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CAPITAL TRIUMPHANT

THE POSTWAR DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT

AMERICAN LABOR entered the postwar period full of high expectations. Having benefited from a number of National War Labor Board rulings and having launched successful wartime organizing drives, the AFL anticipated further growth. But major American corporations believed that labor had taken undue advantage of the “national emergency.” Conflicting goals and expectations meant that 1919 would be a memorable year for labor-capital confrontations. Capital scored a decisive victory in the most important of these battles, the 1919 steel strike, but labor retained and even extended many of its gains until the depression began in mid-1920. At that point, American business, proclaiming its belief in the open shop, fully reasserted its power at the workplace. AFL unions conducted defensive strikes in 1922, but by the mid-1920s, a badly battered labor movement had practically disappeared as a significant factor in an America resplendent with “Coolidge Prosperity.”

The 1919 Strike Wave

More than four million workers participated in strikes during 1919. Major walkouts included the Seattle General Strike; work stoppages conducted by Butte, Montana, copper miners and textile workers in Passaic, New Jersey, and Lawrence, Massachusetts; a New England telephone operators’ strike; the Boston Police Strike; and nationwide walkouts in the steel and coal industries. Recent immigrants to the United States from southern and eastern Europe played a notable role in many of the work stoppages. Unable to return to their homelands during the war, they had enjoyed steady wartime work and had begun to view themselves as permanent industrial employees. Motivated by a desire to earn a living wage, many immigrants now viewed unions as a vehicle by which they could gain both a measure of security and respect on the job.

Capital Triumphant

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Participants in the 1919 strikes voiced grievances that they had nursed throughout the war. Whenever walkouts occurred, employees expressed irritation at the war-imposed speed-ups, corporate profiteering, runaway inflation, and coerced contributions to the so-called voluntary Red Cross and Liberty loan drives. Arguing that it was time for some democracy at home, they seized upon Wilson’s idealistic language and applied it to their own lives. Calling for an end to “Kaiserism in industry,” employees in far-flung mill towns announced their readiness to do battle with “Junkerish” bosses and the “Hun in America,” and told employers that it was now time for them to make some “sacrifices.”

Two of the most noteworthy 1919 strikes occurred in Seattle and Boston. In Seattle, sixty thousand laborers shut down the entire city in sympathy with striking shipyard workers. For one week in early February, workers essentially ran the city, but the general strike collapsed because of unclear overall objectives, government threats of repression, and divisions among its supporters. In Boston, most of the police force walked out in an attempt to win a wage increase and in support of its leaders who had been fired. Considerable rioting accompanied the walkout until the National Guard restored order. In the aftermath, the police officers, who belonged to an AFL union, lost their jobs.

The Seattle and Boston events scared a middle class already prone to blame labor for the high cost of living. Ole Hanson and Calvin Coolidge were not the only politicians to take an antilabor stance. Erstwhile progressive supporters of labor also began to reconsider their backing for what they now considered a selfish and class-bound movement. During his September 1919 speaking tour, President Wilson denounced the Boston Police Strike as a “crime against civilization.” Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer distanced himself from the AFL, and Wilson’s alter ego, Secretary of War Newton Baker, embraced the antiunion campaign of the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce. Furthermore, with the dismantling of the National War Labor Board, the Wilson administration signaled that labor could no longer count on sympathetic government intervention during walkouts.

Emboldened by its wartime gains, labor pressed ahead despite the loss of government support. Of all labor’s planned organizing drives, the boldest involved a full-fledged effort to organize America’s steel industry. Steel—the very symbol of America’s industrial might. Steel—a bastion of antiunionism ever since the crushing of the 1892 strike in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Steel—an industry which used spies and blacklists to weed out labor organizers. Steel—home to America’s largest industrial firm, the U. S. Steel Corporation. Steel—where almost half of all employees worked a twelve-hour day and a seven-day week.

From labor's perspective, if steel could be organized then perhaps all of America's mass production industries could be organized.

The drive to unionize steel got underway in the summer of 1918 when two experienced organizers, John Fitzpatrick and William Z. Foster, headed the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. Fitzpatrick and Foster had the formidable task of coordinating the efforts of the twenty-four AFL unions that claimed jurisdiction over some part of the steel industry. The campaign picked up steam in the spring of 1919 when organizers in Chicago, Gary, Cleveland, Buffalo, and other districts met an unexpectedly enthusiastic response from Slavic (Polish, Slovakian, Czech, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Russian), Hungarian, and Lithuanian workers. These recent immigrants, whom older Americans often scornfully called "hunkies," did the vast bulk of the unskilled and semiskilled work in the steel mills. Hailed for their contributions during the war, immigrants resented that many old-stock Americans once again referred to them as "foreigners" as soon as the war ended. They eagerly embraced the twelve demands made by the steel organizing committee, especially those calling for an end to the twelve-hour day and the seven-day week, and demanding collective bargaining.

