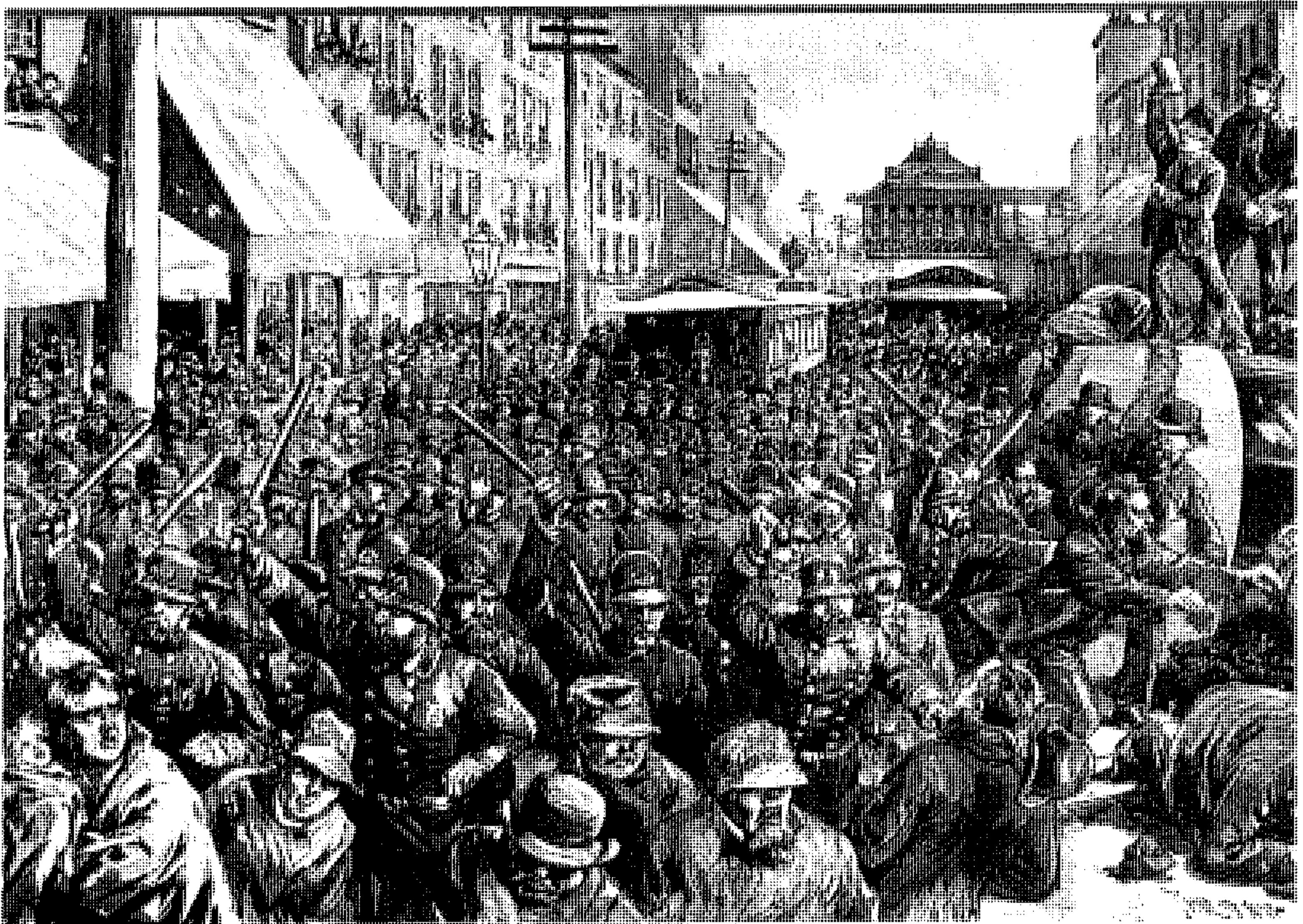
2

Community and Conflict: Working People Respond to Industrial Capitalism

1877–1893



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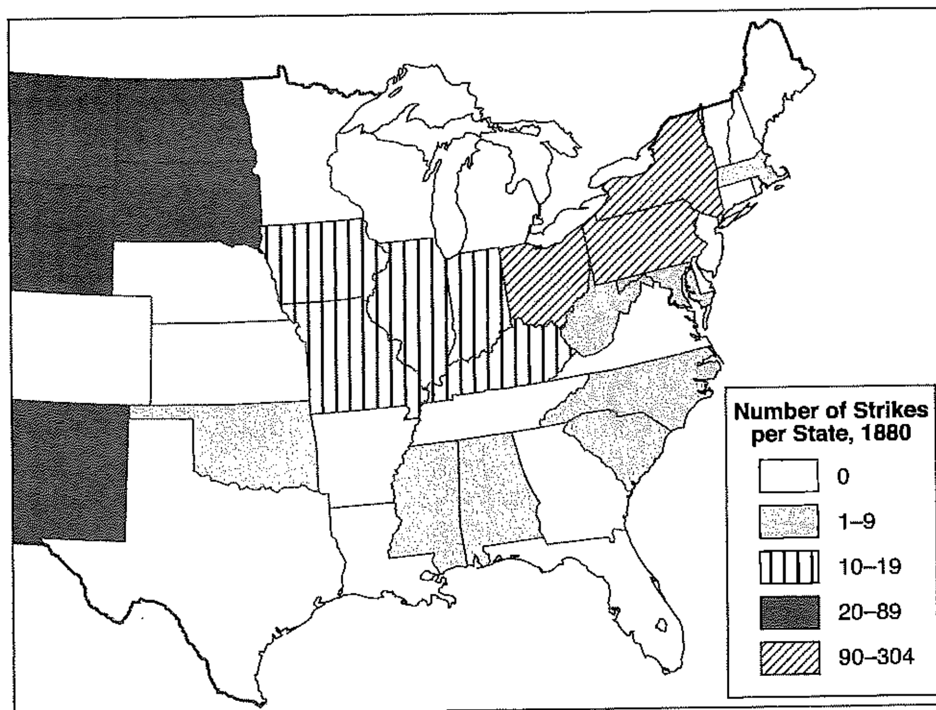
As industrial capitalism extended its reach into every corner of the nation's life, Americans differed on the merits of the emerging social order. Among those who deplored the industrial system's callous disregard for human beings was the poet Walt Whitman, who in 1871 had railed against the contemporary "hollowness of heart" and "depravity of the business classes." Humorists Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novel *The Gilded Age* (1874) satirized the politics and values of the post–Civil War boom years: "Get rich . . . dishonestly if we can, honestly if we must." Historians later adopted their title to describe the materialism and superficiality of the late nineteenth century. Gilded Age America was a society that was dividing along class lines and spoiling for a fight. Industrial capitalists built luxurious mansions and hired private armies to defend their wealth and power; they often enlisted local and national politicians in their cause. Many came to see all working people, in the words of *Century* magazine, as "the vicious and disorderly classes."

Working people, in response, shook their collective fist at the growing visibility of unbridled privilege, especially in the sixteen-year period framed by the railroad strikes of 1877 and the depression of 1893 (Map 2.1). Workers joined together in the Knights of Labor, the eight-hour movement, and the craft unions. They struck not only for higher wages, but also to express solidarity with their fellow workers. They formed independent political parties and debated—and sometimes adopted—radical political ideologies such as socialism and anarchism. And in trying to cope with the impact of industrial capitalism on their daily lives, they drew on shared cultural values—religious, political, ethnic, and craft traditions. In cities, working-class newspapers and debating societies published workers' grievances. Workers

New York Streetcar Workers Strike, March 1886
New York City police drive back striking streetcar workers and their sympathizers as a lone horsecar, operated by company personnel, attempts to make its usual journey along Grand Street. Thure de Thulstrup, *Harper's Weekly*, March 13, 1886 — American Social History Project.



MAP 2.1 A Striking Map: Work Stoppages in 1880
This map, which shows the number of strikes per state in 1880, indicates that strikes were most common in the industrialized regions of the Northeast and Midwest and were rare in the more agricultural South.

inhabited spaces where employers did not go: ethnic, working-class neighborhood stores, saloons, and churches. In rural areas, quilting bees, barn raisings, and outdoor protest meetings provided forums for radical critiques of capitalism's impact on farm families. Resistance—both moderate and militant—flourished in these vibrant labor-reform environments. But large capital would ultimately have the upper hand.

Working People and Their Communities

Working-class life was grounded more in group identity than in ideals of individual effort and initiative. Among native-born workers, collective values stemmed from an abiding belief in independence and liberty spawned by the American Revolution, from religious ideals of equality and justice inherent in evangelical Protestantism, and from community institutions. The cooperative values and traditions brought by immigrants arriving throughout the nineteenth century enriched this mix. Many veterans of fierce social conflicts in Europe remained fervent advocates of egalitarian principles after their arrival in the United States.

The social structures and institutions that underlay working-class life in the late nineteenth century nurtured these collective values. Working people particularly forged bonds of solidarity in their neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, women, who generally did not work outside the home after marriage, were crucial to developing these neighborhood ties. Churches, especially the rural African American churches and the urban immigrant

Catholic parishes, also fostered local community. But religion could be a source of conflict, as when white Protestant moral reformers sought to reshape the manners and morals of working people. Those reformers viewed another crucial working-class institution—the saloon—with particular horror and launched temperance crusades to close it.

Neighborhood Cultures Immigrants relied on collective traditions and identities to help ease their entry into urban-industrial America. Neighborhoods with names such as German Town, Chinatown, and Little Sweden sprang up across the country, each with its own churches, schools, saloons, and newspapers. Ethnic institutions—foreign-language newspapers, athletic and cultural associations, financial institutions, neighborhood militias, and family-oriented beer halls—helped to soften the worst effects of individual isolation in a new land.

African American neighborhoods, like those of white workers, nurtured solidarity, protest, and resistance. In Washington, Atlanta, and other southern cities, a segregated black culture of mutual aid and self-help eased the afflictions of daily life in a racist society. African Americans fared better—within the severe limitations placed on every aspect of their lives—in large cities, where they could at least secure menial jobs and some small measure of personal freedom.

Working people's neighborhoods nourished collectivity in part because their homes lacked space for socializing. Developers of housing near factories squeezed cheap tenements and wood-frame houses tightly together. In dark apartments, families and boarders shared beds and slept on couches, chairs, and floors. Residents lacked privacy and sought escape on the city streets. Crowds celebrated holidays, neighbors exchanged news and gossip, and activists debated politics, while peddlers sold food and clothing. Mothers socialized on front steps and porches, and children played in streets and alleys.

