Challenging Corporate Power, Asserting the People's Rights

Session VI — People's and Worker's Resistance Movements

The changes in the United States throughout the 19th century were profound and rapid, picking up speed as the decades passed. The industrial revolution changed the nature and pace of both urban and rural livelihoods, and a predominantly independent workforce was converted to a majority of wage earners working for someone else. Capitalism came to dominate the economic system, bringing periodic depressions. Immigrants flooded into the country, creating a complex and constantly shifting hierarchical order that affected who worked and who didn't, what kind of work they could do, where they could live, and what kind of life they could lead. The country grew rapidly in size, providing opportunity for some and destroying a way of life for others. The Civil War, resisted by thousands on both sides, left over half a million dead, the South on its knees, and corporations with significantly increased wealth and power.

For the majority of people, all these changes added up to a life of increased subservience to the wealthy minority, and they didn't accept it lying down. Abuse of workers by industrialists was ruthless and rampant; strikes were frequent and often brutally broken by police, Pinkerton's hired men, and even federal army troops. Increased mechanization, monopolistic practices by banks and railroads, and falling crop prices all conspired to drive hundreds of thousands of farmers off their land and into tenancy or low wage work. By the century's close there was an enormous gap between the wealthy and the poor. Resistance to these oppressive systems was born of desperation, hope, and a belief in the promise of democracy. Facing injury, death, disease, and starvation, people rose again and again in the largest mass movements in the country's history.

The readings in this session provide an opportunity to explore this world of resistance — what motivated people, what challenges they faced, what lessons we can learn, and how these events shaped the world we live in today.

Readings:

1 – Excerpts from *Who Built America?* by the American Social History Project (10 pages)
2 – Excerpts from the introduction to *The Populist Moment*, by Lawrence Goodwyn (10 pages)
3 – "Tragedy and Hope in American Labor," by Paul Buhle (6 pages)
4 – "Labor Must Challenge Corporate Rule," by Peter Kellman (5 pages)
5 – "A People's history of the United States," by Howard Zinn (4 pages)

Note: For those who would like some historical context of the social and economic conditions in the US during the 19th century, an optional five-page reading is available — excerpts from *A People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn. The unabridged introduction to *The Populist Moment* is also available. Both optional readings can be found at www.wilpf.org.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss the economic and social factors that sparked people's movements at the end of the 19th century. What philosophies and concepts influenced their actions? How are those ideas expressed today (if at all)?

2. Explore Lawrence Goodwyn's observations about the difficulties that contemporary people have

in understanding the democratic ideals of the last century. What would it take for a democracy movement to happen in the U.S. today?

3. What 20th-century factors have contributed to the current state of unionism? What are the implications of democratic self-governance with the current relationship of labor to management?

4. What would it look like if we didn't need unions at all — if workers owned the means of production? Would that be more or less democratic than the system we have now?

Supplementary Materials:

- *A People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn. HarperCollins Publishers, 1980 (a twentieth anniversary edition published in 1999).

- *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, by Lawrence Goodwyn. Oxford University Press, 1978.

- *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society*, Volume One (Columbus to 1877) and Volume Two (1877 to the Present). Worth Publishers, 2000 (originally published in 1990 and 1992; the 2000 edition is revised and updated.) Each chapter includes print and website references. There is also a CD-ROM. See www.ahsp.cuny.edu.

- *Fear at Work: Job Blackmail, Labor, and the Environment*, by Richard Kazis and Richard Grossman. Capital City Press (Montpelier, VT), 1991. (This edition contains a new introduction by the authors and a forward by Barry Commoner. Originally published in 1982 by Pilgrim Press.)

- *History of the Labor Movement in the United States: From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor*, by Philip S. Foner. International Publishers Company, Inc., 1947 (12 volumes).

- *The Cold War Against Labor*, edited by Ann Fagan Ginger and David Christiano. Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, 1987 (two volumes).

- "Freedom of Association: Bringing the Bill of Rights through the Plant Gates," by Peter Kellman, 1999. Developed to implement a Labor Party resolution on a "Workplace Bill of Rights." Includes information on rethinking what we mean by workplace rights; practices in other countries; and how the imbalance between corporate and individual worker rights has evolved in the US. 48 standard 8.5x11 pages; $7.

- "Salt of the Earth," 1954, 94 minutes, black/white. Story of anti-Hispanic racial strife that occurs in a New Mexico zinc mine when union workers organize a strike. Suppressed in the US for 30 years, this controversial film was made by a group of blacklisted filmmakers during the McCarthy era. Directed by Herbert Biberman; starring Rosaura Revueltas, Will Geer, David Wolfe. Good companion film: "One of the Hollywood Ten," 2000, 109 minutes, color. Tells the story of Biberman's blacklisting and the subsequent making of the film. Directed by Karl Francis; starring Jeff Goldblum and Greta Scacchi.

- "Matewan," 1987, 130 minutes, color. Dramatization of the famous Matewan massacre in the 1920s, in which coal miners in West Virginia, reluctantly influenced by a young union organizer, rebelled against terrible working conditions. Directed by John Sayles; starring Chris Cooper, James Earl Jones, Mary McDonnell, David Straithairn.

Excerpts from *Who Built America?* (Volume 2) by the American Social History Project:

"Union for All": The Knights of Labor

At the center of labor activity in the 1880s was the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, a group founded by nine Philadelphia tailors in 1869. 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 the words of a Detroit parade banner, "'Each for himself' is the bosses' plea; Union for all will make you free."

Like middle-class Masons, the Knights of Labor engaged in elaborate rituals at secret meetings. 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.

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. By 1886, the Order boasted 15,000 local assemblies, representing between 700,000 and 1 million members. This was nearly 10 percent of the country's nonagricultural workforce, a much higher proportion than had ever been enrolled in unions. 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.

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

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 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]." Monopoly took the form of rent-gouging in Ireland, of labor exploitation in America.

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. When it was passed in 1882, Knights hailed the law as a step forward for "American" workers. Especially on the West Coast, the union label was as much an expression of antagonism to the Chinese as a symbol of worker's solidarity. Chinese workers served as convenient scapegoats when times were tough.

Despite this persistent racism, the Knights claimed to represent the last best hope for a republic weakened by the forces of monopoly, political corruption, cutthroat competition, and — most important — wage labor. "We declare an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage system of labor and republican system of government," proclaimed the Knights, who sought to eliminate political corruption and industrial degradation and 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. "Nonproducers," such as bankers, speculators, lawyers, and liquor dealers, were excluded from the ranks of the Knights of Labor. But "fair" employers, who respected the "dignity of labor" by employing union workers and selling union-made goods, could join.

Local Knights of Labor assemblies developed a variety of institutions that reflected the ideals of mutuality and solidarity. Many 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. The balls, picnics, and parades sponsored by the Knights were distinctive forms of recreation and group expression.

There was never total harmony among the groups that comprised the Knights of Labor, but for a time the alliance was sufficiently stable 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 to those who joined the Knights, the important fact was that people of diverse backgrounds were marching together. "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 general strike to begin that day. The federation, an alliance of eighteen national unions, had been formed in 1881 by local unionists who called for national organizing to deal with employers operating in national markets. 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, the eight-hour movement was led by radicals — most notably Albert Parsons, the son of a prominent 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 anti-racist 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 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, the Parsons were the most famous radical couple in Chicago and were subjected to 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 workmen. August Spies, the editor of a pro-labor 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 anti-radical, 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; the three others were pardoned in 1893 by John Peter Altgeld, a German immigrant who had by then become the pro-labor governor of Illinois…

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.

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, having discovered that placating workers' organizations fostered militancy and unionization, were intransigent. 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 two years later. The Illinois Bureau of Labor reported that of seventy-six attempts to negotiate differences between labor and employers in 1886, 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. The Knights had claimed 40,000 members in Chicago prior to a confrontation in the meatpacking plants; less than a year later their number had fallen to 17,000. Across the nation, the organization that had boasted perhaps three quarters of a million members at its peak in 1886 shrank to half that size within a year. By 1890, the Knights could claim only 100,000 members.

End of a Century; End of an Era

Class conflict defined the final two decades of the nineteenth century as working people confronted, with extraordinary creativity, the profound changes wrought by industrial capitalism. The first truly national working-class movement emerged in these years out of the militant protests and oppositional ideas of workers and farmers across the country. In creating a culture of resistance, the late–nineteenth-century labor movement rejected not only capitalists' growing control over the nation's economic and political life but also the twin ideologies of acquisitive individualism and Social Darwinism that served to justify that control. While the movement's programs were eclectic, its philosophies diverse, and its outright victories few, it nonetheless succeeded in galvanizing millions of people with an alternative vision of industrial America.

But the bitter defeats suffered by the Knights of Labor in 1886, the Homestead workers in 1892, the industrial armies in 1893 and 1894, the Pullman workers in 1894, and the Populists in 1896 eroded the power of this alternative vision and marked the end of an era. As a result, many working people in cities and the countryside retreated into insular cultures that included strong elements of racism and nativism. The nineteenth century closed with the labor and agrarian movements fragmented and their broad, organizing efforts defeated. The return of economic prosperity, the expansion of American corporations abroad, and the wave of mergers that swept through the economy further consolidated the power of giant corporations.

The bitter defeats of the 1880s and 1890s left permanent scars. The United States would never again witness such a broad or fundamental challenge by working people to the claims of capital. Racial, ethnic, gender, skill, and ideological divisions would define the labor movement after 1900, displacing the working-class unity of the preceding decades. Thus, as the new century dawned, neither popular movements nor the government imposed serious constraints on the actions of the nation's capitalists. Working people, African Americans, immigrants, and women would need to find new ways to mitigate their subordinate position in American society.