For the steel drive to succeed, organizers had to crack the Pittsburgh district, the center of America's steel industry. In this region, mill towns such as Ambridge, Aliquippa, New Kensington, Homestead, Braddock, Duquesne, and McKeesport lined the Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio Rivers. From a distance, lighting up the sky with a red glow in the night, the mills awed visitors. Seen up close, the mill towns, with their belching smokestacks, decrepit housing, and barren hillsides, served as a reminder of the ugliness that accompanied industrialization.

First Amendment rights did not exist in these small municipalities where mayors often held supervisory positions in the mills. Aliquippa, for example, could not be penetrated by the unions' flying squadrons. Even the less tightly controlled towns required permits for meetings, banned foreign-language speakers, and discouraged hall owners from letting workers use their facilities.

Despite these barriers, the enthusiasm of the immigrant workers forced the National Organizing Committee to establish 22 September 1919 as the strike date. On that day, more than 250,000 steelworkers walked picket lines rather than reporting to work. Never before had there been a steel strike of such magnitude. Deeply affected by their wartime experiences, worker after worker voiced the same opinion: only a union could guarantee that employees would be treated with decency and respect.

Steel executives scoffed at the notion of collective bargaining. Determined to run their businesses as they had before the war, without any outside interference, steel executives, led by U. S. Steel head Elbert Gary, made plans for a long strike. Counting on the support of local, state, and federal officials, management expressed confidence that the organizing drive could be defeated.

The gap separating the two sides in the steel dispute became evident at an industrial conference that the Wilson administration convened in early October. Meeting against the backdrop of the intensifying steel walkout, union representatives and members of the public called for recognition of collective bargaining, but management representatives adamantly refused to sign any statement that acknowledged the legitimacy of labor unions. The failure of the conference made it clear that the strike would force an all-out struggle between capital and labor.

The steel strike was an unequal battle. In the Pittsburgh district, local police and the state constabulary—called "Cossacks" by workers—broke up meetings, smashed heads, and even invaded workers' homes. In Gary, Indiana, federal troops headed by General Wood acted in a similar manner. Many of the native-born skilled workers refused to strike alongside the "hunkies." In the Pittsburgh region, the mill owners brought in trainloads of African-American strikebreakers from the South. Seizing on William Z. Foster's previous involvement in radical causes and the association of eastern Europeans with the Russian Revolution, steel magnates also used the press to portray the strikers as Reds. Steel executives knew the battle was about unionism and had nothing to do with revolution (except to the extent that collective bargaining represented a revolution to them), and Slavic workers, devoted to the church, expressed little sympathy for the Russian Revolution, but charges of Communist influence carried weight in the highly charged Red Scare atmosphere.

Labor's position looked hopeless by comparison. The AFL's insistence on retaining a craft-union structure made no sense in an industry where the majority of workers did not do skilled jobs. Samuel Gompers and other AFL leaders never gave their full support to the walkout. In November and December 1919, workers began to drift back to the mills, returning, as Thomas Bell described in his novel *Out of This Furnace*, with a "beaten sag" to their "shoulders."

The mill owners had scored a decisive victory. Having used much of their savings during the strike, many workers vowed never again to join a union and voiced suspicion that organizers had made off with strike funds. As late as 1927, workers told a reporter for the *Survey* magazine about their resentments over having been "left alone, without relief, without leadership." Above all, fear con-

tinued to dominate the lives of steelworkers: fears of spies, blacklists, discriminatory bosses, and layoffs. The twelve-hour day remained in force as a new decade began, and it seemed as if all the wartime hopes of the steelworkers for "industrial democracy" had been thwarted.

