees of union rights, a labor party, and strikes to demand freedom for political prisoners, never favored by Gompers, now disappeared from the federation's proceedings altogether. Dissidents faced expulsion. The federation program adopted in 1923 proclaimed a vision at once grandiose and timid, of workers gathered into unions as "the conscious organization of one of the most vital functional elements for enlightened participation in a democracy of industry," and as a bulwark against "state invasion of industrial life."[8] Despite the proud example of union-management cooperation on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, however, corporate executives remained convinced that they could organize the cooperation of all "functional elements" and fend off "state invasion" without the AFL's help.

Although American workers as a class had never become revolutionary during this half century of struggle, they had attempted to give their social and political life a very different character from what confronted them in the 1920s. Modern America had been created over its workers' protests, even though every step in its formation had been influenced by the activities, organizations, and proposals that had sprung from working-class life. Moreover, the decade after 1923 was a remarkable hiatus in the evolution of the labor movement itself. With strike activity falling to an all-time low, the many workers radicalized by the war years isolated and able to influence only occasional struggles, and workers' aspirations turning inward upon family and ethnic ties, corporate mastery of American life seemed secure. Those AFL officials who had once been vociferous reformers now believed they had to bide their time until a more favorable political climate would allow them to lead a union resurgence. As it turned out, when that time came, the petrified house of labor split in two.

The history of American workers has not been a story of progressive ascent from oppression to securely established rights, nor has it offered us a past moment of democratic promise that was irretrievably snuffed out by the consolidation of modern capitalism. Their movement has grown only sporadically and through fierce struggles, been interrupted time and again just when it seemed to reach flood tide, overwhelmed its foes only to see them revive in new and more formidable shapes, and been forced

8. "Industry's Manifest Duty," in American Federation of Labor, *History, Encyclopedia, Reference Book* (2 vols., Washington, D.C., 1919, 1924), II, 99.

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More information

to reassess what it thought it had already accomplished and begin again. The taproot of its resilience has been the workers' daily experience and the solidarities nurtured by that experience, which have at best encompassed a lush variety of beliefs, loyalties, and activities within a common commitment to democratic direction of the country's economic and political life. The becalmed and beleaguered trade unions of the 1920s had made their peace with a most undemocratic America, one whose economic underpinnings were soon to give way. When working-class activists sought a path out of the depression of the 1930s, they revoked that settlement, reopened controversy over what had been considered accomplished, and began to organize anew on the basis of the ways America's heterogeneous working people actually experienced industrial life.

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Excerpt
More information

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The manager's brain under the workman's cap

The regular Saturday-night meeting of Lodge No. 11 of the Rollers, Roughers, Catchers and Hookers Union stirred with excitement on June 27, 1874. There had been no work for its members since mid-April, when they had finished rolling a few thousand tons of iron rails for which they had contracted with their employer, the Columbus Rolling Mill Company, in January. Through two months of unemployment, between eleven and twenty-six of the members (who had once numbered fifty-two) had faithfully appeared at the weekly meetings and paid not only their dues but also a two-dollar weekly assessment to aid their brothers who were on strike against the giant Cambria Iron Works in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Only Daniel Childs had refused to pay, protesting, "I don't believe in any Society that is going to take half a man earns to keep it up." He had been expelled.[1]

That evening a committee of four members had brought before the meeting a report of utmost importance. They had met with superintendent Christopher Lewis of the rolling mill to discuss a contract for what was described in the lodge's minutes as "the new mode of working: namely Reheating." After sections of iron "muck bar" had been heated in gas-fired soaking pits under the watchful eyes of experienced heaters, they would be wheeled on buggies to the rolling mills on which these workers would fashion them into rails. Handling the bars with large tongs, as they were forced back and forth through the rolls a dozen or more times (with occasional trips back to the pits for further heating), would require full crews of thirteen men, and the superintendent had offered the men $1.13 per ton to do the work.

1. Lodge No. 11, Rollers, Roughers, Catchers and Hookers Union, Minute Book (July 14, 1873–April 28, 1876), January 26, April 18, May 30, June 21, June 27, 1874, in William Martin Papers, University of Pittsburgh. The quotation is from May 30, 1874. For strike assessments, see Rollers, Roughers, Catchers and Hookers Union of the United States, Grand Lodge Cash Book (1874), 57–81.

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More information

The minutes of the discussion that followed that report reveal a great deal about work relations in late-nineteenth-century heavy industry. The union members soon accepted the company's offer (that was no season to be choosy about possible work) and turned to the major task of dividing up the tonnage rate of $1.13 among themselves. Each worker stated his own price. When those prices were added up, they produced a total that was 3¾ cents higher than the company's tonnage offer. By careful revision of the rates for the buggymen, whose work was to transport the materials to and from the rolls, a complete scale was finally devised. The roller, who adjusted the space between the middle roll and those below and above it for each successive pass and also checked the product's size and shape as it developed, was to receive 19¼ cents per ton, and the rougher down, who helped him hurl the hot bars into the mill's front end, got 10 cents. The two men on the other side of the rolls, who caught the emerging bar and forced it back through the upper set of rolls, were the catcher, who got 9 cents, and the rougher up, who earned 13. The hookers, who helped move the bars to alignment before the proper grooves on the rolls, were to earn 8½ cents each. The runout hooker and the two runback buggymen, who moved bars about off the mill, got only 5 cents apiece, but more was to go to the gang buggyman and his helper, whose task it was to bring the heated blooms into position to be rolled. They were accorded 13¾ cents, to be divided between themselves.[2]

Thus, the team of men who performed the work also devised the payroll structure in open meeting, where everyone voted. It was far from egalitarian: The highest pay was almost four times the lowest. It is also evident that the lodge was kept informed about wage scales elsewhere in the industry by regular correspondence with other lodges, by transfer of new members from other localities, and by its practice of sending observers to conventions of rail manufacturers.[3] Thus, both the customs of the trade and market forces shaped the claim that each worker made for his own part of the tonnage rate. Moreover, the plant superintendent did intervene in the process, after the meeting at which the scale had been adopted. He persuaded a union committee to raise the rate for the general buggyman and his helper to 8 cents apiece, by taking ¼ cent from the rougher up and each of the hookers and ¾ cent from the rougher down. At a union meeting the next night, the hookers protested against the

2. Lodge No. 11 Minute Book, June 27, 1874. On the development and operation of three-high rolls, see Robert W. Hunt, "The Evolution of American Rolling Mills," *Transactions of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers*, 13 (1892), 47–51.
3. Lodge No. 11 Minute Book, September 6, 1873, November 15, 1873, January 13, 24, 26, 1874.

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