Radicals and Reformers in the Progressive Era 1900—1914

…By the turn of the century, many Americans — wageworkers, the middle class, elite humanitarians — sensed that corporate power was out of control and that the industrial order needed fundamental reform. The same giant corporations that had brought an incredible new array of products from Crisco to the Model T had also brought incredible exploitation, indignities, and even death. The bitter defeats of the Homestead and Pullman strikes had confirmed the dominance of corporate enterprise and large-scale production and distribution. The United States was now the greatest industrial power in the world, and the Populist vision of a nation of yeoman farmers had faded. Even the republican and producer ideals of the Knights of Labor, which were rooted in the world of the artisan, were clearly no longer viable. But millions of ordinary Americans had grown indignant over the inhuman living and working conditions endured by many laborers and with the corruption that had been rife in U.S. political and economic spheres since the Gilded Age…

Historians use the term *progressivism* to describe [a wide-ranging set of movements or coalitions that had sprung up to address the cultural, economic, social, and political dislocations and inequities caused by the growth of industrial capitalism.] The term is confusing because it does not refer to a single movement or party but rather applies to a network of overlapping and sometimes conflicting organizations and coalitions that campaigned to reform American society between 1890 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914…

Millions of Americans from all walks of life marched under the progressive banner. Some were working people battling for better pay and control over their lives. Others were urban reformers striving to improve living and working conditions in the slums. Some "reformers" were actually what we might consider conservative in their goals — they wanted to "Americanize" millions of new immigrants, to close working-class saloons, or to make city government more businesslike. Progressive politicians set goals of "trust busting," regulating corporate activity, and conserving the natural environment. And some parts of the movement addressed issues specific to a certain gender, race, or social group, such as women campaigning for the right to vote and African Americans protesting disfranchisement and lynching…

Progressivism was much more than that: it was an insurgency from below. Women of all classes were important in spearheading major reforms. Another critical influence came ironically from radicals skeptical of progressivism's potential for effectiveness. Socialists, Wobblies, and other groups who wanted a more thoroughgoing transformation of the system than that offered by progressive reformers mobilized pressure that would lead to more moderate reforms. As these popular insurgencies moved party politics to the left, national political leaders — for one of the few times in U.S. history — competed to be known as "reformers" and "progressives." Even if feminists, radicals, African Americans, and industrial workers failed to win all of their demands, they succeeded in setting the political agenda to which the more famous progressives like Roosevelt and Wilson would respond.

Militant Communities

Although most working people were neither anarchists nor socialists, radical ideas about the need for fundamental changes had substantial influence in working-class communities in the early twentieth century. The clearest indication of this sentiment was the creation of a new labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World — the IWW, or Wobblies, as

they were popularly known. "An injury to one is an injury to all," the IWW declared; "the working class and the employing class have nothing in common."

The IWW sought to abolish the wage system and to create a society in which workers would own and control the factories, mines, and railroads where they labored. IWW leaders believed that the vehicle for revolutionary change should be a union, not a political party. Organizing all workers into one militant union, they asserted, would lead to a massive general strike. Capitalism would be overthrown, and the people would run industry in a decentralized, democratic fashion.

Dissident socialists, including Eugene V. Debs, together with other radicals and industrial unionists organized the IWW in 1905. Leadership came, in part, from the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), which represented thirty thousand hard-rock miners in the Rocky Mountains. During a decade of bitter strikes against some of the largest corporations in America, the WFM's leaders had come to reject capitalism and to embrace unions that spanned an entire industry (steelworkers or railroad workers) rather than a specific craft (carpenters or machinists). The federation's efforts to build alliances with workers in the East culminated in the founding convention of the IWW in Chicago. "Fellow workers," western miner Big Bill Haywood proclaimed, "this is the Continental Congress of the working class." The new movement, he declared, "shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism."

Spirited, colorful, and proud in the face of jail sentences and vigilante attacks, the IWW was the most egalitarian labor organization in American history. It was committed to organizing all workers — skilled and unskilled, men and women, black and white, Mexican, Chinese and Japanese. The Wobblies drew upon longstanding traditions: the Knights' belief in organizing across ethnic and racial lines; the shop-floor control enjoyed by skilled craftsmen; and the industrial unionism of coal miners and the American Railway Union.

At first, factionalism, government harassment, and an economic downturn frustrated the IWW. But in 1909 it won nationwide attention by leading a successful strike among unskilled immigrant steelworkers in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania. In 1909 and 1910 the IWW also led a series of "free speech" fights in western cities, which served as hiring centers for jobs in forests, mines, and fields. But the union's reputation soared in 1912, when it led a massive textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. A new Massachusetts state law requiring employers to cut workers' hours had backfired when employers retaliated by speeding up the looms to compensate for the lost time. The last straw for Lawrence's thirty thousand textile workers came when mill owners announced a pay cut. Half of the mills' labor force were young women between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, many of whom suffered from malnutrition and overwork. Two days after the pay cut announcement, more than twenty thousand workers of forty nationalities went on strike. "We want bread and roses, too" was the strikers' memorable slogan.

The IWW organized separate strike and relief committees for workers of different nationalities and translated speeches and literature into every language. Strikers threw up massive picket lines around the mills and paraded through the streets. Mill owners and government officials responded with a massive show of force, including a declaration of martial law and a ban on public meetings. With an entire town deprived of the workers' meager wages, hunger was widespread. Eventually, New York socialists, concerned about the effects of hunger on the strikers' children, organized to care for them. Margaret Sanger, a nurse who later became famous for promoting birth control, arrived in Lawrence to transport children out of the strife-torn town. "Out of the 119 children, only four had underwear on… their outerwear was almost in rags… their coats were simply torn to shreds," she later testified.

The departure of the children generated so much sympathy for the strikers that Lawrence authorities decreed that children would no longer be allowed to leave the city. Two days later, a group of Philadelphia

socialists arrived to transport two hundred children. As a member of the Philadelphia Women's committee testified, "The police closed in on us with their clubs, beating right and left with no thought of the children who were in the most desperate danger of being trampled to death. The mothers and children were thus hurled in a mass and bodily dragged to a military truck, and even then clubbed, irrespective of the cries of the panic-stricken women and children." This was the turning point. Across the country, public opinion turned against the employers. In March, the mill owners agreed to a settlement providing raises and overtime pay to workers.

The Lawrence textile strike demonstrated that immigrant workers could unite to win a strike, but the victory did not open the way for widespread industrial organization. A year later, in 1913, the IWW met serious defeat in a silk workers' strike in Paterson, New Jersey, where thousands of immigrant women, men, and children had walked out of the mills. Over the course of seven months, IWW leaders again organized picket lines and called enthusiastic rallies, and again the authorities responded with repression, even arresting socialist Frederick Sumner Boyd for reading the free-speech clause of the New Jersey state constitution at a strike meeting. But Paterson employers, unlike their Lawrence counterparts, exploited divisions within the silk workers' ranks. The skilled, English-speaking workers and their craft unions, put off by the radicalism and anarchism of many of the Italian and Jewish workers, were slow to join the strike. The strike collapsed when the English-speaking mill workers agreed to return to work on a shop-by-shop basis, leaving the unskilled immigrants without support.

In mining communities in the Appalachian and Rocky mountains, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) overcame the cultural difficulties that defeated the strikers in Paterson. Although highly skilled, coal miners had no tradition of apprenticeship and therefore little control over who entered their trade. Thus recent immigrants or African Americans could find work as miners more easily than in other trades. Drawing on the legacy of interracial unionism inherited from the Knights of Labor and black UMWA activists, the UMWA extended itself to organize all who worked in and around the mines. By 1910, nearly one-third of all coal miners were unionized, compared with one-tenth of the broader U.S. labor force.

But the mine owners fought back fiercely. In late 1913, John D. Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel and Iron Company led other companies in an open-shop drive — an attempt to guarantee the right to work without union membership — that prompted more than ten thousand miners to strike. The battle was long and bitter. Despite the determination of the miners and their wives, who were active in the struggle, the owners refused to recognize the union. They evicted strikers from their company-owned homes and brought in deputies and the state militia to quell the protest. On Easter night in 1914, the troops attacked a strikers' tent camp in Ludlow. Firing machine guns and setting fire to the tents, they killed sixteen people, including twelve children.

In the wake of the Ludlow massacre, the UMWA issued a "call to arms." For ten days war raged between miners and the state militia, until federal troops finally disarmed the miners. IWW leader Bill Haywood concluded that the country was gripped by "an irreconcilable class struggle" between workers and capitalists. Most progressives would have avoided those terms, but many of them agreed that in Lawrence, Paterson, and Ludlow, the industrial system had generated a terrifying conflict that threatened the very stability and promise of American society.

Like the electoral challenge by the Socialist party, the militant agitation of the Wobblies and mine workers moved the terms of progressive debate to the left. Moderate reformers took up more radical ideas for two reasons. First, they were worried about the threat posed by socialists and Wobblies. They sought to counter the appeal of the radicals — and prevent the more fundamental changes those groups favored — by offering changes that responded, in part, to the radical critique. When the radicals publicized the inequities and

degradations brought by industrial capitalism, progressives proposed ways that reform and regulation could make capitalism more humane while also preserving it.

The second reason moderate reformers incorporated some radical ideas is that they found them attractive. They agreed with the radicals about the threats posed by unregulated big business and great concentrations of wealth. They also adopted the radicals' view that only a strong national state could tame the giant national corporations — an idea that socialist activists had long argued, but that broke with deep-seated U.S. traditions of limiting the power of the federal government. Although the role of the state espoused by Democratic and Republican progressives was not as vast as that endorsed by the socialists, the moderate reformers did come to accept and endorse a new regulatory function for the federal government.

Toward the Modern State

Progressivism responded to the economic, social, and political dislocations that accompanied industrial capitalism's dramatic growth during the Gilded Age: rapid technological change; intense and episodic conflict between capital and labor; the influx of enormous numbers of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America; and the growing national and international reach of American capitalism. Each of these problems posed a special challenge to older American ideals of individual independence and equality.

Progressivism looked to an active government to blunt the worst of capitalism's economic and social problems. Working people, in coalition with socialists, radicals, and feminists, were key participants in progressive reform struggles, helping to win passage of pro-labor legislation, especially the federal Clayton Act. These reforms helped lay the foundation for our modern notion of government and were among progressivism's most lasting contributions to American political life.