Immigrant neighborhoods developed an abundant cultural and institutional life. As newcomers arrived, they sought out relatives or people from their villages in the old country. They found housing through the people they worked with and jobs through the people they lived with. Boarding with families from their homelands, they could eat familiar foods, speak their own languages, and discuss their working conditions free from surveillance. Reformers looked askance at the crowding, but revenue from boarders was an essential part of the family economy. An immigrant woman who cooked for four boarders later recalled "that everybody used to do it [at] that time," since "some of the people that came from the other side didn't have no place to stay."

Neighborhood grocery stores, butcher shops, boardinghouses, churches, and saloons sprang up to meet the needs and tastes of particular

"The Workingman's Club": The Saloon as a Social Institution

This description, taken from an article titled "The Saloon in Chicago," conveys a sense of how the late-nineteenth-century saloon met a range of urban workers' social, economic, and cultural needs. The writer, a sociologist, calls the saloon "the workingman's club," comparing it to such institutions as the eating and political clubs that catered to the urban middle and upper classes.

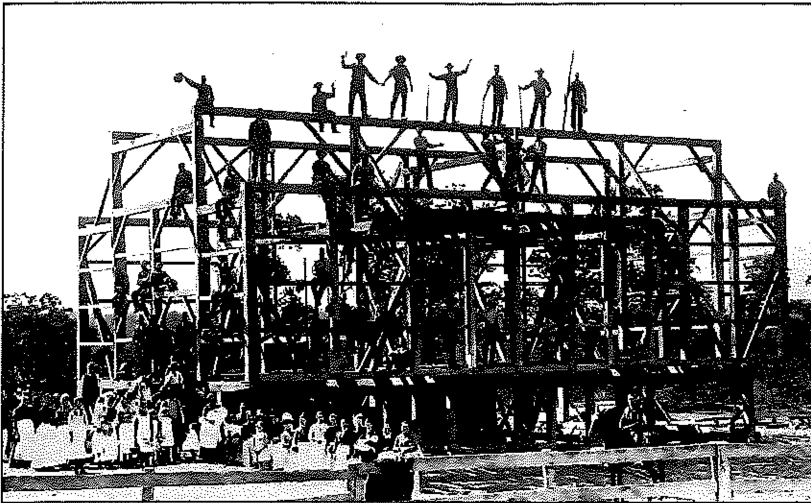
The term "club" applies; for, though unorganized, each saloon has about the same constituency night after night. Its character is determined by the character of the men who, having something in common, make the saloon their rendezvous. . . . The "club-room" is furnished with tables, usually polished and cleaned, with from two to six chairs at each table. As you step in, you find a few men standing at the bar, a few drinking, and farther back men are seated about the tables, reading, playing cards, eating, and discussing, over a glass of beer, subjects varying from the political and sociological problems of the day to the sporting news and the lighter chat of the immediate neighborhood. . . . That general atmosphere of freedom, that spirit of democracy, which men crave, is here realized; that men seek it and that the saloon tries to cultivate it is blazoned forth in such titles as "The Freedom," "The Social," "The Club," etc. Here men "shake out their hearts together." . . .

In many of these discussions, to which I have listened and in which I have joined, there has been revealed a deeper insight into the real causes of present evils than is often manifested from lecture platforms. . . . This is the workingman's school. . . . Here the masses receive their lessons in civil government, learning less of our ideals, but more of the practical workings than the public schools teach. It is the most cosmopolitan institution in the most cosmopolitan of cities . . . Men of all nationalities meet and mingle. . . . It does much to assimilate the heterogeneous crowds that are constantly pouring into our city from foreign shores. But here, too, they learn their lessons in corruption and vice. It is their school for good and evil.

Royal Melendy, "The Saloon in Chicago," *American Journal of Sociology* (November 1900).

ethnic groups, serving as centers of information and communication, connecting neighborhoods with the outside world. In the 1880s, many Czech immigrants to Omaha settled in what became known as "Bohemian Town" or "Praha" (Prague), which was the home to St. Wenceslaus Church, Swoboda's Bakery, Cermak's Pharmacy, and the Bohemian Benevolent Association. But such ethnic labels sometimes hid the mixed and rapid changing nature of immigrant working-class neighborhoods.

In working-class neighborhoods in cities such as Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, immigrants supported ethnic fraternal organizations—the Sons of Italy, the Polish Union, and the Jewish Landsmanschaft organi-



A Barn Raising
Survival in rural America often relied on community support. Jacob Roher and his neighbors took a break from their construction efforts on his farm near Massillon, Ohio, in 1888 to pose for a photographer.
Theodore Teeple, 1888 — Massillon Museum, Massillon, Ohio.

zations — to provide mutual assistance and a familiar cultural milieu. They published newspapers and magazines in dozens of languages, filled with news from the old country and advice to newcomers. Immigrants also created cultural activities, sports teams, and clubs. These institutions nourished a sense of sociability and camaraderie and helped sick, injured, or unemployed community residents.

Networks based on extended families and Old World village ties met many of the immediate needs of immigrant workers, but some problems demanded a broader sense of identity. Antonio Margano, an Italian Protestant engaged in missionary work for his church, complained that New York Italians were "divided into almost as many groups as there are sections of Italy represented" and that "while a man may be known as Italian, he is far better known as a Napoletano, Calabrese, Veneziano, Abruzzese, or Siciliano." But he also observed that the rise of institutions such as Columbus Hospital, the Italian Benevolent Institute, and the Italian Chamber of Commerce pointed to the "development of a larger spirit of co-operation among Italians as a whole." "Italians" and "Germans" were in this sense being invented in America during the same decades when they were created in Europe through political unification.

Immigrant entrepreneurs turned their native languages and knowledge of Old World preferences into business assets. Many acted as intermediaries for individuals dealing with the American legal and financial systems, explaining, translating, and writing letters for a fee. Working-class neighborhoods in cities and small towns provided ready customers for groceries, saloons, barbershops, and variety stores. Although most of the men and women who ran such businesses managed to establish only small, struggling enterprises, the lure of being one's own boss attracted the hopeful.

Like industrial tycoons, some small businesspeople believed that the individual pursuit of wealth was the highest realization of American freedoms. But even the most ambitious local politicians and shopkeepers found that to succeed, they had to collaborate with their families, workmates, and other members of their ethnic and religious groups. Many business owners and professionals who relied on working-class patrons for their livelihoods supported working people's demands and struggles. Local shopkeepers helped strikers by providing food and other necessities on credit.

Similarly, the proprietors of general stores at rural crossroads saw many a farm community through a bad harvest. And although rural

"neighborhoods" were not as densely populated as urban ones, they too fostered collective problem solving and socializing. During the 1870s, for example, locusts and drought prompted Kansas women to mount a relief campaign for "families in the country whose only safety from starvation lies in the charity of the people."

The life of William Turner, a skilled ironmolder who in 1880 lived in Troy, New York, with his wife and eight children, illustrates the nature of individual success within the extended family networks and the ethnic, religious, and labor organizations of the late-nineteenth-century neighborhood. Turner emigrated from Ireland in 1850. His father worked as an unskilled laborer at the Albany Iron Works, and by 1860, William and two of his brothers had jobs there as well. The Turners' life revolved around work in the mill—six twelve-hour days per week—and time with the family. William soon became a skilled ironworker. When he married, he found a home in the same row of brick houses where his parents lived.

Turner's rise to the more secure and comfortable position of a skilled worker was the modest success story experienced by millions of Americans—not the "rags to riches" of mythology. Men like Turner dreamed not of riches, but of making a decent life for their families. They found security and solidarity in their ethnic communities, performing the rituals and observing the commandments of their churches and fulfilling their obligations to neighbors and fellow workers.

Working Women at Home Women were central to these working-class communities. Unlike factory workers, women working at home could vary their tasks, laying aside their sewing to stir the soup or comfort a crying baby. For these women, labor was intertwined with family-centered entertainment and neighborhood socializing. They often did certain tasks together while chatting about community events, politics, friends and relations, recipes, and housework techniques. But even running modest households required arduous manual labor and considerable time (Figure 2.1).

More isolated rural women lacked the connections to church, kin, and friends that had sustained them in the more densely populated regions from which they had come, and many women complained of intense loneliness. "As soon as the storms let up, the men could get away from the isolation," wrote Mari Sandoz,

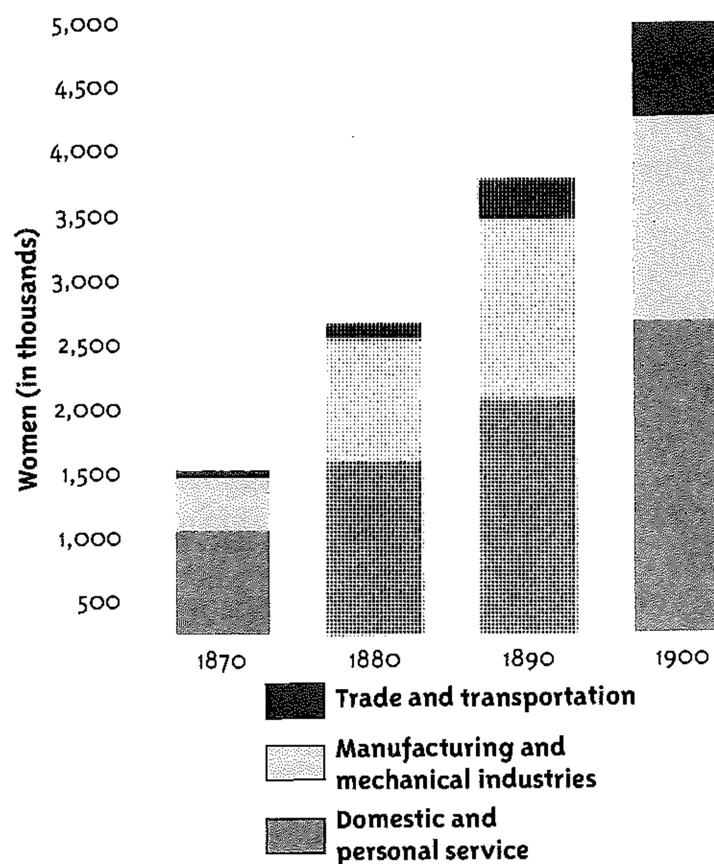


FIGURE 2.1 Out of the Household and into the Household: Women and Work, 1870–1900
Between 1870 and 1900, the number of women in the paid labor force more than tripled, but a majority of women still found employment in the domestic sphere.