Coal miners, participants in the other major strike in the autumn of 1919, appeared to have fared better. Working in a highly dangerous industry, coal miners often formed strong bonds of solidarity that transcended nationality and racial divisions. More than five hundred thousand miners belonged to the United Mine Workers (UMW), the largest union in the AFL; it gained many new members during the war when industry's insatiable demand for coal led to the opening of countless new pits. Headed by John L. Lewis, a shrewd, calculating, tough-minded son of Welsh immigrants, the UMW had organized the entire anthracite (hard coal) region of northeastern Pennsylvania and most of the bituminous (soft coal) mines in western Pennsylvania, northern West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Most remarkably, in 1917 and 1918 the union had begun to make inroads in the fiercely antiunion southern Appalachian region of southern West Virginia, Kentucky, and Alabama.

With the conclusion of hostilities, coal miners rushed to cast off the wartime restraints, and the UMW's September 1919 convention resolved to seek a 60 percent wage increase and a six-hour day. As the strike deadline drew near, a White House statement declared that a strike would be "unjustifiable" as well as "unlawful." (The lack of a signed peace agreement meant that technically the war had not yet ended.) Nevertheless, more than four hundred thousand coal miners struck in November 1919. After a preliminary injunction failed to halt the walkout, A. Mitchell Palmer obtained a sweeping injunction forbidding the strike. To the surprise and consternation of many miners, Lewis ordered them to comply with the court edict. But thousands of miners defied their union's president; eventually the government and a special coal commission agreed to healthy wage increases ranging from 20 to 27 percent.

Despite the wage gains, in the immediate postwar period the UMW suffered a string of setbacks in the southern West Virginia coal fields. Once the war was over, operators in this region refused to sign any accord with the union. Relying on private detectives and yellow-dog contracts (which forbade workers from joining a union) to enforce their rule over towns where even the schools and the churches might be owned by the company, employers established a form of industrial autocracy. In one of the most violent incidents in a series of mining wars, the chief of police of Matewan, West Virginia, Sid Hatfield, participated in a May 1920 gun battle during which seven Baldwin-Felts detectives were killed. In retaliation, Hatfield was gunned down. Soon thereafter, in August 1921,

armed miners set off on a march to Logan County, only to be halted by federal troops. The events overshadowed the UMW's basic dilemma: without government support, the union could not crack the southern Appalachian fields. The operators began to shift more production to this region, spelling disaster for the UMW and the labor movement in the 1920s.

Despite these setbacks, until the economy dipped in mid-1920, unions continued to build on their wartime gains. Union membership in January 1917 totaled 2.9 million, and in early 1920, it reached an all-time high of 5 million. Progressive garment workers' unions such as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America scored a steady stream of victories throughout 1919; efforts to organize textile and meat-packing workers showed considerable promise; and the building trades, railroads, and many other sectors remained union strongholds. Faced with this reality and anxious to reassert their authority in the workplace, employers set out to perfect antiunion strategies.

The Carrot and the Stick: Welfare Capitalism and the Open Shop

Most large employers knew they could not prevent unionization unless they offered their employees some tangible benefits. As early as the 1880s, Proctor and Gamble and the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company (the core firm of what became International Harvester) made some efforts at industrial betterment. It was not until the World War I era, however, that companies fully embraced the idea of providing a wide range of services, known collectively as welfare capitalism, for their employees. Motivated by a need to attract a labor force and to wean workers away from unions, many large and highly profitable firms greatly expanded such programs in the first year after the war.

Welfare capitalism sought to build ties between employers and employees. Such initiatives included stock-subscription plans, profit sharing, pensions, and group insurance. To discourage strikes and to stem high turnover rates, the benefits depended on continuous service. Programs were established specifically for female employees, a group often neglected by unions. Company cafeterias served low-cost meals in a pleasant atmosphere, and corporate-sponsored sports teams participated in industrial leagues. Glossy, picture-filled magazines publicized company activities and helped build a sense of company identity and loyalty.

Disturbed by the postwar labor unrest, many employers in 1919 and 1920 also established employee representation plans, which sought to provide an alternative to labor unions. Employees desired a means for presenting grievances;

these plans allowed for the election of plant delegates who sat down with company representatives to discuss problems. Their foes dismissed them as meaningless substitutes for real unions, but when they were first established, the plans often garnered considerable support from workers.

In the decade when public relations fully emerged as a field, businessmen received considerable praise for dispensing such largesse. Citing the sharp decline in walkouts after 1922, *Magazine* after *Magazine* touted welfare capitalism as the solution for the "labor problem." The Great Depression would later reveal the shallowness of this claim, but during the 1920s, welfare capitalism set the tone for what many considered a new era of harmonious labor-capital relations.