But by the time war broke out in Europe in 1914, the central role many progressives desired for government had been only partially realized: federal, state, and local laws minimally regulated the economy and industrial relations while extending limited protections to consumers and women and children. Assembling the cross-class coalition that made progressive reforms possible had involved significant compromises. Only a relatively small number of working people — those organized into skilled-craft unions and those working in industries covered by limited factory reforms — fully benefited from the passage of progressive legislation. Many others — unskilled and manual laborers, domestic servants, agricultural wageworkers, and sharecroppers — remained outside progressivism's protective sphere.

African Americans experienced the Progressive Era quite literally as a tightening noose: the federal government repeatedly ignored the wanton lynching of hundreds of African Americans in the South. At the same time, the modest political and economic gains these Americans had made during Reconstruction were rolled back in a flood of Progressive Era disfranchisement laws and the purging of African Americans from federal jobs by the Wilson administration. Women had been central to the movements that made up progressivism and had succeeded in expanding their public role in American life. Yet their

most important demand — for the right to vote — remained stalled as the United States entered World War I.

Despite these very real limitations, progressivism represented a watershed that marked the beginning of a new relationship between working people and the government. The era's limited reforms inaugurated a period of governmental involvement in economic and social affairs that would intensify in coming decades. As a result, working people would look increasingly to government to ameliorate the worst excesses of industrial capitalism. Progressivism set the terms of this new relationship, as working people's experiences in their struggle for a better life were now linked inextricably to national political, economic, and social developments.

THE POPULIST MOMENT

A Short History of the
Agrarian Revolt in America

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Introduction

This book is about the flowering of the largest democratic mass movement in American history. It is also necessarily a book about democracy itself. Finally it is about why Americans have far less democracy than they like to think and what would have to happen to alter that situation.

The passionate events that are the subject of this book had their origins in the social circumstances of a hundred years ago when the American population contained huge masses of farmers. A large number of people in the United States discovered that the economic premises of their society were working against them. These premises were reputed to be democratic — America after all was a democratic society in the eyes of most of its own citizens and in the eyes of the world — but farmers by the millions found that this claim was not supported by the events governing their lives.

The nation's agriculturalists had worried and grumbled about "the new rules of commerce" ever since the prosperity that accompanied the Civil War had turned into widespread distress soon after the war ended. During the 1870's they did the kinds of things that concerned people generally do in an effort to cope with "hard times." In an occupation noted for hard work they worked even harder. When this failed to change things millions of families migrated westward in an effort to enlist nature's help. They were driven by the thought that through sheer physical labor they might wring more production from the new virgin lands of the West than they had been able to do in their native states of Ohio and Virginia and Alabama. But, though railroad land agents created beguiling stories of Western prosperity, the men and women who listened, and went, found that the laws of commerce worked against them just as much in Kansas and Texas as they had back home on the eastern side of the Mississippi River.

So in the 1870's, the farmers increasingly talked to each other about their troubles and read books on economics in an effort to discover what had gone wrong. Some of them formed organizations of economic self-help like the Grange and others assisted in pioneering new institutions of political self-help like the Greenback Party. But as the hard times of the 1870's turned into the even harder times of the 1880's, it was clear that these efforts were not really going anywhere. Indeed, by 1888 it was evident that things were worse than they had been in 1878 or 1868. More and more people saw their farm mortgages foreclosed. As everyone in rural America knew, this statistic inexorably yielded another, more ominous one: the number of landless tenant farmers in America rose steadily

year after year. Meanwhile, millions of small landowners hung on grimly, their unpaid debts thrusting them dangerously close to the brink of tenantry and peonage. Hard work availed nothing. Everywhere the explanation of events was the same: "Times were hard."

Then gradually, in certain specific ways and for certain specific reasons, American farmers developed new methods that enabled them to try to regain a measure of control over their own lives. Their efforts, halting and disjointed at first, gathered form and force until they grew into a coordinated mass movement that stretched across the American continent from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific. Millions of people came to believe fervently that a wholesale overhauling of their society was going to happen in their lifetimes. A democratic "new day" was coming to America. This whirlwind of effort, and the massive upsurge of democratic hopes that accompanied it, has come to be known as the Populist Revolt. This book is about that moment of historical time. It seeks to trace the planting, growth, and death of the mass democratic movement known as Populism.

For a number of reasons, all of them rather fundamental to historical analysis, the Populist moment has proved very difficult for Americans to understand. Under the circumstances, it is probably just as well to take these reasons up one at a time at the very outset in an effort to clear away as much underbrush as possible before turning our attention to the protesting farmers of the 1890's.

There are three principal areas of interpretive confusion that bear directly on the Populist experience. First, very little understanding exists as to just what mass democratic movements are, and how they happen. Second, there are serious problems embedded in the very language of description modern Americans routinely employ to characterize political events. These problems particularly affect commonly held presumptions about how certain "classes" of people are supposed to "act" on the stage of history. Finally, and by all odds most importantly, our greatest problem in understanding protest is grounded in contemporary American culture. In addition to being central, this cultural difficulty is also the most resistant to clear explanation: we are not only culturally confused, our confusion makes it difficult for us even to imagine our confusion. Obviously, it is prudent, then, to start here.

The reigning American presumption about the American experience is grounded in the idea of progress, the conviction that the present is "better" than the past and the future will bring still more betterment. This reassuring belief rests securely on statistical charts and tables certifying the steady upward tilt in economic production. Admittedly, social problems have persisted — inequities of income and opportunity have plagued the society — but these, too, have steadily been addressed through the sheer growth of the economy. For all of its shortcomings, the system works.

This is a powerful assumption. It may be tested by reflecting upon the fact that, despite American progress, the society has been forced to endure sundry movements of protest. In our effort to address the inconvenient topic of protest, our need to be intellectually consistent — while thinking within the framework of continuous progress — has produced a number of explanations about the nature of dissent in America. Closely followed, these arguments are not really explanations at all, but rather the assertion of more presumptions that have the effect of defending the basic intuition about progress itself. The most common of these explanations rests upon what is perceived to be a temporary malfunction of the economic order: people protest when "times are hard." When times stop being "hard," people stop protesting and things return to "normal" — that is to say, progress is resumed.

Unfortunately, history does not support the notion that mass protest movements develop because of hard times. Depressed economies or exploitive arrangements of power and privilege may produce lean years or even lean lifetimes for millions of people, but the

historical evidence is conclusive that they do not produce mass political insurgency. The simple fact of the matter is that, in ways that affect mind and body, times have been "hard" for most humans throughout human history and for most of that period people have not been in rebellion. Indeed, traditionalists in a number of societies have often pointed in glee to this passivity, choosing to call it "apathy" and citing it as a justification for maintaining things as they are.

This apparent absence of popular vigor is traceable, however, not to apathy but to the very raw materials of history — that complex of rules, manners, power relationships, and memories that collectively comprise what is called culture. "The masses" do not rebel in instinctive response to hard times and exploitation because they have been culturally organized by their societies not to rebel. They have, instead, been instructed in deference. Needless to say, this is the kind of social circumstance that is not readily apparent to the millions who live within it.

The lack of visible mass political activity on the part of modern industrial populations is a function of how these societies have been shaped by the various economic or political elites who fashioned them. In fundamental ways, this shaping process (which is now quite mature in America) bears directly not only upon our ability to grasp the meaning of American Populism, but our ability to understand protest generally and, most important of all, on our ability to comprehend the prerequisites for democracy itself. This shaping process, therefore, merits some attention.

Upon the consolidation of power, the first duty of revolutionaries (whether of the "bourgeois" or "proletarian" variety) is obviously to try to deflect any further revolutions that necessarily would be directed against them. Though a strong central police or army has sometimes proved essential to this stabilizing process, revolutionaries, like other humans, do not yearn to spend their lives fighting down counterrevolutions. A far more permanent and thus far more desirable solution to the task of achieving domestic tranquillity is cultural — the creation of mass modes of thought that literally make the need for major additional social changes difficult for the mass of the population to imagine. When and if achieved, these conforming modes of thought and conduct constitute the new culture itself. The ultimate victory is nailed into place, therefore, only when the population has been persuaded to define all conceivable political activity within the limits of existing custom. Such a society can genuinely be described as "stable." Thenceforth, protest will pose no ultimate threat because the protesters will necessarily conceive of their options as being so limited that even should they be successful, the resulting "reforms" will not alter significantly the inherited modes of power and privilege. Protest under such conditions of cultural narrowness is, therefore, not only permissible in the eyes of those who rule, but is, from time to time, positively desirable because it fortifies the popular understanding that the society is functioning "democratically." Though for millions of Americans the fact is beyond imagining, such cultural dynamics describe politics in contemporary America. It is one of the purposes of this book to trace how this happened.

It can be said, in advance of the evidence, that this condition of social constraint is by no means solely an American one; it is worldwide and traceable to a common source: the Industrial Revolution. Over the last eight generations, increasingly sophisticated systems of economic organization have developed throughout the western world, spawning factories and factory towns and new forms of corporate centralization and corporate politics. Through these generations of the modern era, millions have been levered off the land and into cities to provide the human components of the age of machinery. Meanwhile, ownership of both industrial and agricultural land has been increasingly centralized. Yet, though these events have caused massive dislocations of family, habitat, and work, creating

mass suffering in many societies and anxiety in all of them, mass movements of protest have rarely materialized. This historical constant points to a deeper reality of the modern world: industrial societies have not only become centralized, they have devised rules of conduct that are intimidating to their populations as a whole. Though varying in intensity in important ways from nation to nation, this has now happened everywhere — whether a particular society regards itself as "socialist" or "capitalist." When people discover that their intellectual autonomy has become severely circumscribed and their creativity forcibly channeled into acceptable non-political modes of expression (a not unfrequent circumstance in socialist systems of economic organization), they are told that their autonomous hungers are "decadent," "individualistic," and, if obstinately pursued, will be seen as "revisionist" and "counterrevolutionary" in intent. On the other hand, when people discover they have far fewer opportunities than others of their countrymen (a not infrequent circumstance in capitalist systems of economic organization), they are told — as Populists were told in the 1890's and as blacks, Appalachian whites, and migrant laborers are told today in America — that they are "improvident," "lazy," inherently "deprived," or in some similar fashion culturally handicapped and at fault. These stigmas (which in earlier times were also visited upon Irish, Jewish, Italian, and other immigrants to America) generate fears; people are driven to undergo considerable indignity to earn sufficient status to avoid them. Accordingly, they try to do those things necessary to "get ahead." The result is visible in the obsequious day-to-day lives of white-collar corporate employees in America — and in the even more obsequious lives of Communist Party functionaries in the Soviet Union. Though life clearly contains far more options in America than in Russia, the persistence of these varying modes of mass deference in both countries illuminate the social limits of democratic forms in modern industrial societies generally. It is interesting to observe that each of the aforementioned adjectives, from "counterrevolutionary" to "lazy," is offered in the name of preserving corporate or state cultures self-described as "democratic." It is clear that the varied methods of social control fashioned in industrial societies have, over time, become sufficiently pervasive and subtle that a gradual erosion of democratic aspirations among whole populations has taken place. Accordingly, it is evident that the precise meaning of the word "democracy" has become increasingly obscure as industrialization has proceeded. It is appropriate to attempt to pursue the matter — for problems inherent in defining democracy underscore the cultural crisis of modern life around the globe.