"Harmony in the Home, in More Ways Than One"
Women bought sewing machines to make clothes for their families but also to provide themselves with incomes. In families such as the Norwegian American Gjevre household in Fairdale, North Dakota, sewing also was a social activity. Companionship could be found at gatherings such as quilting bees or even in the more intimate space of a small parlor.
Fred Hulstrand History in Pictures Collection, NDIRS-NDSU, Fargo, North Dakota.

the daughter of a Nebraska homesteader. "But not their women. They had only the wind and the cold and the problems of clothing, shelter, food, and fuel." But rural women's work could have a cooperative dimension. Women helped each other to make quilts, as men shared work to get the harvest in and build houses or barns. Groups of women cooked for the parties associated with both of these kinds of cooperative labor, which featured food, music, and dancing after the work was done.

Before the 1890s, most households were equipped with the same technology that had been used for centuries, with two important exceptions: sewing machines and cast-iron stoves. Sewing machines were quite expensive, but marketed on the installment plan, they became a fixture in both middle-class and poorer households. In many households, men's clothing was purchased, but most women had to produce much of their own clothing and all of their children's, in addition to family linens.

Cast-iron stoves had become common among the middle class in 1870 and spread to people of all classes by 1890. Stoves heated rooms more evenly than did old-fashioned fireplaces. They allowed finer adjustments in cooking temperatures, and cooks no longer had to bend down by open flames to move pots on the hearth. Nevertheless, the stoves were heated by coal and wood, so most women still had to haul fuel and build fires for all of their cooking and heating. Other regular household tasks included hauling pails of water from outside wells and from pumps connected to city water

UNION AGAINST UNION.
THE UNION MAN.—Who Ever Put Them Up to that Piece of Impudence!

Union Against Union

A wry comment on the general refusal of working-class men and the trade union movement to consider women's maintenance of the household as work. J. S. Pughe, *Puck*, 1900 — Scott Molloy Labor Archives.

systems, lugging tubs of hot water from the stove for laundry and dishes, and carrying dirty water and bodily wastes back outside.

In some homes, domestic servants did these tasks for pay; this work was the largest source of paid employment for women in the late nineteenth century. In northern cities, most domestic servants were first-generation Irish. Theirs was a life of drudgery and isolation; it was hard, one Irish maid said, "to give up your whole life to somebody else's orders." In the South, domestics were African American women, who rarely had other options and worked for extremely low wages. But domestic servants were not common in workers' homes; most working people hired household help only in emergencies.

Many women earned money by adding to their household workloads—caring for boarders or taking in laundry or sewing. In western mining towns, women rented or bought large houses and took in workingmen who needed lodgings. One Nevada widow, Mary Mathews, labored until one o'clock every morning to support herself and her small child during the 1870s, running a school, sewing, and taking in laundry. Eventually, she bought a boarding house, where she washed clothes for twenty-six boarders. Many African American married women earned money taking in laundry, which offered considerably more independence than domestic service in white people's houses. These workers sometimes fought to maintain their autonomy, which was especially precious to people who had memories of slavery.

Religion and Community Of the many institutions that supported community life in working people's neighborhoods, churches were the most important. Most Americans before the Civil War had been Protestants, but many new immigrants were Catholic and Jewish. Still, in 1890, Protestant denominations claimed more than six of every ten church members. All across the country, rural Protestant churches continued to flourish; countless small, often poor, churches sustained and were sustained by the vast majority of the nation's farmers, black and white.

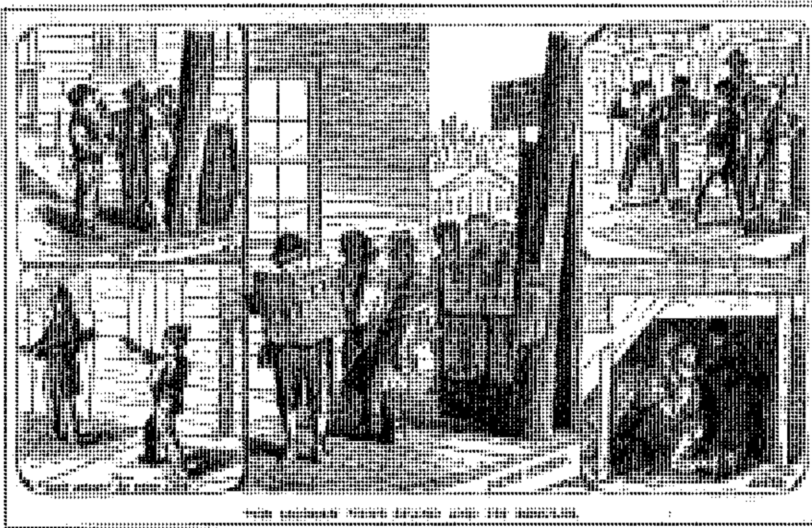
Churches figured centrally in rural African American culture. In Edgefield County, South Carolina, an area that was renowned for lynchings, black tenant farmers and sharecroppers joined some forty small churches established by Alexander Bettis, a leader who urged African Americans to organize their own institutions. The churches engendered Masonic lodges, benevolent societies, burial organizations, and schools, as well as fairs and other social gatherings. This cultural foundation sustained black Americans in "Bloody Edgefield." Many white southerners viewed the networks of black churches and organizations as a threat. "The meanest negroes in the country are those who are members of the churches," declared a writer in the *North Georgia Citizen* in 1879, "and, as a general thing, the more devout and officious they are, the more closely they need watching."

Churches also created community in mining camps and cattle towns. Kansans exaggerated when they proclaimed in the 1870s that there was "no Sunday west of Junction City and no God west of Salina." Protestants sent missionaries west to preach against Mormons, Catholics, and moral decay. Western towns built schools first, but these often served as places of worship on Sunday, uniting different Protestant sects. Josiah Strong, a well-known reformer who began as a young minister in Wyoming, observed that western church meetings brought strangers together as Christians. His church spawned a library, a park, and voluntary organizations that battled liquor and prostitution.

In eastern cities, middle- and upper-class Protestants had moved to the suburbs and abandoned many downtown churches in neighborhoods that were now filled with immigrants. As a result, white Protestant churches lost touch with urban working people and became more oriented toward the well-to-do. Wealthy congregations produced nationally renowned ministers, such as Brooklyn's Henry Ward Beecher, one of the best-known and most influential of these "princes of the pulpit." Beecher's wit and eloquence made him a popular speaker, despite much publicity about his alleged extramarital affairs. Although he had supported the antislavery movement, he viewed the rich with sympathy and the poor with hostility. "No man in this land suffers from poverty unless it be more than his fault—unless it be his sin," Beecher proclaimed.

Saving Souls and Selling Soap Henry Ward Beecher did not hesitate to use his national fame as a Presbyterian minister in the cause of commerce, as evidenced by his testimonial for Pears' Soap in an 1883 advertisement. "If cleanliness is next to Godliness," Beecher declared in this ad, "soap must be considered as a means of Grace." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, November 10, 1883 — American Social History Project.

Nevertheless, a focus on "sin" could lead to broader concerns. Many women started out in church-based antidrink organizations such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and then began to take a broader view of the need for social reform. And the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Salvation Army did try to bring Protestantism to urban working people. The Salvation Army, an evangelical organization run along military lines, held meetings in the worst slums, even in saloons, and offered "degenerate souls" food, shelter, and low-wage work. The YMCA established gymnasiums, lecture halls, and reading rooms in cities to provide a "wholesome" atmosphere where men could exercise and socialize without the drinking and gambling that prevailed at pool halls, bowling alleys, and saloons. Bible study classes were central to the program. But the predominantly Catholic urban working class did not always warmly receive



The Modern News Stand and Its Results

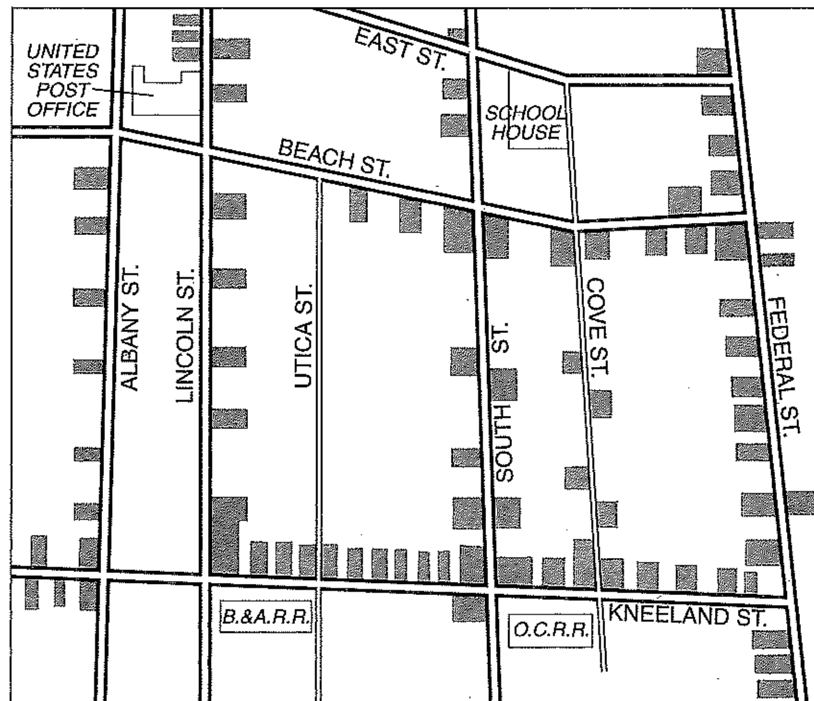
The frontispiece of *Traps for the Young*, an influential 1883 tract by Anthony Comstock, illustrates the threat purportedly posed by "debased" commercial magazines. "They open the way for grossest evils," Comstock wrote. "Foul thoughts are the precursors of foul actions." [A. B. Davis], Anthony Comstock, *Traps for the Young* (1883) — American Social History Project.

missionary work of the Protestant YMCA and Salvation Army.

The YMCA had close ties to the social purity movement, which rejected overt sexual expression and practice. In 1873, Anthony Comstock, a dry goods salesman, YMCA member, and founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, won passage of an antiobscenity statute (the so-called Comstock Act), which forbade the mailing of obscene, lewd, lascivious, and indecent writing or advertisements as well as contraceptive devices. As an unpaid postal inspector, Comstock personally supervised forty-seven arrests and the destruction of more than twenty-nine thousand photos, leaflets, songs, and contraceptives in 1875 alone. The literature targeted by the law included material on women's reproductive health and descriptions of methods of contraception. Comstock's crusade criminalized social and sexual behavior that deviated from an idealized norm of sobriety, heterosexual monogamy, and piety.