Welfare capitalism was the soft side of the postwar antiunion offensive. The open-shop movement was the hard side. By declaring themselves in favor of the open shop, employers claimed they only wanted to give their employees a choice whether to join a union. In reality, by declaring for the open shop, employers intended to free themselves entirely of labor unions. The terminology obscured employers' real motivations and made them appear to be fair-minded compared to unions, which, in closed-shop workplaces, restricted employment to union members.

An open-shop drive had been conducted in 1904 and 1905; the second campaign reached even greater proportions. Almost simultaneously in a number of cities in 1919, organizations such as the Seattle Waterfront Employers' Association, the Minneapolis Citizens' Alliance, and the Associated Employers of Indianapolis declared themselves in favor of the open shop. Having enhanced their reputation by directing the five Liberty loan drives, businessmen knew the value of identifying their cause with patriotism and began to refer to the open shop as the American Plan of Employment, or more simply as the American Plan.

The American Plan had great appeal to employers determined to operate without interference from unions. In books and pamphlets and from podiums, employers hammered away at the same themes. Union work rules unnecessarily restricted production; unions' unreasonable wage demands caused the skyrocketing of the cost of living; unions brought all workers down to the level of the least capable. Medium-sized firms belonging to the National Association of Manufacturers—described by Samuel Gompers as a militant "union-hating" organization—most fully embraced the cause, but the open shop also attracted the support of local chambers of commerce and trade associations ranging from the National Metal Trades Association to the National Hairdressers' Association.

The antiunion campaign, devised to stem labor's 1919 organizing drives, began in 1920 to target the more established AFL unions. The fierce vendetta

against labor disrupted a second industrial conference, held in January 1920, and caught many complacent AFL leaders off guard. Once the postwar depression began, the campaign gained momentum, and the early 1920s came to be characterized by considerable labor-capital strife.

The Postwar Depression and the 1922 Strikes

The economic collapse that began in mid-1920 was a disaster for labor. In Lawrence, Massachusetts, the giant American Woolen Company closed all of its mills for two months and reopened on a four-day-per-week basis. In the wartime boom town of Akron, Ohio, almost fifty thousand unemployed rubber workers left the city. Most major industrial firms imposed 20 percent wage cuts during 1921; the unemployment rate in manufacturing rose above 20 percent, and cities lacked adequate relief to cope with the mounting suffering.

Between 1916 and 1919, unions had often used labor shortages to extract wage increases and other gains; between 1920 and 1922, employers now used the high unemployment rate to their advantage. Promising industrial union drives in the textile and meat-packing industries were early victims of the severe economic downturn. In textiles, a new union, the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America (ATWA), born amid the 1919 strife, nearly collapsed when workers lost their jobs or became so discouraged that they stopped paying their dues. In meat-packing, organizing efforts in the giant Swift and Armour Companies by an umbrella group called the Stockyards Labor Council (SLC) had already been damaged by the 1919 Chicago race riot. But the SLC did not completely fall apart until the employers, in late 1921, forced a hopeless strike upon diehard union supporters.

Pounded into submission during 1921, labor remained quiet, but when the economy began to rebound in 1922, a new round of walkouts began. These strikes differed markedly from those that had occurred in 1919. Defensive rather than offensive, generally involving craft rather than industrial unions, led by stolid AFL militants, and concentrated in many of the nation's oldest and most labor-intensive industries, the 1922 walkouts lacked the optimistic spirit of the 1919 strikes. From a historical perspective, 1922 marked the end of an era of mass labor unrest and inaugurated an era when capital appeared to have emerged fully triumphant over labor.

Sixty thousand New England textile workers set off the 1922 strike wave when in February they walked off the job in many New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island mills. Employees had accepted a 22.5 percent wage slash in

1921, but a second 20 percent cut announced in January 1922 threatened to eliminate all of their wartime wage gains. New Hampshire and Rhode Island employees also walked picket lines in protest of employers' plans to increase the workweek from forty-eight to fifty-four hours, a move that the manufacturers claimed was necessary because of southern competition.

The nine-month textile walkout typified the 1922 strikes. Workers generated considerable support from local merchants and priests angered by the manufacturers' callousness; employers countered by seeking court injunctions to forbid picketing; faced with declining profits, mill owners had little incentive to settle; gritty and determined, employees showed great resilience in holding out. In the end, the mill owners and the textile unions arranged a compromise settlement. Manufacturers rescinded the 22.5 percent wage cut, but New Hampshire employers went ahead with plans to increase the hours of work. Bled dry by the need to provide relief, the United Textile Workers, an AFL union, emerged from the walkout greatly weakened.