In America, an important juncture in the political consolidation of the industrial culture came some four generations ago, at the culmination of the Populist moment in the 1890's. Because the decline in popular democratic aspiration since then has involved an absence of something rather than a visible presence, it has materialized in ways that are largely unseen. Politically, the form exists today primarily as a mass folkway of resignation, one that has become increasingly visible since the end of World War II. People do not believe they can do much "in politics" to affect substantively either their own daily lives or the inherited patterns of power and privilege within their society. Nothing illustrates the general truth of this phenomenon more than the most recent exception to it, namely the conduct of the student radicals of the 1960's. While the students themselves clearly felt they could substantively affect "inherited patterns of power and privilege," the prevailing judgment of the 1970's, shared by both the radicals and their conservative critics, is that the students were naive to have had such sweeping hopes. Today, political life in America has once more returned to normal levels of resignation.

Again, the folkway is scarcely an American monopoly. In diverse forms, popular resignation is visible from Illinois to the Ukraine. It does more than measure a sense of impotence among masses of people; it has engendered escapist modes of private conduct that focus upon material acquisition. The young of both societies seek to "plug in" to the system, the better to reap private rewards. Public life is much lower on the scale of priorities. Indeed, the disappearance of a visible public ethic and sense of commonweal has become the subject of handwringing editorials in publications as diverse as the Chicago *Tribune* in the United States and *Izvestia* in the Soviet Union. The retreat of the Russian populace represents a simple acknowledgment of ruthless state power. Deference is an essential ingredient of personal survival. In America, on the other hand, mass resignation represents a public manifestation of a private loss, a decline in what people think they have a political right to aspire to — in essence, a decline of individual political self-respect on the part of millions of people.

The principal hazard to a clear understanding of the meaning of American Populism exists in this central anomaly of contemporary American culture. Reform movements such as Populism necessarily call into question the underlying values of the larger society. But if that society is perceived by its members to be progressive and democratic — and yet is also known to have resisted the movement of democratic reform — the reigning cultural presumption necessarily induces people to place the "blame" for the failure of protest upon the protesters themselves. Accordingly, in the case of the Populists, the mainstream presumption is both simple and largely unconscious: one studies Populism to learn where the Populists went wrong. The condescension toward the past that is implicit in the idea of progress merely reinforces such complacent premises.

Further, if the population is politically resigned (believing the dogma of "democracy" on a superficial public level but not believing it privately) it becomes quite difficult for people to grasp the scope of popular hopes that were alive in an earlier time when democratic expectations were larger than those people permit themselves to have today. By conjoining these two contradictory features of modern culture — the assumption of economic progress with massive political resignation — it is at once evident that modern people are culturally programmed, as it were, to conclude that past American egalitarians such as the Populists were "foolish" to have had such large democratic hopes. Again, our "progressive" impulse to condescend to the past merely reinforces such a presumption. In a society in which sophisticated deference masks private resignation, the democratic dreams of the Populists have been difficult for twentieth-century people to imagine. Contemporary American culture itself therefore operates to obscure the Populist experience.

A second obstacle to a clear perception of Populism is embedded in the language of description through which contemporary Americans attempt to characterize "politics." A central interpretive tool, derived from Marx but almost universally employed today by Marxists and non-Marxists alike, is based upon concepts of class: that is, that the intricate nature of social interaction in history can be rendered more intelligible by an understanding of the mode and extent of class conflict that was or was not at work during a given period. Needless to say, many psychological, social, and economic ingredients are embedded in concepts of class, and, when handled with care, they can, indeed, bring considerable clarity to historical events of great complexity. Nevertheless, as an interpretive device, "class" is a treacherous tool if handled casually and routinely — as it frequently is. For example,

offhand "class analysis," when applied to the agrarian revolt in America, will merely succeed in rendering the Populist experience invisible. While classes in agricultural societies contain various shadings of "property-consciousness" on the part of rich landowners, smallholders, and landless laborers ("gentry," "farmers," and "tenants," in American terminology), these distinctions create more problems than they solve when applied to the agrarian revolt. It is a long-standing assumption — not so thoroughly tested in America by sustained historical investigation as some might believe — that "landowners" must perforce behave in politically reactionary ways. The political aspirations of the landless are seen to deserve intense scrutiny, but the politics of "the landed" cannot be expected to contain serious progressive ideas. The power of this theoretical assumption can scarcely be understated. It permits the political efforts of millions of human beings to be dismissed with the casual flourish of an abstract category of interpretation. One can only assert the conviction that a thoroughgoing history of, for example, the Socialist Party of the United States, including the history of the recruitment of its agrarian following in early twentieth-century America, will not be fully pieced together until this category of political analysis is successfully transcended. The condition of being "landed" or "landless" does not, *à priori,* predetermine one's potential for "progressive" political action: circumstances surrounding the ownership or non-ownership of land are centrally relevant, too. The Populist experience in any case puts this proposition to a direct and precise test, for the agrarian movement was created by landed *and* landless people. The platform of the movement argued in behalf of the landless because that platform was seen as being progressive for small landowners, too. Indeed, from beginning to end, the chief Populist theoreticians — "landowners" all — stood in economic terms with the propertyless rural and urban people of America.

In consequence, neither the human experiences within the mass institutions generated by the agrarian revolt nor the ideology of Populism itself can be expected to become readily discernible to anyone, capitalist or Marxist, who is easily consoled by the presumed analytical clarity of categories of class. The interior life of the agrarian revolt makes this clear enough. While the economic and political threads of populism did not always mesh in easy harmony (any more than the cultural threads did), the evolution of the political ideology of the movement proceeded from a common center and a common experience and thus possessed an instructive degree of sequential consistency.

The use of the word "sequential" provides an appropriate introduction to the final hazard confronting the student of the agrarian revolt — the rather elementary problem of defining just what "mass movements" are and how they happen. The sober fact is that movements of mass democratic protest — that is to say, coordinated insurgent actions by hundreds of thousands or millions of people — represent a political, an organizational, and above all, a cultural achievement of the first magnitude. Beyond this, mass protest requires a high order not only of cultural education and tactical achievement, it requires a high order of *sequential* achievement. These evolving stages of achievement are essential if large numbers of intimidated people are to generate both the psychological autonomy and the practical means to challenge culturally sanctioned authority. A failure at any stage of the sequential process aborts or at the very least sharply limits the growth of the popular movement. Unfortunately, the overwhelming nature of the impediments to these stages of sequential achievement are rarely taken into account. The simple fact of the matter is that so difficult has the process of movement-building proven to be since the onset of industrialization in the western world that all democratic protest movements have been aborted or limited in this manner prior to the recruitment of their full natural constituency. The underlying social reality is, therefore, one that is not generally kept firmly in mind as an operative dynamic of

modern society — namely, that mass democratic movements are overarchingly difficult for human beings to generate.

How does mass protest happen at all, then — to the extent that it does happen?

The Populist revolt — the most elaborate example of mass insurgency we have in American history — provides an abundance of evidence that can be applied in answering this question. The sequential process of democratic movement-building will be seen to involve four stages: (1) the creation of an autonomous institution where new interpretations can materialize that run counter to those of prevailing authority — a development which, for the sake of simplicity, we may describe as "the movement forming"; (2) the creation of a tactical means to attract masses of people — "the movement recruiting"; (3) the achievement of a heretofore culturally unsanctioned level of social analysis — "the movement educating"; and (4) the creation of an institutional means whereby the new ideas, shared now by the rank and file of the mass movement, can be expressed in an autonomous political way — "the movement politicized."

Imposing cultural roadblocks stand in the way of a democratic movement at every stage of this sequential process, causing losses in the potential constituencies that are to be incorporated into the movement. Many people may not be successfully "recruited," many who are recruited may not become adequately "educated," and many who are educated may fail the final test of moving into autonomous political action. The forces of orthodoxy, occupying the most culturally sanctioned command posts in the society, can be counted upon, out of self-interest, to oppose each stage of the sequential process — particularly the latter stages, when the threat posed by the movement has become clear to all. In the aggregate, the struggle to create a mass democratic movement involves intense cultural conflict with many built-in advantages accruing to the partisans of the established order.

Offered here in broad outline, then, is a conceptual framework through which to view the building process of mass democratic movements in modern industrial societies. The recruiting, educating, and politicizing methods will naturally vary from movement to movement and from nation to nation, and the relative success in each stage will obviously vary also. The actions of both the insurgents and the defenders of the received culture can also be counted upon to influence events dramatically.