The predominantly urban and working-class Catholic Church took much less interest in the social purity movement than did its Protestant counterparts. It had expanded with the influx of poor Irish and German immigrants in the decades before the Civil War and continued to gain strength as Italians and Poles entered the country after 1880. Parochial schools provided Catholics with educational opportunities that extended through college, and large city parishes offered programs to meet their spiritual, recreational, and charitable needs. The church's hierarchy remained extremely conservative on social issues, as was illustrated by the policy of excommunicating members who were active in socialist organizations. But at the local parish level, priests defended the aspirations of their working-class parishioners.

The Saloon and Its Enemies The saloon was another central institution of working-class culture; one writer called it "the one democratic club in American life." Drinking on the job, prevalent early in the nineteenth century, had generally disappeared by the 1870s. With a shorter workday—usually ten hours for skilled workers—men drank during leisure hours, in popular taverns that were usually located across the street from a factory or down the road from a mine. "Watch the 'dinner pail' brigade," a Worcester, Massachusetts, observer noted in 1891, "and see how many men and boys drop into the saloons along the north end of Main Street" (Map 2.2).



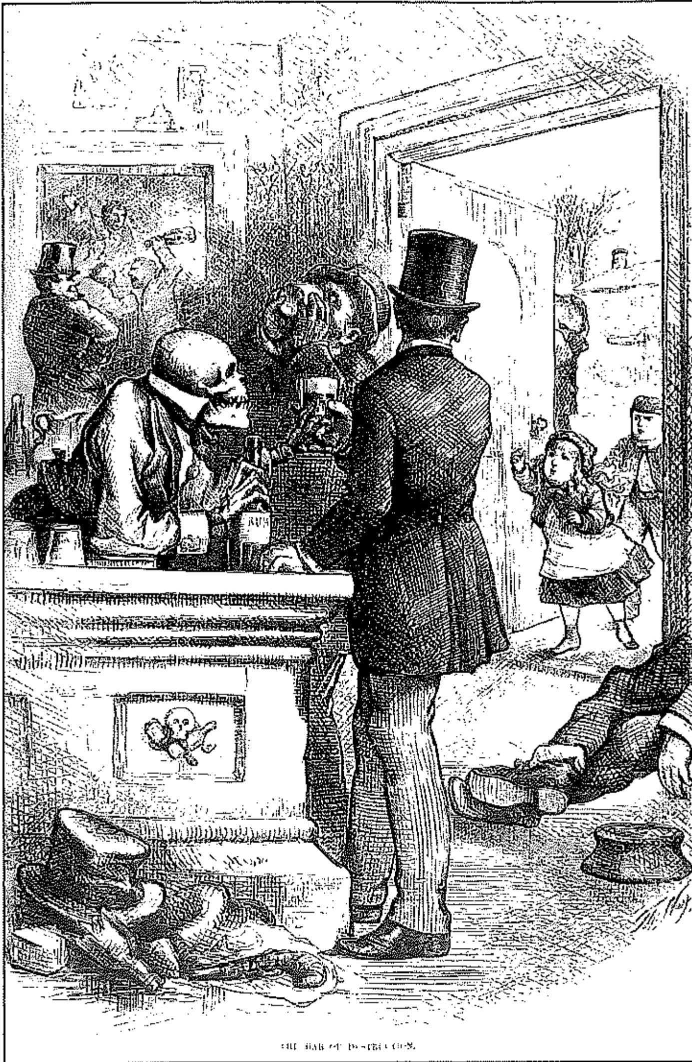
MAP 2.2 A City of Saloons: Boston Bars in 1884

The saloon was ubiquitous in the late-nineteenth-century city In the area around Boston's Albany and Old Colony railroad terminals, travelers could find 175 different saloons — 80 of them within just 650 feet of the stations. "Every traveler," complained a temperance advocate, "passes through a gauntlet of rum."

Saloons filled tangible needs. Saloon owners cashed workers' checks and lent them money. The beer they served was considered full of nutrients and healthier than the water in working-class neighborhoods, which was drawn from wells and pumps near overused outhouses. Many workingmen ate their meals at saloons. "It is cheaper to live at the barroom than at the poor beaneries," an unemployed Boston man reported in 1889. A visitor to a

Morning Customers

A Chicago saloon, around 1890. Chicago Historical Society.



Father, Come Home!

Temperance tracts emphasized the destructive effects of liquor consumption on familial relationships, framing messages in sentimental accounts of little children appealing to drunken parents to forsake the saloon and come home. This Thomas Nast cartoon, *The Bar of Destruction,* repeated motifs that dated back to Timothy Shay Arthur's antebellum best-seller, *Ten Nights in a Bar-room.* *Harper's Weekly,* March 21, 1874 — American Social History Project.

New Orleans saloon described "a large table . . . [with] trays of cut bread, bowls of butter, salads, and sauces" and "another table . . . [with] a large tureen of soup, a platter of roast beef, a large dish of rice or baked beans."

At the saloon, workingmen could experience mutuality and collectivity, symbolized by "treating" — buying rounds of drinks. They could read newspapers, pick up job leads, enjoy good fellowship, and escape from overcrowded houses and tenements. Popular entertainments — illegal boxing matches, cockfights, and gambling — enlivened the atmosphere. Trade unions and ethnic organizations that lacked their own facilities met in saloons, and local politicians set up unofficial headquarters at the bar, dispensing favors and buying drinks for "the boys." Many saloonkeepers entered local politics; eleven of twenty-four New York City Aldermen ran saloons in 1890.

Except for German family establishments that served beer, most saloons catered only to men. Women who drank generally did so at home. In some places, police regulations aimed at curbing prostitution forbade women from entering barrooms. Even when not legally excluded, women who considered themselves respectable did not go to saloons, so they were effectively prohibited from joining organizations that met there.

Many wealthy people — who did their own drinking at private clubs, at expensive hotels, and at home — crusaded to close saloons. Some of the hardest-fought political battles of the nineteenth century involved efforts to limit drinking. Factory owners led campaigns against licensing individual establishments in an effort to keep their workers sober. They contended that temperance increased efficiency: "the men earn better wages, lose less time, do better work . . . while the relations between employers and workmen are most harmonious." Other temperance crusaders were motivated by religious convictions, a concern about the political threat posed by the independent saloon culture, a distaste for or fear of the (often Catholic) immigrants who gathered at saloons, or a sincere conviction that drinking was the source of working-class poverty.

Indeed, alcohol and alcoholism could create real problems in working-class families. Therefore, labor reformers, too, decried the debilitating

"I Had No Idea of the Inward Appearance of a Saloon . . . ": Frances Willard on Temperance Tactics

Frances Willard was an important leader of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and its campaign against saloons. She was head of the union's Chicago chapter and became prominent later in the woman suffrage movement. Willard linked her fight against liquor with her desire to protect the home and family against the ravages of the new industrial order. In this selection from her autobiography, Willard describes the WCTU's most widely known tactic: the praying-in-saloons crusade, in this instance in Pittsburgh in 1873.

We paused in front of the saloon that I have mentioned. The ladies ranged themselves along the curbstone, for they had been forbidden in anywise to incommode the passers-by, being dealt with much more strictly than a drunken man or a heap of dry-goods boxes would be.

. . . The leader had already asked the saloon-keeper if we might enter, and he had declined, else the prayer-meeting would have occurred inside his door. A sorrowful old lady whose only son had gone to ruin through that very death-trap, knelt on the cold, moist pavement and offered a broken-hearted prayer, while all our heads were bowed. At a signal we moved on and the next saloon-keeper permitted us to enter. I had no more idea of the inward appearance of a saloon than if there had been no such place on earth. I knew nothing of its high, heavily corniced bar, its barrels with the ends all pointed towards the looker-on, each barrel being furnished with a faucet; its shelves glittering with decanters and cut glass, its floors thickly strewn with saw-dust, and here and there a round table with chairs—nor of its abundant fumes, sickening to healthful nostrils.

The tall, stately lady who led us, placed her Bible on the bar and read a psalm. . . . Then we sang "Rock of Ages" as I thought I had never heard it sung before, with a tender confidence to the height of which one does not rise in the easy-going, regulation prayer-meeting, and then one of the older women whispered to me softly that the leader wished to know if I would pray. It was strange, perhaps, but I felt not the least reluctance, and kneeling on that saw-dust floor, with a group of earnest hearts around me, and behind them, filling every corner and extending out into the street, a crowd of unwashed, unkempt, hard-looking drinking men, I was conscious that perhaps never in my life, save beside my sister Mary's dying bed had I prayed as truly as I did then. This was my Crusade baptism. The next day I went on to the West and within a week had been made president of the Chicago W. C. T. U.

Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (Chicago: H. J. Smith & Co., 1889), 339–341.

consequences of drink and argued that workers who criticized wage dependency should also shun alcohol dependency. Some unions actively promoted temperance, although it often seemed a losing cause. One prominent labor leader implored workers to "throw strong drink aside as you would an ounce of liquid hell."

Women temperance leaders organized marches on saloons to pray, sing hymns, implore drinkers to pledge abstinence, and shame proprietors. One such group of women, successful in ending the local liquor trade in an Ohio county, formed the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in 1874. Politicizing farm women and women from "respectable" Protestant working-class families, the WCTU recognized the connection between alcoholism and social issues. In the 1890s, it argued that poverty created drinking problems, reversing an earlier stand that excessive drinking caused poverty. The WCTU worked to improve the conditions of the working class, sought power for women inside the home, and endorsed woman suffrage in 1882, decades before any other national group. Its motto, "Do Everything," encouraged women activists to embrace a wide range of social legislation. The WCTU eventually became the largest American women's organization ever.

The Workingman's Hour

As the social and economic gulf separating wage earners and their employers widened, a labor movement of astonishing breadth emerged in the 1880s. Recognizing common interests, workers began to unionize to contest poor working conditions and assert their rights. Labor organization was rooted in the local neighborhoods, institutions, churches, and ethnic societies that structured everyday life for working people.