The 1922 coal strike proved even more damaging to the AFL. Ever since the end of the war, large coal companies, including subsidiaries of the U. S. Steel Corporation, had extended their operations in the southern Appalachian field. In 1922, northern companies in the area that had become known as the Central Competitive Field argued that they could no longer compete against nonunion firms, and demanded that separate pacts, rather than a single national agreement, be negotiated.

Since 1898, the UMW had negotiated uniform agreements, and the union could not countenance such a Draconian demand. On 1 April 1922, six hundred thousand miners of anthracite and bituminous coal began what became the most extensive coal strike in American history. Participants included many army veterans who, much like coal miners in Great Britain, France, and Germany, had been victimized by a disaster in coal brought on by the wartime expansion of mining, the emergence of oil as a new fuel source, and the use of coal for reparations.

An incident that occurred in the midst of the walkout indicated the level of bitterness generated by the coal conflict. In June 1922, a coal company in Herrin, Illinois, foolishly began strip-mining operations using nonunion labor and armed private detectives brought in from Ohio. No state had a more devoted UMW membership than Illinois, where the strike had been 100 percent effective. In communities such as Herrin, located in Williamson County (known as "Bloody Williamson" because of its violent history), the union served as a center of social and community life. Soon after their arrival, the private detectives

killed three striking union miners. In retaliation, irate local residents captured nineteen of the strikebreakers and massacred them in cold blood. Before killing them, they forced some of the scabs to crawl on their hands and knees to a cemetery and shot them in front of a cheering crowd. Others had their throats slit. To the surprise of no one, no jury in Williamson County ever convicted any of those tried for the cold-blooded slaughter.

Antiunion forces denounced the UMW's complicity in the bloodshed, but the Herrin massacre did not decisively influence the strike's outcome. What did prove decisive was simply that without government support, the UMW could not penetrate the southern Appalachian or other nonunion coal fields. Recognizing this, John L. Lewis cut a deal in mid-1922. He signed an agreement that preserved wages at their 1920 level, but which for the first time since 1898, omitted critical operators in the Central Competitive Field.

Never lacking in hyperbole, the *United Mine Workers' Journal* (the official organ of the UMW) proclaimed the 1922 settlement to be "the greatest victory ever won in an industrial struggle." Astute observers of labor knew better. Not only had the UMW lost some of its northern footholds, but Lewis had abandoned thousands of western Pennsylvania miners fighting for union recognition who were living in tent colonies because they had been expelled from company housing. After 1922, Lewis expelled dissident leaders and locals, red-baited left-wing opponents of his leadership, signed a series of increasingly meaningless agreements, and presided over a union whose membership dipped to one hundred thousand by the late 1920s. Meanwhile, many miners had no choice but to abandon their homes and move to automobile, rubber, and other rising industrial centers, where many of them became spearheads of unionization in the 1930s.

The federal government played a more decisive role in the walkout that became known as the Great Railroad Strike of 1922, the most extensive work stoppage to affect the nation's railroads since 1894. The railroad unions and workers had made great gains during the war when the government operated the railroads. Disappointed by the return of the railroads to private ownership, the unions had hoped for equitable treatment from the Railway Labor Board, established by the 1920 Esch-Cummins Transportation Act. Instead, once the postwar depression began, the board approved a series of wage cuts, endorsed new work rules, and allowed the establishment of employee representation plans.

The board's promanagement slant had little impact on the four operating brotherhoods, which were composed of engineers, conductors, firemen, and

trainmen, the true aristocrats of the American labor movement. They were proud of their skills and often contemptuous of those they deemed beneath them, and their strong position remained essentially unchanged. But the Railway Labor Board's decisions riled railroad shop workers—boilermakers, electricians, railway carmen, clerks, sheet-metal workers, and machinists—who ardently defended work rules that management claimed restricted output.

The simmering conflict came to a head on 1 July 1922 when more than four hundred thousand railroad shop workers walked off their jobs at the same time as the coal miners' strike. The simultaneous work stoppages threatened the economic recovery that had just begun. Secretary of Commerce Hoover urged Harding to take a neutral stance, and at first, the president complied. But by the end of August, Attorney General Daugherty had convinced the chief executive that radicals had gained undue influence over the workers. In early September, the Harding administration requested a federal court order to enjoin the strikers, and on 23 September 1922, the court handed down one of the most sweeping injunctions ever issued against labor. Known as the Wilkerson injunction, and modeled on a similar court edict directed against the 1894 railroad strike, the court order forbade workers from engaging in almost any activity that might have aided the walkout.