Within this broad framework, it seems helpful to specify certain subsidiary components. Democratic movements are initiated by people who have individually managed to attain a high level of personal political self-respect. They are not resigned; they are not intimidated. To put it another way, they are not culturally organized to conform to established hierarchical forms. Their sense of autonomy permits them to dare to try to change things by seeking to influence others. The subsequent stages of recruitment and of internal economic and political education (steps two, three, and four) turn on the ability of the democratic organizers to develop widespread methods of internal communication within the mass movement. Such democratic facilities provide the only way the movement can defend itself to its own adherents in the face of the adverse interpretations certain to emanate from the received culture. If the movement is able to achieve this level of internal communication and democracy, and the ranks accordingly grow in numbers and in political consciousness, a new plateau of social possibility comes within reach of all participants. In intellectual terms, the generating force of this new mass mode of behavior may be rather simply described as

"a new way of looking at things." It constitutes a new and heretofore unsanctioned mass folkway of autonomy. In psychological terms, its appearance reflects the development within the movement of a new kind of collective self-confidence. "Individual self-respect" and "collective self-confidence" constitute, then, the cultural building blocks of mass democratic politics. Their development permits people to conceive of the idea of acting in self-generated democratic ways — as distinct from passively participating in various hierarchical modes bequeathed by the received culture. In this study of Populism, I have given a name to this plateau of cooperative and democratic conduct. I have called it "the movement culture." Once attained, it opens up new vistas of social possibility, vistas that are less clouded by inherited assumptions. I suggest that all significant mass democratic movements in human history have generated this autonomous capacity. Indeed, had they not done so, one cannot visualize how they could have developed into significant mass democratic movements.

Democratic politics hinge fundamentally on these sequential relationships. Yet, quite obviously the process is extremely difficult for human beings to set in motion and even more difficult to maintain — a fact that helps explain why genuinely democratic cultures have not yet been developed by mankind. Self-evidently, mass democratic societies cannot be created until the components of the creating process have been theoretically delineated and have subsequently come to be understood in practical ways by masses of people. This level of political analysis has not yet been reached, despite the theoretical labors of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and their sundry disciples and critics. As a necessary consequence, twentieth-century people, instead of participating in democratic cultures, live in hierarchical cultures, "capitalist" and "socialist," that merely call themselves democratic.

All of the foregoing constitutes an attempt to clear enough cultural and ideological landscape to permit an unhampered view of American Populism. The development of the democratic movement was sequential. The organizational base of the agrarian revolt was an institution called the National Farmers Alliance and Industrial Union. Created by men of discernible self-possession and political self-respect, the Alliance experimented in new methods of economic self-help. After nine years of trial and error, the people of the Alliance developed a powerful mechanism of mass recruitment — the world's first large-scale working class cooperative. Farmers by the hundreds of thousands flocked into the Alliance. In its recruiting phase, the movement swept through whole states "like a cyclone" because, easily enough, the farmers joined the Alliance in order to join the Alliance cooperative. The subsequent experiences of millions of farmers within their cooperatives proceeded to "educate" them about the prevailing forms of' economic power and privilege in America. This process of education was further elaborated through a far-flung agency of internal communication, the 40,000 lecturers of the Alliance lecturing system. Finally, after the effort of the Alliance at economic self-help had been defeated by the financial and political institutions of industrial America, the people of the movement turned to independent political action by creating their own institution, the People's Party. All of these experiences, stretching over a fifteen-year period from 1877 to 1892, may be seen as an evolutionary pattern of democratic organizing activity that generated, and in turn was

generated by, an increasing self-awareness on the part of the participants. In consequence, a mass democratic movement was fashioned.*

Once established in 1892, the People's Party challenged the corporate state and the creed of progress it put forward. It challenged, in sum, the world we live in today. Though our loyalty to our own world makes the agrarian revolt culturally difficult to grasp, Populism may nevertheless be seen as a time of economically coherent democratic striving. Having said this, it is also necessary to add that Populists were not supernatural beings. As theoreticians concerned with certain forms of capitalist exploitation, they were creative and, in a number of ways, prescient. As economists, they were considerably more thoughtful and practical than their contemporary political rivals in both major parties. As organizers of a huge democratic movement, Populists learned a great deal about both the power of the received hierarchy and the demands imposed on themselves by independent political action. As third party tacticians, they had their moments, though most of their successes came earlier in the political phase of their movement than later. And, finally, as participants in the democratic creed, they were, on the evidence, far more advanced than most Americans, then or since.

But American Populists did not parachute in from Mars. They grew up in American culture and felt the pull of its teachings. Though they knew they were pioneers, and earnestly endeavored to persuade others of the merit of what they had learned along their own path of democratic innovation, they did not always do so free of inherited cultural barnacles. They had earlier learned a number of things taught by the dominant culture; and more than a few people stumbled into the movement with many of their traditional inheritances almost wholly intact. The tension between these modes of conduct persisted within the agrarian movement throughout its life. Populists also encountered more specific hazards. They sought to enlist the urban working class without understanding the needs, nor the barriers to autonomous political expression, that informed life in the metropolitan ghettos of the nineteenth-century factory worker. Populists sought to enlist landless black sharecroppers (and in so doing explored new modes of interracial political coalition) without ultimately shaking off the more subtle forms of white supremacy that fundamentally undermine the civility of American society in our own time. And Populists tried through democratic politics to bring the corporate state under popular control without fully anticipating the counter-tactics available to the nation's financial and industrial spokesmen. In summary, though Populists generated a vibrant democratic movement, they were not unfailingly guided by genius. Their shortcomings as well as their achievements contain much that is useful to all those who study history because they continue to nurse aspirations for an industrial society in which generous social relations among masses of people might prevail as a cultural norm.

A final prefatory comment. It is helpful to bear in mind that the Populist moment in America came before the global twentieth-century struggle between the East and the West. It came, therefore, at a time when the range of culturally sanctioned political traditions was broader than two. As children of the two spreading cultures of intellectual conformity that are a product of that conflict, modern people live in a time of extreme politicization of knowledge throughout the world. Rigid modes of thought and terminology dominate the schools and colleges of both traditions. The young of both can imbibe the particular received wisdom of their theoretical tradition (however distorted by the events of history that theoretical tradition has become) or, if they are somehow unconvinced and can cope with the ostracism involved, they can adopt the rival mode. Within the perceived limits of this most ideologically confined of recent centuries, one is surely right: man is either a

competitive being or a cooperative being. However all those who are not persuaded by this speculation — or faith — soon discover how difficult it is to express their disbelief in terminology that the confined participants in twentieth-century culture can understand. Capitalist "modernization theory" and Marxist "democratic centralism," together with supporting linguistic accoutrements, have left mankind in our time with few conceptual options through which to assert believable political aspirations to the mass of the world's peoples. In both traditions, one "believes" or one does not, but in terms of sanctioned categories of political language, the option for the unconvinced is an option of one. So be it. The Populists did not know that the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, and the ascendancy of the multinational corporation were to be the coercive and competitive products of the industrial age. Spared the ideological apologetics and narrowness of a later time, Populists thought of man as being both competitive and cooperative. They tilted strongly toward the latter, but they also confronted the enduring qualities of the former. They accepted this complexity about mankind, and they tried to conceive of a society that would be generous — and would also house this complexity. With all of their shortcomings, including theoretical shortcomings, the Populists speak to the anxieties of the twentieth century with their own unique brand of rustic relevance.

Out of their cooperative struggle came a new democratic community. It engendered within millions of people what Martin Luther King would later call a "sense of somebodiness." This "sense" was a new way of thinking about oneself and about democracy. Thus armed, the Populists attempted to insulate themselves against being intimidated by the enormous political, economic, and social pressures that accompanied the emergence of corporate America.

To describe that attempt is to describe their movement.

L.G.
Durham, N. C.
May 1, 1978

[1] Of course protest is not invariably an economic expression; it can also emerge from unsanctioned conceptions of civil liberty, as illustrated by the movements of Anti-Federalists, suffragettes, feminists, and blacks. While demonstrably important in their own terms, such movements historically have not mounted broad challenges to the underlying economic structures of inherited power and privilege that fundamentally shape the parameters of American society. Even the one movement that most nearly approached this level of insurgency — abolitionism — actually challenged, in slavery, only a deviance *within* the economic order rather than the underlying structure of the order itself.

[2] Though European and Asian conceptions of agricultural "classes" can be applied to America only if one is willing to accept a considerable distortion of reality, Populism can with a stretch of the imagination be seen as a product of the organizing efforts of middle peasants engaged in recruiting both their own "kind" and lower peasants. But one must immediately add that such interesting examples of agrarian "unity" can be more swiftly explained through recourse either to the labor theory of value or to simple historical observation rather than to class categories.

[3] For example, five sequentially related stages of this ideological process, all contradicting conclusions implicit in perfunctory class analysis, are treated on pp. 75-76, 78-80, 84-87, 91-93 and 108-13.
American factory workers, for example, were unable for generations to successfully complete step one of the process because their initial strikes for recognition were lost and their fragile new unions destroyed. They thus were unable to create autonomous institutions of their own. See pp. 41-42, 117-18, and 174-76.

[4] Since Populism was a mass movement (and one that attempted to be even more "massive" than it was), the sequential stages in the recruiting and politicizing of its mass constituency are the core of this study. The stages of this sequential development may be found on pp. 26-35, 39-41, 49, 58-59, 64-66, 73, 75-87, 91-93,108-15, 125-36, 148-64, and 172-82. The mass movement reached its practical range of politicization in 1892 (pp. 175-82). The summary interpretation of these sequential democratic stages is on pp. 293-310 and 318-19.

Tragedy and Hope in American Labor

BY PAUL BUHLE

Millennium Part One - Democratic Left

Just a few years ago, the story of American labor seemed like one of those oversold movies which start out grandly, drift into heavy action with special effects, and wind down as the audience heads for the exits. Several mini-generations of young idealists, many of them in DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] or like-minded feminist and labor reform organizations, had thrown their energies into the labor movement only to face odds so daunting that most drifted out again. Practically a whole generation of radical historians, heading to graduate school on the wave of anti-war campus uprisings, had dedicated itself to rediscovering the secret history of working class life "from below," in forgotten strikes and the turmoil of daily struggles for bread and dignity. Not unlike their activist cousins, they produced a library of solidly researched and insightful volumes — for fewer and fewer readers.