Despite this pervasive localism, one national labor organization—the Knights of Labor—arose in the 1880s to powerfully challenge the national corporations that increasingly held sway in late-nineteenth-century America. The Knights mobilized unprecedented numbers and won some stunning victories. They fed into a more general "great uprising of labor," which led into nationwide strikes—many of them successful—for shorter workdays. Ultimately, however, an employer counteroffensive that began in the aftermath of the Haymarket bombing of 1886 and had the support of the coercive power of the state halted this onward march of labor by the end of the 1880s.

The Labor Community With the exception of the Knights of Labor, most unions were local and confined to an individual trade. Cincinnati, an important manufacturing center, boasted thirty-five separate unions in the early 1880s. Here, as elsewhere, most union members were skilled craftsmen in the building trades, foundries, and small consumer-goods industries.

Craft unionists created strong central labor bodies in cities all across the country, from Boston to Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, and San Francisco. In 1882, New York City's Central Labor Union (CLU) brought together a dozen small unions. Within a few years, it functioned as an effective "parliament of labor" for more than two hundred labor organizations. As

one printer put it, the CLU constituted an effort to replace the "little-minded, narrow-minded view of the interests of a single occupation" with that of "the general interests of all bodies of wage workers."

Traditional ideas about gender roles and masculinity infused craft unionism. "The craftsmen's ethical code," notes one labor historian, "demanded a 'manly' bearing toward the boss," and "few words enjoyed more popularity in the nineteenth century than this honorific, with all its connotations of dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism, and patriarchal male supremacy." Women were barred from most skilled occupations, but unions were hostile even to the women who customarily worked alongside men, as in the cigar industry. Focusing narrowly on "bread and butter" wage goals, craft unions fought for the "family wage" to enable men to support their families "in a manner consistent with their responsibilities as husbands, fathers, men, and citizens." Though the demand for a family wage dignified male workers' struggles at the expense of women's, the two were not entirely separable; higher wages paid to fathers and husbands would benefit most working women.

Two Homes

These illustrations in the *Boston Labor Leader* compared the homes of a union workman and a scab workman. In this view, strikebreaking was a logical outgrowth of the general moral and physical degradation of the one-room scab household. The "superiority" of the trade unionist was portrayed in the modest but solidly domestic atmosphere of the family's parlor. *Boston Labor Leader*, October 6, 1894 — State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Although craft unions evinced little interest in women workers, some women organized on their own. During the summer of 1881, African American washerwomen in Atlanta organized a two-week strike, demanding higher fees and recruiting 3,000 supporters by door-to-door canvassing and nightly neighborhood meetings throughout the city. This protest was unusual but not unique. Following the 1877 railroad strike, household workers in Galveston, Texas, had walked off their jobs, and other southern domestics struck from time to time, often led by outspoken washerwomen. More often, however, household workers and independent washerwomen used covert tactics — such as quitting without notice — to resist racism and oppression.

Boycott Fever

A cartoon in the weekly *Life* satirized the growth of boycotts. "Whereas," reads one boy, representing a committee of disgruntled candy-cart customers, "we find we don't git red color enough in our strawberry cream, nor enough yaller in our wanilla, . . . to say nothin' o' the small measure of peanuts we gits for a cent; therefore, be it resolved . . . that all the stands in the city is boycotted until these things is righted." *Life*, May 27, 1887 — Scott Molloy Labor Archives.

The labor movement offered workers good fellowship and activities that reinforced a working-class consciousness. Unions and their citywide central organizations sponsored social activities: parades, balls, and picnics. More broadly, labor organizations were part of an alternative culture that belonged unmistakably to the producing classes. Many cities had labor reading rooms; Atlanta's Union Hall and Library Association drew 800 people a week during the mid-1880s to read its collection of over 350 newspapers. In Detroit, the labor movement supported a range of daily activities. Workers gathered to read prolabor newspapers in English and German; to argue politics; and to participate in theater groups, singing societies, dances, and educational events. Some joined the Detroit Rifles, a militia that drilled and practiced target shooting on the outskirts of town under cover of darkness. "Every union ought to have its company of sharpshooters," a Detroit worker wrote in the *Labor Leaf*. He urged his compatriots to pick up the gun and "learn to preserve your rights in the same way your forefathers did."

Besides daily fellowship, the labor community offered a spiritual experience of solidarity, a new form of evangelism based on old ideals: the brotherhood of man, divine retribution against injustice, and indignation at human suffering. The labor movement adapted these religious ideals and used spiritual language to reflect and interpret the growing class division. Labor songs drew on hymns, changing the words but not their zealous spirit. Unions, the *United Mine Workers' Journal* suggested, had stepped into the space left when the conservative churches abdicated their true mission. "Jesus Christ is with us outside the church," one worker explained, "and we shall prevail with God."

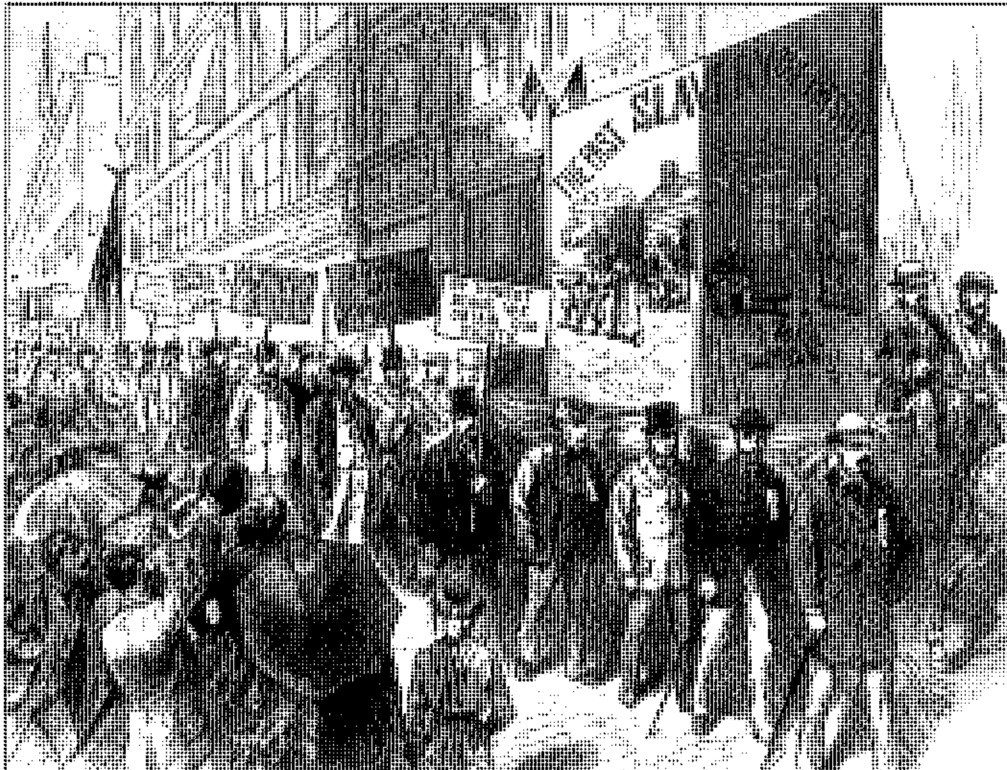
Righteous belief and a context of community provided the foundation for a wave of boycotts in the mid-1880s. Boycotts, an effort to win concessions from an employer by persuading other workers to stop patronizing the employer's business, proved especially effective in trades serving urban working-class consumers. One business journal reported more than two hundred boycotts in 1884 and 1885 — against newspapers, street railways, and manufacturers of cigars, hats, carpets, clothing, shoes, and brooms. The movement hit its peak in 1886, when countless campaigns touched the South, Far West, Midwest, and eastern seaboard. Denouncing boycotts as "un-American and anti-American," employers turned to the courts. In the

spring of 1886, New York courts prohibited boycotts as a form of criminal conspiracy, handing down indictments against more than 100 tailors, bakers, musicians, and waiters. In the most widely publicized of the subsequent trials, five workers who had organized a boycott against Theiss' Music Hall received long prison terms.

"Union for All": The Knights of Labor The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, a group founded by nine Philadelphia tailors in 1869, stood at the center of labor activity in the 1880s. In response to employers' use of firings and blacklists to suppress unions, the Knights adopted rigid secrecy for members. Its first leader, Uriah Stephens, had studied for the ministry before apprenticing as a tailor. A man of broad moral vision, he called for an organization that would unite all workers, regardless of race, nationality, occupation, or skill level.

In 1879, the Knights of Labor chose Terence V. Powderly as their "Grand Master Workman." An Irish Catholic machinist and mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, Powderly led the Knights for fifteen years. The Order's programs reflected not only Powderly's beliefs in temperance, education, and land reform, but also his conviction that the wage system should be abolished. Under his leadership, the Knights gradually put aside their secrecy, which had hampered their ability to grow, and membership soared.

Under Powderly, the Knights became a stunningly influential national movement composed of hundreds of different local assemblies. Its diversity makes it difficult to generalize about its approaches and policies.



The Great Labor Parade of September 1st

A placard in an 1884 Labor Day march presented the struggle over inequality in the nineteenth century. "Wage-slavery" emerged as an oppressive institution to take the place of racial slavery, defeated in the Civil War. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 13, 1884 — American Social History Project.

"Labor's Catechism": The Knights of Labor's Moral Code

Designed to instruct new recruits on the political and moral principles that guided the Knights of Labor, this manual illustrates the ways in which the Gilded Age labor movement constructed an ideology that was in opposition to the values of acquisitive individualism. The power loom weavers of Rhode Island were the intended audience of this catechism written by labor activists "Bobba Chuttle" and "Betty Reedhook" (pseudonyms evocative of the tools of the textile worker's trade) in 1887. Drawing on church traditions, the pair patterned their educational effort along the lines of a religious catechism's call-and-response format.

Q. What did thy masters promise for thee?

A. They did promise and vow many things in my name: First:—That I should renounce the comforts of life through working for less wages than the weavers in other towns, and starve my wife and hunger my children for the same cause. Second:—That I must not in any way try to better my condition, but be content to work at any price which they think proper to give; neither must I join the Knights of Labor as that is contrary to their by-laws. Third:—That I must bear patiently the insults of all that are put in authority over me, and a host of other things too numerous to mention.

Q. Dost thou not believe that thou art bound to do as they have promised for thee?

A. No, verily; for I have come to the determination to free myself, and to strive to get as much for my work as the weavers in other places for the same kind and quality, and that is the Knights of Labor's duty.

Q. Rehearse the articles of thy belief.

A. I believe in the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—and in Honesty, his only son, who was conceived by our Common Right, born of the Virgin Truth, suffered under Cotton Treason, was crucified, dead, and buried in Rhode Island, for many years, but is now risen again, and sitteth on the right hand of Justice and Liberty.