The outright decline of the contemporary labor movement and its special failure to engage poorer and nonwhite workers; the consuming Cold War conservatism of AFL-CIO leaders on issues ranging from Central America to feminism, affirmative action and environmentalism; and perhaps most of all, the success of the bureaucratic lock-step against reform and reinvigoration, had together taken their toll. By the middle 1980s and in the face of constant denials, the Lane Kirkland leadership had reached something like a dead end. Progressives had successfully eroded the previously unchallenged authority of conservative labor chiefs, especially on Third World human rights issues, and also the mobilization of service workers, but had little luck.

Only a few years later, in 1995, the failed and morally tainted AFL-CIO leadership was outmaneuvered (in part by DSAers), outvoted and out the door, replaced by self-described reformers. Meanwhile, thousands of graduate students formed unions, and yet more undergraduates looked to labor causes, especially the international sweatshop, as a prime campus issue. Labor teach-ins brought progressive unionists and campus audiences back together in ways unforeseen a decade earlier. In 1997, "Scholars, Artists and Writers for Social Justice" (SAWSJ) formed, with a very DSA-like program and the blessings of the John Sweeney administration. Even labor history looked more interesting again. Never, in fact, had things looked better for democratic socialists since the Cold War purge of Left-wing unions and unionists a half-century ago.

Things were, and are, regrettably not so wonderful. An AFL-CIO united behind progressive social movements (peace, antiracism, feminism and ecology) of the 1960s-80s

would surely have changed labor and might have changed the world, but it didn't happen that way, and we are more than forty years behind. The grand project of labor reform, twin to potential labor alliances with students, women, minorities and others near the bottom of society, has far to go and many well-placed opponents, some of them within the AFL-CIO.

A staff writer for *Forward,* a newspaper which long saw itself intimately allied with a socialist or, later, reformist section of labor, recently commented that organized labor's pro-business faction had indeed been temporarily defeated, but that success in a heralded drive to "organize high-wage workers in Silicon Valley and across the information technology" could eventually overcome momentum in the direction of what the writer contemptuously called "the likes of strawberry workers." At that point, the old Cold War labor leadership would "have the votes needed to turn the tables on Mr. Sweeney."

Leave aside for the moment that many high-technology workers are anything but high-wage workers; the issue is clearer in that ringing phrase, "the likes of strawberry workers." Not only does it resound with the historic quest of American craft unionism and its leaders for 'respectability' in society, but with the assignment of dominant racial and cultural categories to one sector of workers over others. It also returns us to the very making of the America Federation of Labor and Samuel Gompers, business unionism's iconic figure.

Recent scholars have pinpointed the moment of Gompers' rise to his identification of the Chinese as objects for exclusion. The very notion of the union label, although used subsequently for better purposes, was the "white label," designating products free of the Chinese immigrant touch and yellow labor, not contract labor, that Gompers and the early AFL resisted. For forty years Gompers and his coterie sought to limit organized labor to the distinct minority of craft workers, excluding the overwhelming majority of women workers and non-white workers. During those years, Gompers worked effectively with employers, the press and the government to destroy the Knights of Labor and the Industrial Workers of the World, which is to say those movements which sought to embrace all workers and to create an "industrial commonwealth" in place of aggressive capitalism. It should be no surprise that Gompers also clamped down on democracy within the AFL, ruthlessly centralizing power, punishing dissidents, ignoring constitutional provisions in order to quash progressive impulses of all kinds.

Why would an American labor leader abandon the working class at large, and what kind of forces within American labor did Gompers represent? These large questions cannot be exhaustively answered in brief space. But the most important issue is *empire.* No other modern empire, not even the British, has shown the same capacity to shape its society or its labor leaders to such uniform purpose. The familiar liberal praise of American *exceptionalism* operating in a labor movement which pragmatically refused socialist alternatives, not only ignores the manipulative grasp of Gompers and his successors for the next century, but also ignores the hierarchy of race and nation which designated certain Americans (and white American males in general) as the aristocrats of the planet. Overlaid with other factors including ethnic hierarchies, the changing rules of industrial production and the compelling need of leaderships to put down or co-opt challenges to authority, empire and law have demanded an "iron triangle" against bottom-up, inclusive labor

democracy, a mind-set accompanied by oceans of anti-socialist, meritocratic, or pseudo-egalitarian rhetoric dividing "worthy" workers from the "unworthy" poor.

Gompers had good cause, in the narrow sense. No labor movement ever faced a capitalist class so powerful, so concentrated, or so framed within a national tradition of territorial and economic expansion at the expense of nonwhite peoples. The steady advance of colonialism had commanded the destruction of existing labor and social frameworks, including an often sophisticated division of labor among Indians and Hispanics. The slave system was the backbone of the emerging economy, and notwithstanding the abolition of slavery, the expansion of U.S. economic power overseas continued the same basic program. Indeed, if the demands for global democracy have usually (not always) been mere rationalizations for territorial expansion and economic supremacy as the answer to all domestic social problems, then Gompers did not intend to be left out of the imperial feast.

Secondly, any labor movement faced the daunting power of the State. The American legal system, from the Constitution onward, has placed property rights in the hands of the courts. Chosen from the elites of business and the law, the judiciary consistently defined "republicanism" in ways to exclude redistribution of power or rights to the lower classes. Massive legal injunctions and the use of court-supported police and militia threatened more radical efforts.

To buck the system meant inviting trouble; accommodation to it permitted a privileged minority of labor to operate safely and respectably, perhaps even to prove beneficial to the system as a whole by restraining radical "troublemakers" within the working class. Gompers thereby seized opportunities offered him by the courts and the corporations to legitimate his vision of unionism, much as George Meany and Lane Kirkland would use global realities to gain assistance of corporations and intelligence agencies to crush radical or egalitarian challenges at home and abroad.

And yet such interpretations do not fully explain the tragic misdirection of the American labor mainstream. We need to consider briefly the anti-Gompers alternatives. The turning point of American labor was about a century ago. If the American working class up to that point had been deeply divided by race and ethnicity, it was nonetheless impressive in its sometimes ferocious militancy and the willingness of considerable sections to take on realities, like the organization of African-American workers that European counterparts did not face. The Knights of Labor, a half-million strong with female *majorities* in many factories, had begun to throw labor's weight against the economic authoritarianism of corporations by simply taking over daily operation of producing goods. A labor party, following the rise of the Republican Party organized just thirty years earlier, was next on the agenda.

Then came ferocious repression, following the explosion of a bomb in Chicago's Haymarket, releasing police and industry thugs against radicals' offices, beating and arresting activists, especially the foreign-born, blacklisting good unionists and spreading "red scares" through the press and politicians' rhetoric. It was this brutalization, along with appeals to race and ethnic prejudice, which doomed the Knights and the labor party movement. A Democratic Party which then represented the revanchist South, triumphing

over a racially mixed Populist movement by playing the "race card" even as lynchings accelerated, along with exclusion of African-Americans from jobs and residences taken over by new European immigrants in northern states, brought Gompers home to the idea of a political coalition suited to his purposes. Thereafter, the notion of a labor ticket or even the demand that Democrats embrace small "d" democratic principles in race, gender or true class terms, were viewed with extreme hostility. Gompers demanded his "cut" from the electoral spoils, although he consistently exaggerated the real effects of labor legislation within Congress, and ignored the influence of industrial unionists propelling politicians to make concessions to the "safe" union movement so as to uproot the dangerous ones.

Gompers did not succeed in building a global labor empire, the fondest dream of his last years and also the fondest dream of his successors. The Pan American Federation of Labor, launched with secret government funding, and the intellectual assistance of turncoat former socialists, was intended to place control of all Latin American unions in Gompers' hands. By the time of his death it was a dead letter, and the attempts during the 1930s to establish U.S-controlled unions supporting American oil corporations in Mexico also failed.

Gompers also failed American labor, including the AFL itself, in another key regard. When the First World War brought a sudden shortage of labor, working people and experienced unionists, including many socialists, mobilized to strike in unprecedented numbers, and to organize so successfully that by 1919 industrial unionism seemed around the corner. Gompers so successfully demobilized militants that when business howled "Bolshevism," and President Woodrow Wilson's reign of oppression spread from vigilante violence to police raids to lengthy jail sentences, labor caved in before the coming corporate counteroffensive. By the middle 1920s, nearly everything won had been lost, especially for unskilled industrial workers.

History does not really repeat itself, and yet so much of labor history remains largely trapped within this tragic framework. We forget too easily how thousands of craft workers, from highly skilled German wood-workers at the center of Chicago's 1880s anarchist movement, to railroad men and machinists following Eugene Debs, to the needletrades women workers of the 1909 "Uprising of the 20,000" sought to make their own way toward a generous, egalitarian, inclusive labor movement. We forget even more easily the crucial role of thousands of pro-Communist immigrants rallying grassroots support for industrial unionism during the 1920s-30s and urging racial equality. We forget how much positive influence labor wielded within the political world from 1936 through 1944, and how close it came during the 1940s to breakthroughs in organizing southerners, women and nonwhite workers — until the Cold War and Harry Truman ended the dream.

We forget because the bland and defeated AFL-CIO, at the two organizations' merger in 1956, had effectively rewritten the past with the help of prestigious scholars and journalists, and minimized or marginalized every alternative to Gompersism. The cooperation of the New Deal administration — sometimes tacit, sometimes real — in legitimating industrial unions was now seen as a gift from above rather than won through labor power expressed in direct action of mass strikes and sit-ins. More important, the major political goals were viewed as completed by the welfare (and warfare) state politics that included influential

union leaders. Now, organized labor mainly wanted adjustments, and mainly for itself. Workers outside unions, except those in government, were essentially written off as too much trouble to reach and probably not worth the effort. The popular labor opposition to the weapons industry ("Merchants of Death") during the 1930s was repressed from memory, and the determined anti-fascism of left-wing unions now treated as a mere preface to anti-communism and the job-creating arms race. Antiracism, nominally a centerpiece of the AFL-CIO political program, was never to be applied within unions themselves; anything approaching affirmative action would be resisted, with resentful comments about the ingratitude of those who dared to ask.

The dual or multiple labor market, a constant in America, where the ratio between the best paid and worst paid workers has long been the largest in the world, thus took on new meaning in the second half of the century. The veterans of 1930s and 1940s unions, by now looking ahead to retirement, had become the favored workers in a factory workforce increasingly nonwhite and in numeric decline. The blue-collar towns of the South, Southwest and far West, practically brought into being by the federal defense and water subsidies, harbored the mulch of future Reagan Democrats. In a larger sense, the suburbs, created twice over by tax dollars for the highways and mortgage benefits, offered what only the streetcar suburbs had made possible for the labor aristocrats of the 1890s: distance from the unwashed masses.

Unions, for all their failures and weaknesses, nevertheless alone possessed the potential power to mediate these differences, to bring together the variegated sections of a working class which even under the most favorable conditions still faced work five days a week, if not more. Self-satisfied and deeply conservative, AFL-CIO leaders (with honorable exceptions) pulled members in the opposite direction, toward imperial — and more subtly, race — claims upon the lives of peoples in the ghettos and around the globe, toward macho war-posturing, toward an indifference and worse about the inherently undemocratic choices, ecological costs, the community destruction and sheer ugliness of economic development-at-any-price.

Other choices were not even considered; to be more positive, they were *all* considered by labor reformers, tried out and defeated each time until the last time, in October 1995. In retrospect, the Meany and Kirkland administrations' meanness of spirit, their unwillingness to countenance the mildest retreat from Cold War global strategies even after the Cold War, their organizational blundering and missed cues for potential organizing breakthroughs may have contributed less to the final defeat of the Kirkland team than the willingness of long-distance runners, many from DSA, to stick out the disappointments and keep coming back for more. What we need is more long-distance runners, and quite a few more upsets.

In that sense, American labor history, a long-running tragedy, may yet have a happy ending. At least an especially unhappy act has ended, and the future is open for something a thousand times more interesting, something dramatically more inspiring, and altogether better.

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Labor Must
CHALLENGE CORPORATE RULE

By Peter Kellman

BY WHAT AUTHORITY • SPRING 1999

It is time for labor to go beyond signing contracts with corporations. We need to start challenging the very concept of corporate privilege and rule.

The people of this country need to act on the understanding that we the people create corporations through our state legislatures. As the Pennsylvania Legislature declared in 1834, "A corporation in law is just what the incorporation act makes it. It is the creature of the law and may be molded to any shape or for any purpose the Legislature may deem most conducive for the common good." If we don't mold corporations, they will continue to mold us. They will mold us at the expense of our rights, our health, our democracy, our communities, our environment and most importantly, our souls.

For almost 80 years, labor's message has been primarily limited to protecting the interests of organized workers. But workers' rights don't exist in a vacuum. A fundamental law of physics can also be applied to politics: two things cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Workers' rights in this country have been relegated to a little space under a chair in the corner of a large room occupied by corporate "rights" — in quotes because only people can have rights, and corporations are not people.

People have rights, inalienable rights. Corporations have only the privileges we the people give them, because corporations are created by people through their legislatures. Corporations are not mentioned in the United States Constitution. Their constitutional privileges stem from Supreme Court cases, judge-made law. These judges are lawyers, appointed for life. In Santa Clara County v. the Southern Pacific Railroad Corporation (1886), the Supreme Court of the United States declared that "...equal protection of the laws, applies to these corporations." The meaning of the Court was clear: corporations are persons under the law deserving "equal protection."

Equal protection is a term used in the 14th Amendment to bring African-Americans under constitutional protection. The activist Court of 1886 bestowed "equal protection" on the corporation. This judicial conversion of people's rights to corporate privilege has done much to create the present situation. The price of each expansion of corporate privilege has been a contraction in workers' rights.

Every day union people are confronted with this erosion of their rights in union organizing, internal governance, the political process and authority over union property such as pension funds. Look, for example, how the court's role diminishes the power of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to the detriment of workers' rights.

OSHA was put in place by Congress in 1970. When you called up OSHA, it would send an investigator to your place of work. Corporate managers objected and went to court. They argued that the corporation should be afforded the same protection that flesh and blood people have under the Fourth Amendment against unreasonable searches of their property. They said OSHA inspectors needed a search warrant to inspect corporate property!

In 1978 (Marshall v. Barlow) the Supreme Court of the United States agreed. So the right of individual people to be protected from the government arbitrarily entering a person's home was extended to corporations. The Court ruled that corporations have the

privilege to require OSHA inspectors to get a search warrant before entering corporate property to investigate the complaints of a worker regarding her health and welfare. In essence, the Court interpreted the obligation of the government to "promote the general welfare" of workers to be secondary to the liberty of a corporation to prevent entry of a government inspector. In this case, while the OSHA inspector is getting a warrant from a judge, the corporation can clean up its act and avoid being found in violation of the law.

The OSHA case is but one example of how the granting of privileges to corporations diminishes the rights of workers. Another is the way corporate employers injected "employer free speech rights" into the process by which workers exercise their "right to associate" in choosing a union to represent them in the workplace.

Under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) required employer neutrality when it came to the self-organization of workers. That is, if an employer interfered in any way with a union organizing drive it was considered a violation of the Act. "The right of employees to choose their representatives when and as they wish is normally no more the affair of the employer than the right of the stockholders to choose directors is the affair of employees," stated the Board. However, with the 1947 passage of the Taft-Hartley Act (termed "the slave labor act" by labor), corporate privilege was inserted into labor rights and corporations were granted "free speech" in the union certification process.

The concept of "corporate free speech" in the union certification process may sound benign to the casual observer. However, if you are involved in a union organizing drive the brutality of the corporate employer's use of "free speech" to usurp the worker's right to "freedom of association" becomes apparent in many ways. One example is called the "captive audience meeting" where the employer assembles workers during working hours and harangues them on the negative consequences of unionization. The corporate spokesperson will inject the notion that if the workers choose a union the company might take that as a sign that their facility might not be a good one to invest in. The company spokesperson will point out that many union shops have been closed over the past couple of decades and the work moved to non-union areas of the country or offshore. The company uses "corporate free speech" to send a clear message: voting for a union means you are voting to close the facility. So much for a worker's right to "freely associate."

The OSHA unreasonable search and the Taft-Hartley corporate free speech instances illustrate that workers cannot assert their fundamental rights unless they deny corporate privilege. Yet for years most of organized labor's activity has revolved around labor Political Action Committees (PACs) giving money to people running for Congress. The money was followed by union leaders trying to convince union members to vote for endorsed "labor candidates." Then, when the new congress took office, labor lobbyists encourage politicians to support labor issues. Labor's record isn't very good because the focus has been on the money given to politicians instead of rank-and-file organizing to confront corporate privilege.

If labor abandoned its PACs and focused its energy on getting members involved in the process, think of the results. First, labor could develop organizations that would put resources into involving the membership in the political process rather than trying to influence politicians with money for their campaigns. Secondly, imagine the message that labor would be sending by voluntarily giving up that corrupting influence on our body politic, the Political Action Committee.

The bottom line is that historically, managers and large stockholders of corporations have a leg up on the rest of us. This process has continued for over 100 years and unlike the union people of a century ago, we no longer understand the origins of corporate privilege. So it is time to take another look. And out of that look MUST come an agenda created by working people that promotes workers' rights and challenges the root of corporate privilege.

So what is labor to do? Labor should take a sabbatical for a year and use the time to analyze what we have been doing over the past century. Then, with history as a guide and real democratic participation of the membership, labor could put together a new agenda that promotes workers' rights and attacks corporate privileges.

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One such agenda is already in place. The following resolution addressing many of the issues raised by Peter Kellman was unanimously approved at the Labor Party's First Constitutional Convention, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, November 13-15, 1998.

Resolution: WORKPLACE BILL OF RIGHTS

WHEREAS, the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution does not protect us against the denial of our rights by private concentrations of power and wealth, and

WHEREAS, we have wrongly come to accept that at work we are not entitled to the rights and privileges we normally enjoy as citizens, and

WHEREAS, private wealth has made sure to convince the Supreme Court that although a corporation is not a living person it is afforded the protections and rights of the Bill of Rights, while living persons at work are denied these same protections, and

WHEREAS, we therefore find that the corporations and Congress through current law have turned democracy exactly backward —

> At work, we are guilty unless proven innocent;
>
> At work, we obey orders upon penalty of discharge;
>
> At work, our most fundamental right, that of free speech, does not apply;
>
> At work, we cannot freely associate with others to protect our interests;
>
> At work, we have to qualify for rights, forced to take extraordinary efforts to win representation elections, gain government certification, and bargain employer recognition of even minimal rights. On the other hand, the corporations are assumed to possess civil rights, do not have to gain such rights, and consequently have more rights under the law than do people, including their "right" to free speech, to hold captive meetings of their employees, and to express political opinions; and

WHEREAS, working people's efforts to organize unions and bargain collectively is now made, because of the very imbalance in civil rights and economic power, to be extremely difficult in all workplaces and almost impossible in some sectors of the economy; and

WHEREAS, our usual political remedies — calls for labor law "reform" and more efficient regulatory agencies — miss the main point, which is that any legislation or agency that seeks to restrict a corporate "person's" freedom will be rejected, and such efforts have in fact failed miserably under both Democratic and Republican Party administrations; and

WHEREAS, in Japan, Canada and throughout Europe, the very countries which are our trading partners, competitors and national peers, there already exist long-standing methods that recognize civil rights at work, including those for forming unions, bargaining collectively, and otherwise dealing with the employers; and finally

WHEREAS, millions of U.S. workers are AT THIS MOMENT anxious and willing to form unions and bargain with their employers over matters of concern, and are ready to add their huge numbers to our union ranks. In other countries comparable to the United States, these workers would be free to speak, associate, organize unions and bargain with their employers.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT:

1. The Labor Party rejects the status quo of today's workplace where workers are forced to abandon their Constitutional Rights in order to earn their living, and are as a consequence subject to the tyranny of the corporation.

2. The Labor Party demands that workers have the actual right to concerted activity, free from employer involvement or interference, and that any number of interested workers in a workplace must have the right to form a union, and bargain with their employer.