Q. What dost thou chiefly learn from these articles of thy belief?

A. I learn to believe that the time has now arrived when I must make a firm stand for a fair share of the profits of my industry, which is nothing less than the Union List, have nine hours' work, seven hours' play, eight hours' sleep, and fair wages every day.

"Labor's Catechism," *The People* (Providence, R.I.), 17 December 1887. Reprinted in Paul Buhle, "The Knights of Labor in Rhode Island," *Radical History Review* (Spring 1978): 39.

For example, although leaders such as Powderly officially opposed strikes and favored good relations with "fair" employers, its members joined and led dozens of work stoppages. And while it preferred "industrial" forms of unionism—that is, organizing all workers regardless of skill—it had locals that were essentially craft-based unions.

In general terms, however, the Knights stood for the twin concepts of "republicanism" and "producerism" that linked the belief in government determined by the people with production determined by the workers. "We declare an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage system of

labor and republican system of government," they proclaimed. They sought to eliminate both political corruption and the wage system and, thereby, restore independence to American citizens.

With this commitment to republicanism went a deep faith in the "producing classes." If properly mobilized, the Knights believed, this broad social group producing society's wealth—the workers, the farmers, even the honest manufacturers—could rescue America from the hands of monopolists and other social parasites. The Knights excluded "non-producers," such as bankers, speculators, lawyers, and liquor dealers, from their ranks. But they admitted "fair" employers, who respected the "dignity of labor" by employing union workers and selling union-made goods.

Drastic wage cuts accompanying the economic downturn of the early 1880s gave the organization its greatest impetus for growth. Victories against two of the country's most powerful railroads—the giant Union Pacific and financier Jay Gould's Southwestern—brought workers across the nation into the Knights. In the first walkout, they won the restoration of the wage cuts, and in the second, they won an agreement not to discriminate against union members in employment. The victory over Gould, one of the most hated men in America, astonished the nation and brought tens of thousands of new members into the Knights. In Milwaukee, where German American craftsmen had dominated the Order in the early 1880s, less-skilled Polish immigrants streamed into the organization in 1886; nearly a thousand joined on a single day. By 1886, the Order boasted fifteen thousand local assemblies, representing between 700,000 and one million members—nearly 10 percent of the country's nonagricultural workforce. Never had such a great proportion enrolled in unions, although, of course, most workers remained outside the union movement even during this great uprising of labor (Table 2.1).

The Knights' commitment to equality extended beyond healing the split between skilled and unskilled workers and included women, immigrants, Mexican Americans, and African Americans, all previously shut out of the labor movement. The Knights welcomed African Americans from the beginning. Most joined all-black assemblies, but some locals had mixed

Union Membership as Percent of Nonagricultural Workforce, 1870–1900

	1870	1880	1886	1890	1900
Union Members (thousands)	300	50	1,010	325	791
Nonagricultural Workforce (thousands)	6,140	8,470	11,404	13,360	17,390
Percent Organized	4.89%	0.59%	8.86%	2.43%	4.55%

Note: All 1886 figures are estimates.

TABLE 2.1 One of the Crowd: The Rise and Fall of Union Membership, 1870–1900

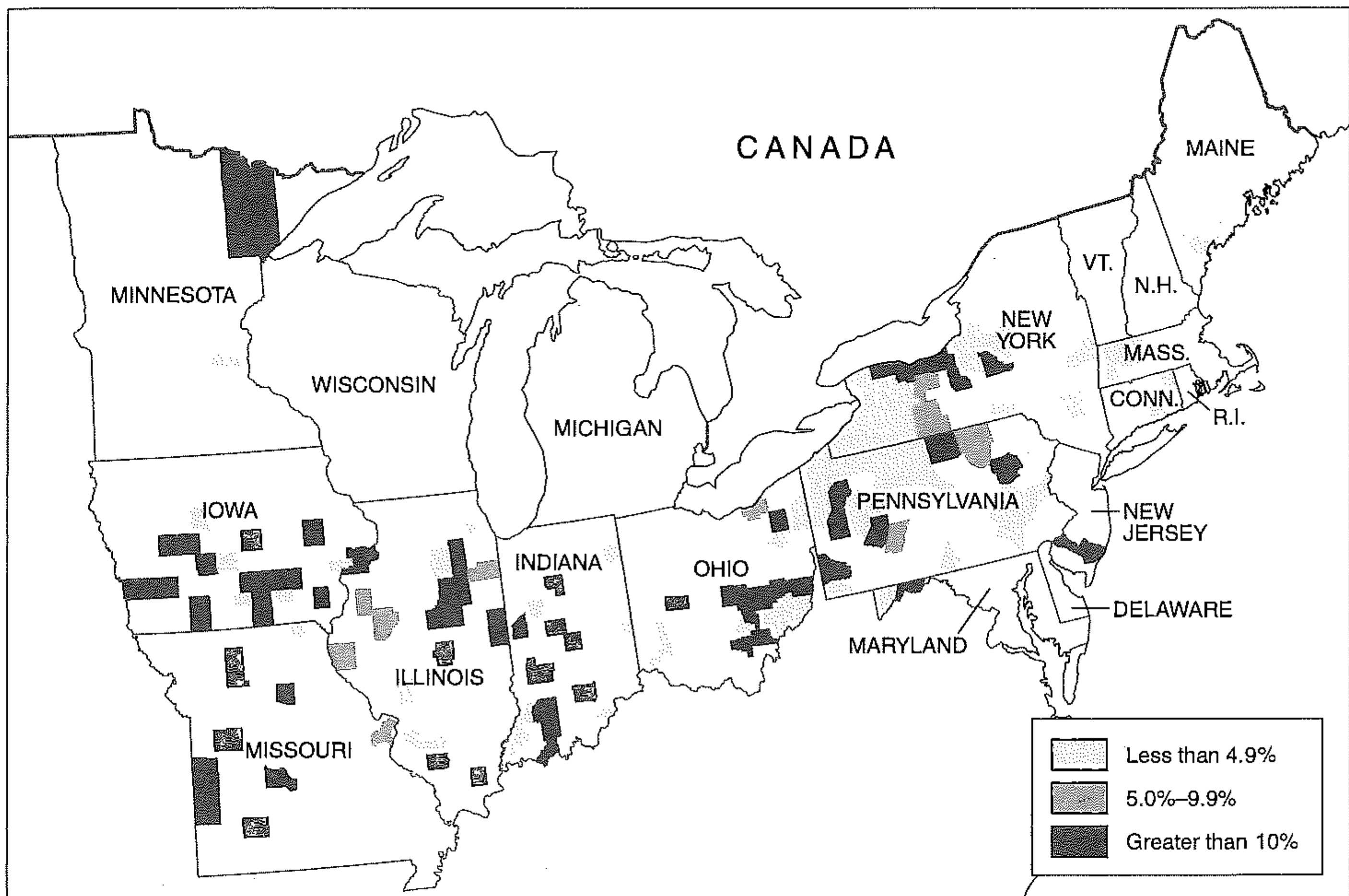
In a single remarkable year—July 1885 to July 1886—membership in the Knights of Labor multiplied at least seven times, probably the most rapid upsurge in union membership in U.S. history. By mid-1886, American trade unions had a combined membership of a million or more people. But the upsurge did not last; by 1890, union membership had dropped by two-thirds.

membership, even in the South. Black dockworkers in New Orleans, turpentine workers in Mississippi, tobacco factory workers in Virginia, and coal miners in Alabama, West Virginia, and Tennessee all joined the Knights in the first half of the 1880s. African American workers became the mainstays of many fledgling local assemblies. "The colored people of the South are flocking to us," trumpeted one Knights organizer.

In Fort Worth, Texas, the Knights united European American, African American, and Mexican American workers in the first coalition of its kind in state history. The Central Trades and Labor Assembly in New Orleans represented some 10,000 black and white workers who regularly joined forces in demonstrations and parades. "In view of the prejudice that existed a few years ago against the negro race," a Brooklyn Knight wrote, "who would have thought that negroes could ever be admitted into a labor organization on an equal footing with white men?" (Map 2.3).

The Order's practice of organizing separate black assemblies provoked controversy among African Americans. Some criticized the labor movement's continuing racism, particularly its exclusion of African Americans from skilled trades. A North Carolina mason complained, "The white Knights of Labor prevent me from getting employment because I am a colored man, although I belong to the same organization." But other black

MAP 2.3 Where the Knights Roamed: Knights of Labor Membership by County, 1883
The Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor was the nation's largest labor organization in the 1880s. As this map shows, their influence was spread widely across the Northeast and Midwest.



"... Women Should Do Anything They Liked That Was Good": Women in the Knights of Labor

The commitment of the Knights of Labor to equality for women was more than rhetorical, as evidenced by the career of Elizabeth Rodgers, the organization's Master Workman, or head, of the giant Chicago District No. 24. This 1889 portrait of Rodgers, offered by leading national antiliquor activist Frances Willard, underscores the desire on the part of many Knights, both men and women, to connect the struggle for labor reform with a broader vision that included vehement opposition to liquor.

So I went; in an unfamiliar, but reputable, part of the city where the streetcar patrons are evidently wage-workers. I was welcomed to a small, but comfortable, modern house by a woman who came to the door with sleeves rolled up and babe in arms. She was the presiding officer over all the Knights of Labor in Chicago and the suburbs, except the Stock Yards division . . . including fifty thousand or more working men and women. . . . Probably no parallel instance of leadership in a woman's hands, conferred by such peers, can be cited in this country, if indeed in any other.

Mrs. Rodgers is about forty years of age. . . . She has been the mother of twelve children, ten of whom are still living. The youngest was but twelve days old when her mother started for the [1886] Richmond Convention, where the baby was made "Delegate No. 800," and presented by the Knights with a silver cup and spoon, and the mother with a handsome Knights of Labor gold watch.

"My husband always believed that women should do anything they liked that was good and which they could do well," said Mrs. Rodgers, proudly; "but for him, I never could have got on so well as a Master Workman. I was the first woman in Chicago to join the Knights. They offered us the chance, and I said to myself, 'There must be a first one, and so I'll go forward.'"

. . . Mrs. Rodgers got her training as the chief officer of a local board of the Knights of Labor, which office she held four years, and by the death of the District Master Workman became the chief for our great city.

"We take no saloon-keepers," she said, "not even a saloon-keeper's wife. We will have nothing to do with men who have capital invested in a business which is the greatest curse the poor have ever known; but wage-workers connected with the liquor business are not forbidden to join us." I told her I hoped the pledge of total abstinence might be made a test of membership, and she heartily acquiesced in the plan. . . . She seemed to me a sincere Christian, and warmly seconded my statement that "Mr. Powderly [the Knights' national leader] must have the help of God, or he could not speak and act so wisely."

Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of an American Woman* (1889).

leaders believed that the Order's local and national assemblies represented a significant advance, providing a context in which black and white workers could begin to make common cause.

The emergence of the Knights of Labor also moved Irish immigrants to the center of the American labor movement. Irish activism had begun with support for the Land League, an organization of tenant farmers in Ireland that built an enormous following in the late 1870s. In the early years, Powderly claimed, the American labor movement and the Irish land movement were "almost identical," and secret gatherings of the Knights frequently followed public meetings of the Land League. As Patrick Ford, a New York editor, explained, "The cause of the poor in Donegal [Ireland] is the cause of the factory slave in Fall River [Massachusetts]."

Unlike African Americans and Irish immigrants, women had to fight their way into the Knights of Labor. Leaders of the Order spoke vaguely about "equal rights" and embraced the idea of equal pay for women, but equal pay meant little in a gender-segregated workforce. The Knights stopped short of granting membership to women, and Powderly refused to implement a resolution calling for women to be admitted until rules "for the governing of assemblies of women" were prepared. Then Mary Stirling, who had led a successful strike of "lady shoemakers" in Philadelphia, presented herself as a delegate at the Knights' convention in 1881. Forced to take a stand, Powderly finally declared that "women should be admitted on equality with men." Within a few years, one in ten Knights was a woman.

The Knights of Labor provided an unprecedented opportunity for working-class women to join men in the struggle for better lives. The Knights mobilized support for equal pay for women, equal rights for women within all organizations, and respect for women's work, whether unpaid in the home or for wages in the factory or mill. The Order's eclectic reform vision linked women's industrial and domestic concerns to broad social and political issues, giving rise to a kind of "labor feminism" in the 1880s.

The Knights of Labor, did, however, blatantly discriminate against one group: the Chinese. In the early 1880s, the major focus of the Order's political activity was promoting the Chinese Exclusion Act, which closed the nation's gates to Chinese immigrants. The Knights hailed the law as a step forward for "American" workers. Especially on the West Coast, Chinese workers served as convenient scapegoats during hard times.

This persistent racism undercut the Knights' proclaimed commitment to ideals of mutuality and solidarity. Although unwilling to embrace solidarity with Chinese immigrants, the Knights did develop a variety of local institutions that fostered cooperation and mutuality among its members. Many locals maintained cooperative stores on the ground floors of their halls and assembly rooms above, where members could hear labor sermons, read reform papers, or debate politics and economics. Knights also found group expression in balls, picnics, and parades.

FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER

NEW YORK—FOR THE WEEK ENDING JUNE 17, 1882.

MARYLAND.—THE LABOR STRIKE IN THE CUMBERLAND [illegible] —MERCHANTS IN THE MINING TOWN OF FROSTBURG CLOSING THEIR STORES BY ORDER [illegible] KNIGHTS OF LABOR.

Closing Stores and Solidarity
A June 1882 cover of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* depicts a scene in the Cumberland region of Maryland during a miners' strike. The boy who is shown ringing a bell in the town of Frostburg was described as an "emissary" conveying a Knights of Labor edict forcing local merchants to close their stores by 7:30 each evening. *Leslie's* professed bewilderment at local businessmen's acceptance of the strikers' "decree." But acquiescence to the new policy was not due to coercion; in the spirit of community cooperation espoused by the Knights, shopkeepers and clerks agreed to experiment with early closing. John N. Hyde, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, June 17, 1882 — American Social History Project.

The groups that made up the Knights of Labor never achieved total harmony, but for a time, the alliance had enough power and stability to spark widespread fear among industrialists and their friends. During a Cleveland steel strike, employers called on police to intervene. After violent confrontations at the mill gates, the city's daily newspapers launched a torrent of invective against the "un-American" Polish workers, labeling them "foreign devils," "ignorant and degraded whelps," and "Communistic scoundrels." But many members of the Knights reveled in the solidarity. "All I knew then of the principles of the Knights of Labor," the Jewish immigrant Abraham Bisno later remembered, "was that the motto . . . was One for All, and All for One."

1886: The Eight-Hour Movement and Haymarket Square "The year 1886 will be known as the year of the great uprising of labor," proclaimed

George McNeill, a Massachusetts member of the Knights of Labor. "The skilled and the unskilled, the high-paid and the low-paid all joined hands." The Knights' membership drive and the boycott movement peaked that year. Even more important, hundreds of thousands of workers struck, demonstrated, and fought for an eight-hour day.

American workers had been agitating for shorter workdays for decades. In 1884, the demand resurfaced when the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions began a two-year campaign, resolving that "eight hours shall constitute a legal day's work from and after May 1, 1886" and calling for a nationwide strike to begin that day. Local unionists who called for national organizing to deal with employers operating in national markets formed the federation, an alliance of eighteen national unions, in 1881. At its peak in 1886, federation membership totaled as much as 350,000, or 3 percent of the nation's nonagricultural workforce.

From Milwaukee, Chicago, and New York, the eight-hour movement spread to towns and cities throughout the country. "This is the workingman's hour," proclaimed the workers at Boston's Faneuil Hall on the eve of May 1, 1886. Across the nation, about one-third of a million workers demonstrated for the eight-hour day, and 200,000 actually went out on strike. By the end of the year, 400,000 workers had participated in 1,500 strikes, more than in any previous year of American history. Most of the strikers won shorter workdays, and 42,000 won an eight-hour day. These strikes marked an important new phase in the mobilization of unskilled workers, brought many workers into the ranks of the labor movement, and turned thousands of union members into activists.

The national leadership of the Knights of Labor discouraged the demonstrations and strikes for the eight-hour day, but many Knights led local campaigns, working with the unions and with the socialists and anarchists who played a prominent role in the agitation. Although united in their challenge to the concept of private property, socialists and anarchists differed in their views of the role of government. Socialists advocated government ownership of factories and mines, whereas anarchists argued that organized government was by its very nature oppressive.

In Chicago, radicals, most notably Albert Parsons, led the eight-hour movement. The son of a prominent white New England family, Parsons arrived in Chicago after apprenticing as a printer in Waco, Texas, where he had moved before the Civil War. Although he had served in the Confederate Army, Parsons became a Radical Republican during Reconstruction, championing African American rights, addressing meetings, and mobilizing black voters. He met his wife Lucy when she was sixteen and already a passionate labor and antiracist activist. Lucy had probably been born a slave in Texas, but she claimed to be the orphaned child of Mexican and Indian parents. Because Texas laws banned interracial marriage, they moved

"Eight Hours for What We Will!": Rallying Cry for the Eight-Hour Work Day

This poem, titled "Eight Hours," was written by I. G. Blanchard in 1866. Six years later, Blanchard's poem was set to music by the Reverend Jesse H. Jones, who was closely associated with Boston's Eight-Hour League. The song became a rallying cry during the 1886 strike wave that demanded an eight-hour workday.

We mean to make things over,
We're tired of toil for naught,
With bare enough to live upon,
And never an hour for thought;
We want to feel the sunshine,
And we want to smell the flowers,
We're sure that God has willed it,
And we mean to have Eight Hours.
We're summoning our forces
From shipyard, shop and mill;
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
Eight hours for what we will!
From the factories and workshops,
In long and weary lines,
From all the sweltering forges,
From all the sunless mines;
Wherever Toil is wasting
The force of life to live;
Its bent and battered armies
Come to claim what God doth give.
And the blazon on its banner
Doth with hope the nations fill.
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
Eight hours for what we will!
The voice of God within us
Is calling us to stand
Erect, as is becoming
To the work of His right hand.
Should he, to whom the Maker
His glorious image gave,
The meanest of His creatures crouch,
A bread-and-butter slave?
Let the shout ring down the valleys
And echo from ev'ry hill,
Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
Eight hours for what we will!

I. G. Blanchard, *Boston Daily Voice*, August 7, 1886.

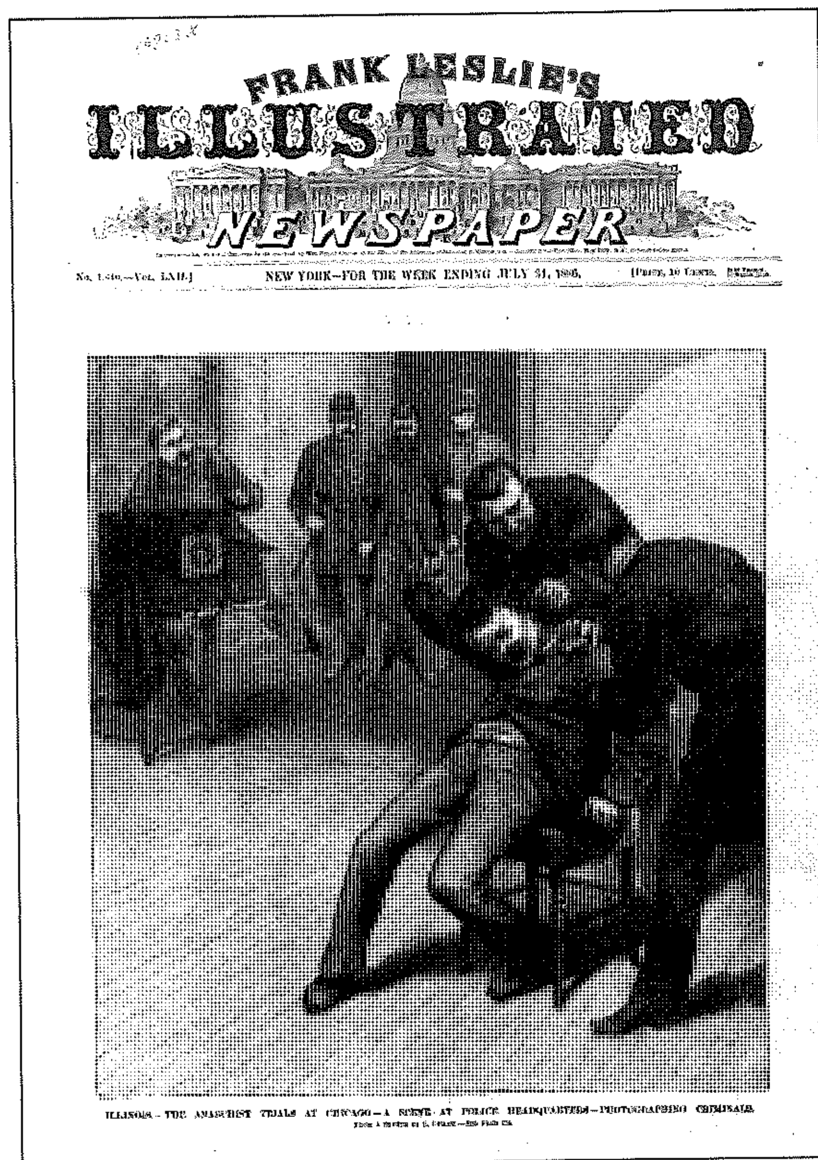
north in 1873, settling in Chicago, where Albert found employment as a typesetter.