3. The Labor Party insists that all workers must have the ability to exercise their rights to concerted activity irrespective of job titles and responsibilities, citizenship status, method of payment, or sector of the economy in which employed.

4. The Labor Party holds that workers, including workfare, contingent, part-time, temporary, and contract workers, must have the right to bargain over the terms and conditions of their labor with the employer(s) who controls or influences their work environment, irrespective of ownership title.

5. The Labor Party insists upon the restoration of all rights of free association, including the voluntary joining together to redress grievances by strikes, economic boycotts, sympathy actions, "hot cargo" agreements, and common situs picketing.

6. The Labor Party rejects limits on subjects upon which employees and unions may bargain with employers.

7. In order for this Campaign to be advanced, the Labor Party commits itself to:

> A) Popularize this Campaign through Labor Party communications and with unions affiliated with the Labor Party;
>
> B) Select a state in which to develop a state-based campaign to reform state labor relations laws and statutes in accordance with the above principles;
>
> C) Select a state which presently does not permit collective bargaining rights for public employees in which to develop a state-based campaign for rights in accordance with the above principles;
>
> D) Select a city or other location in which to popularize, build support around, and in other ways make real the Labor Party's campaign to bring the Bill of Rights into the workplace;

E) Conduct educational work within the trade union movement, helping all of us to rethink what we mean by workplace rights, to learn what is the practice in other countries similar to the United States; how the current imbalance between corporations and individual rights has evolved in our own country, and how the Labor Party proposes to change this;

F) The Labor Party supports the formation of committees of fired workers wherever possible, to organize and support their fight for workers' rights.

Excerpts from chapters 10 and 11 of *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn:

In the North, the [Civil War] brought high prices for food and the necessities of life. Prices of milk, eggs, cheese were up 60 to 100 percent for families that had not been able to pay the old prices. One historian… described the war situation: "Employers were wont to appropriate to themselves all or nearly all of the profits accruing from the higher prices, without being willing to grant to the employees a fair share of these profits through the medium of higher wages..."

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

The Irish working people of New York, recent immigrants, poor, looked upon with contempt by native Americans [not Indians], could hardly find sympathy for the black population of the city who competed with them for jobs as longshoremen, barbers, waiters, domestic servants. Blacks, pushed out of these jobs, often were used to break strikes. Then came the war, the draft, the chance of death. And the Conscription Act of 1863 provided that the rich could avoid military service: they could pay $300 or buy a substitute…

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

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

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

More important, perhaps, than the federal laws passed by Congress for the benefit of the rich were the day-to-day operations of local and state laws for the benefit of landlords and merchants…

In the thirty years leading up to the Civil War, the law was increasingly interpreted in the courts to suit the capitalist development of the country… Judgments for damages against businessmen were taken out of the hands of juries, which were unpredictable, and given to judges. Private settlement of disputes by arbitration was replaced by court settlements, creating more dependence on lawyers, and the legal profession gained in importance. The ancient idea of a fair price for goods gave way in the courts to the idea of caveat emptor (let the buyer beware), thus throwing generations of consumers from that time on to the mercy of businessmen…

It was a time when the law did not even pretend to protect working people… Health and safety laws were either nonexistent or unenforced…

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

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

The cities to which the soldiers returned were death traps of typhus, tuberculosis, hunger, and fire. In New York, 100,000 people lived in the cellars of the slums; 12,000 women worked in houses of prostitution to keep from starving; the garbage, lying 2 feet deep in the street, was alive with rats. In Philadelphia, while the rich got fresh water from the Schuylkill River, everyone else drank from the Delaware, into which 13 million gallons of sewage were dumped every day…

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

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

The depression continued through the 1870s… All over the country, people were evicted from their homes. Many roamed the cities looking for food…

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

That year [1877] there came a series of tumultuous strikes by railroad workers in a dozen cities; they shook the nation as no labor conflict in its history had done.

In the year 1877, the signals were given for the rest of the century: the black would be put back; the strikes of white workers would not be tolerated; the industrial and political elites of North and South would take hold of the country and organize the greatest march of economic growth in human history. They would do it with the aid of, and at the expense of, black labor, white labor, Chinese labor, European immigrant labor, female labor, rewarding them differently by race, sex, national origin, and social class, in such a way as to create separate levels of oppression — a skillful terracing to stabilize the pyramid of wealth.

Between the Civil War and 1900, steam and electricity replaced human muscle, iron replaced wood, and steel replaced iron (before the Bessemer process, iron was hardened into steel at the rate of 3 to 5 tons a day; now the same amount could be processed in 15 minutes). Machines could now drive steel tools. Oil could lubricate machines and light homes, street, factories. People and goods could move by railroad, propelled by steam along steel rails; by 1900 there were 193,000 miles of railroad. The telephone, the typewriter, and the adding machine speeded up the work of business…

While some millionaires started in poverty, most did not. A study of the origins of 303 textile, railroad, and steel executives of the 1870s showed that 90 percent came from middle- or upper-class families. The Horatio Alger stories of "rags to riches" were true for a few men, but mostly a myth, and a useful myth for control.

Most of the fortune building was done legally, with the collaboration of the government and the courts…

[J. P.] Morgan had escaped military service in the Civil War by paying $300 to a substitute. So did John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Philip Armour, Jay Gould, and James Mellon. Mellon's father had written to him that "a man may be a patriot without risking his own life or sacrificing his health. There are plenty of lives less valuable."…

And so it went, in industry after industry — shrewd, efficient businessmen building empires, choking out competition, maintaining high prices, keeping wages low, using government subsidies. These industries were the first beneficiaries of the "welfare state." By the turn of the century, American Telephone and Telegraph had a monopoly of the nation's telephone system, International Harvester made 85 percent of all farm machinery, and in every other industry resources became concentrated, controlled. The banks had interests in so many of these monopolies as to create an interlocking network of powerful corporation directors, each of whom sat on the boards of many other corporations. According to a Senate report of the early twentieth century, Morgan at his peak sat on the board of forty-eight corporations; Rockefeller, thirty-seven corporations.

Meanwhile, the government of the United States was behaving almost exactly as Karl Marx described a capitalist state: pretending neutrality to maintain order, but serving the interests of the rich. Not that the rich agreed among themselves; they had disputes over policies. But the purpose of the state was to settle upper-class disputes peacefully, control lower-class rebellion, and adopt policies that would further the long-range stability of the system. The arrangement between Democrats and Republicans to elect Rutherford Hayes in 1877 set the tone. Whether Democrats or Republicans won, national policy would not change in any important way…

Control in modern times requires more than force, more than law. It requires that a population dangerously concentrated in cities and factories, whose lives are filled with cause for rebellion, be taught that all is right as it is. And so, the schools, the churches, the popular literature taught that to be rich was a sign of superiority, to be poor a sign of personal failure, and that the only way upward for a poor person was to climb into the ranks of the rich by extraordinary effort and extraordinary luck…

Farming became mechanized — steel plows, mowing machines, reapers, harvesters, improved cotton gins for pulling the fibers away from the seed, and, by the turn of the century, giant combines that cut the grain, threshed it, and put it in bags. In 1830 a bushel of wheat had taken three hours to produce. By 1900, it took ten minutes. Specialization developed by region: cotton and tobacco in the South, wheat and corn in the Midwest.

Land cost money, and machines cost money — so farmers had to borrow, hoping that the prices of their harvests would stay high, so they could pay the bank for the loan, the railroad for transportation, the grain merchant for handling their grain, the storage elevator for storing it. But they found the prices for their produce going down, and the prices of transportation and loans going up, because the individual farmer could not control the price of his grain, while the monopolist railroad and the monopolist banker could charge what they liked…

The farmers who could not pay saw their homes and land taken away. They became tenants. By 1880, 25 percent of all farms were rented by tenants, and the number kept rising. Many did not even have money to rent and became farm laborers; by 1900 there were 4.5 million farm laborers in the country. It was the fate that awaited every farmer who couldn't pay his debts…

The government played its part in helping the bankers and hurting the farmers; it kept the amount of money — based on the gold supply — steady, while the population rose, so there was less and less money in circulation. The farmer had to pay off his debts in dollars that were harder to get. The bankers, getting the loans back, were getting dollars worth more than when they loaned them out — a kind of interest on top of interest. That is why so much of the talk of farmers' movements in those days had to do with putting more money in circulation — by printing greenbacks (paper money for which there was no gold in the treasury) or by making silver a basis for issuing money…

On top of the serious failures to unite blacks and whites, city workers and country workers, there was the lure of electoral politics — all of that combining to destroy the Populist movement. Once allied with the Democratic party in supporting William Jennings Bryan for President in 1896, Populism would drown in a sea of Democratic politics. The pressure for electoral victory led Populism to make deals with the major parties in city after city. If the Democrats won, it

would be absorbed. If the Democrats lost, it would disintegrate. Electoral politics brought into the top leadership the political brokers instead of the agrarian radicals.

There were those radical Populists who saw this. They said fusion with the Democrats to try to "win" would lose what they needed, an independent political movement. They said the much-ballyhooed free silver would not change anything fundamental in the capitalist system. One Texas radical said silver coinage would "leave undisturbed all the conditions which give rise to the undue concentration of wealth."…

In the election of 1896, with the Populist movement enticed into the Democratic party, Bryan, the Democratic candidate, was defeated by William McKinley, for whom the corporations and the press mobilized, in the first massive use of money in an election campaign. Even the hint of Populism in the Democratic party, it seemed, could not be tolerated, and the big guns of the Establishment pulled out all their ammunition, to make sure.

It was a time, as election times have often been in the United States, to consolidate the system after years of protest and rebellion. The black was being kept under control in the South. The Indian was being driven off the western plains for good… It was the climax to four hundred years of violence that began with Columbus, establishing that this continent belonged to white men. But only to certain white men, because it was clear by 1896 that the state stood ready to crush labor strikes, by the law if possible, by force if necessary. And where a threatening mass movement developed, the two-party system stood ready to send out one of its columns to surround that movement and drain it of vitality.