Making contacts among Chicago radicals and hosting socialist study groups in their home, Lucy and Albert Parsons were soon at the center of socialist and anarchist agitation. When Albert lost his job because of speeches he gave during the 1877 railroad strike, Lucy set up a dressmaking shop to support them both. By 1885, as the most famous radical couple in Chicago, they faced regular and vicious attacks in the mainstream press.

On May 1, 1886, Parsons led the 80,000 Chicago marchers in a parade for the eight-hour day. The day passed without incident, but two days later, a clash at the McCormick Reaper Works ended in police beatings and the fatal shooting of two unarmed workers. August Spies, the editor of a prolabor German newspaper witnessed the bloodshed and issued a fiery leaflet, calling Chicago's workers to a protest at Haymarket Square the following evening. Attendance was sparse at the hastily called rally. As the small crowd began to drift away, a bomb exploded, killing a policeman. The police opened fire immediately, killing at least one more person and wounding many more.

The city's antiradical, anti-immigrant civic leaders quickly sought revenge for the policeman's death. Parsons, Spies, and six other anarchist leaders were arrested, charged with conspiracy to commit murder, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. No evidence ever connected any of the accused with the bomb. Even so, Powderly refused to support Parsons, a member of the Knights, or to criticize the courts. Despite worldwide protest, Spies, Parsons, and two of their comrades went to the gallows in November 1887. One of the remaining anarchists committed suicide. John Peter Altgeld, a German immigrant who had by then become the prolabor governor of Illinois, pardoned the three others in 1893.

The Decline of the Knights Haymarket raised fears among the middle and upper classes—anxiety about aliens, radicals, mobs, and labor organizations and, more broadly, about the prospects for anarchism and revolution. Government responded to these fears by strengthening the police, militia, and the U.S. Army, and vigilante groups proliferated. Capitalists mounted a sustained counteroffensive to destroy the insurgency of the eight-hour movement and other organized labor efforts. Some employers attempted to undercut unionization by hiring workers from different ethnic groups who would have difficulty communicating with one another. Trade association members discharged strikers, locked out workers who joined unions, and circulated blacklists of labor activists. Industrial spies, many of them employees of the rapidly growing Pinkerton Detective Agency, infiltrated labor organizations.



FRANK LESLIE'S ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER

NEW YORK—FOR THE WEEK ENDING JULY 31, 1886.

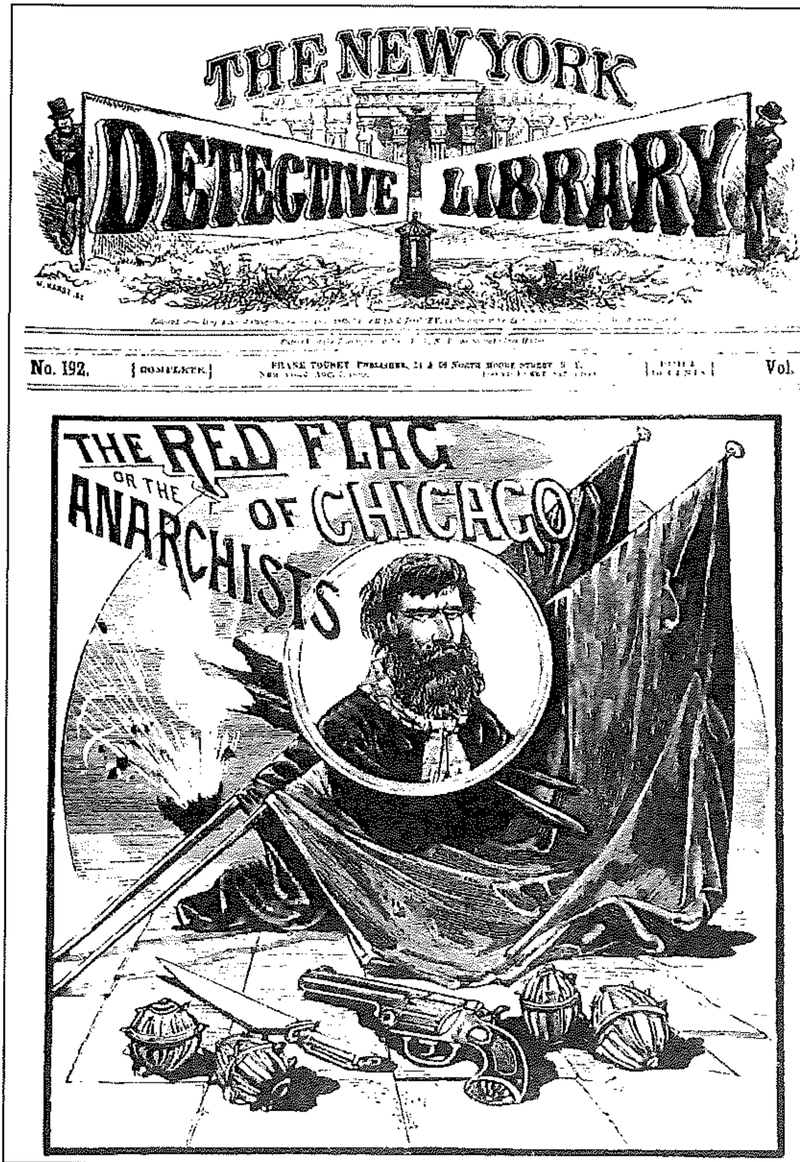
ILLINOIS.—THE ANARCHIST TRIALS AT CHICAGO—A SCENE AT POLICE HEADQUARTERS—PHOTOGRAPHING CRIMINALS.

Photographing Criminals

As part of its coverage of the Haymarket incident, one newspaper displayed this scene in Chicago's police headquarters, showing the construction of a criminal identification system based on photographs. The "Rogues' Gallery" would serve as an archive to identify individual criminals (including political dissenters and labor activists) and to discern, according to contemporary scientific beliefs, what "physiognomic" traits (such as skull shape and facial characteristics) indicated innate criminal tendencies. Charles Upham, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, July 31, 1886 — American Social History Project.

Employers also relied increasingly on the coercive power of the government. During the 1880s, legal charges such as "inciting to riot," "obstructing the streets," "intimidation," and "trespass" were first used extensively against strikers, and court injunctions restricting workers' right to picket became commonplace. One judge, handing down an injunction in a labor dispute, proudly called it a "Gatling [machine] gun on paper."

Weakened by internal disputes, faulty decisions, and disunity of purpose, the Knights of Labor proved especially vulnerable. The most dramatic setback occurred on the same rail lines where the Knights had first become prominent. After a successful strike in 1885, Southwestern Railroad workers struck again in March 1886, demanding wage increases and the reinstatement of a discharged comrade. But railroad executives, realizing that placating workers' organizations fostered militancy and unionization, took a hard



The "Typical" Anarchist
Hairy, disheveled, and perched above the deadly tools of his "trade," he stares out from the cover of an 1886 edition of *The New York Detective Library*, one of the many weekly "dime novels" eagerly read by working people in the late nineteenth century. *The New York Detective Library*, August 7, 1886 — American Social History Project.

line. In the midst of the eight-hour strikes, the Knights capitulated on May 4, 1886, and called off the walkout.

Across the country, employers who had negotiated with labor in 1884 and 1885 refused to do so in 1886. The Illinois Bureau of Labor reported that of seventy-six attempts to negotiate differences between labor and employers in that year, employers rejected any discussion in thirty-two cases. In the second half of 1886, employers locked out some 100,000 workers. Attempts to improve working conditions—by laundry workers in Troy, New York; packinghouse workers in Chicago; and knitters in Cohoes and Amsterdam, New York—ended in harsh defeats.

All these unsuccessful strikes involved the Knights of Labor, which collapsed, no longer able to protect members' workplace rights. Across the

nation, the organization that had boasted perhaps three-quarters of a million members at its peak in 1886 had shrunk to half that size within a year. By 1890, the Knights could claim only 100,000 members.

Labor Politics and Conflict

The decline of the Knights did not, however, mean the end of the working-class challenge to the industrial capitalist order. Working people also mobilized in other arenas and through other organizations in the 1880s and early 1890s. They sought political power, for example, through the mainstream parties and their own labor parties, winning both patronage jobs and some modest legislative gains. Skilled workers mobilized through the American Federation of Labor, which emerged as the dominant labor organization of that era (and subsequent ones as well).

Although the AFL had a narrower social and political vision than the Knights, it proved more adept in winning strikes and making gains for members. The AFL sometimes moved beyond advocating the self-interests of its members, although it never transcended the racism that pervaded American society at this time. The United Mine Workers, however, provided a shining exception and organized coal miners across racial lines. The class struggles that marked urban industrial workplaces also spilled over into the countryside. Across the nation, groups of workers and small farmers struggled against the power of the railroads and the giant corporations. They won some remarkable victories, but as the defeat of steelworkers at Homestead in 1892 indicated, the greater power remained in the hands of the capitalists.

Politics and the Workingman For much of the nineteenth century, an abiding belief in equality and independence permeated working-class political thought. The Revolutionary-era ideology of republicanism placed on an equal and fair footing all white men who participated in American political and social life. In fact, many election boards required ownership of property in order to vote, but republicanism rested on the assumption that independent producers had skills or access to farmland and could provide adequately for themselves and their families. Women remained outside the bounds of formal political participation, as, in practice, did African Americans, American Indians, and most immigrants. Still, the rhetoric of mainstream American politics promoted the idea that fairness and equal opportunity marked the difference between the United States and the privilege-bound Old World.

By the 1870s, this republican vision of a society of independent citizens was further tarnished. The railroad strikes of 1877 indicated how far the republic had traveled from the egalitarian promise of the eighteenth