Lacking the support of the railroad brotherhoods, disheartened by the UMW's failure to come to their aid, and facing the full force of the federal government, the embattled railroad unions had little choice but to give up. Upon the strike's conclusion, the railroads implemented employee representation plans and the railroad unions' membership plummeted. The AFL discussed launching impeachment proceedings against Daugherty, but the Wilkerson injunction highlighted the increasingly hostile political climate. Beset by a highly successful open-shop campaign and stung by a series of defeats, the AFL by the end of 1922 had become a far different organization than the one that had emerged from the war full of confidence about the future.

The Decline of the AFL

Between 1920 and 1923, the AFL's membership declined from a peak of 5 million to 3.6 million. In the case of some unions such as the International Association of Machinists, the success of the open-shop drive accounted almost entirely for the rapid drop in membership. In the case of the brewery workers, Prohibition wiped out a once powerful union.

Manufacturers' desire to shift production from union to nonunion areas also led to a steep drop in membership. The practice had become common in the coal industry, where, in some fiercely antiunion states such as Alabama, a mere 2 percent of all miners belonged to the UMW. The shift of production from union to nonunion areas—known as the runaway shop—also affected the garment industry, where manufacturers in the 1920s began to move production from New York City to the anthracite coal-mining region of northeastern Pennsylvania. This area attracted garment manufacturers because it offered cheap rents, low taxes, and lenient labor laws. The wives and daughters of unemployed coal miners could be employed at wages considerably below those paid to members of the ILGWU, a union that had enjoyed considerable success in organizing New York City garment workers.

The runaway-shop phenomenon had an even more severe impact on textile workers. Ever since the 1880s, advocates of the "New South" had argued that industry could pave the way for progress in America's poorest region. In general, business-oriented southerners had not had much success in attracting northern firms. On the other hand, textile manufacturers had shown considerable interest in a region where state legislatures had little interest in passing laws to protect labor. By World War I, textile towns stretching from Virginia through the Carolinas to Georgia and Alabama dotted the Piedmont. To elevate the status of textile work in the eyes of whites, southern mill owners had rigidly excluded African Americans from all but the most menial jobs. In turn, textile workers had often been scorned as "lint heads" by many southern whites, who viewed industrial work as a form of dependency.

Some valiant efforts to organize southern textile workers had been made in the aftermath of the war, even though they had little chance in a region where authorities considered any union to be radical or red. But the very lack of unions and the lure of profits had led to overexpansion, and by the 1920s, the southern textile industry also faced increased competition from rayon and other synthetic fibers. Southern manufacturers, experiencing a decline in profits, began to require textile workers to tend more machines. Known as the "stretchout," this practice finally led to an explosion of labor unrest in the Piedmont in the late 1920s.

By the 1920s, progress for the South spelled disaster for northern textile workers. Unable to compete against cheap southern labor, mill after mill, often poorly managed and saddled with antiquated machinery, closed its doors in Manchester, Lawrence, Lowell, Fall River, and other New England mill towns. De-

scribed by United Textile Workers president Tom McMahon as "sad, sad places," the once vibrant textile centers became so forlorn that the writer Louis Adamic, on his visit to what he called "the tragic towns of New England," interviewed one worker who longed for another war so he could work again.

Massachusetts became the nation's most depressed state; many shoe factories also left Brockton, Lynn, and Haverhill for low-wage areas. By the middle of the decade, textiles, shoes, and coal became known as the "sick" industries, characterized by what labor economists termed structural unemployment. In these areas with shuttered mills and abandoned houses, references to "Coolidge Prosperity" appeared more a mockery than a description of workers' lives.

The success of the open-shop drive, capital flight, and technological change caused the AFL unions in mining, brewing, clothing, and railroads to lose big chunks of their membership in the early 1920s. Many of these organizations had been among the most militant and the most progressive unions in the AFL. At the same time, rising economic giants such as the automobile, rubber, chemical, and electrical industries remained almost totally union-free. As a result, the building trades—one of the few sectors in which the open shop had been stymied—began to play a more prominent role within the AFL.

During the 1920–22 depression, the building trades were subjected to severe attacks by contractors angered by the unions' work rules, restrictions on the use of machinery, control over apprenticeships, and the power given to business agents. Having often engaged in annoying and petty jurisdictional battles, building trades unions such as the carpenters, ironworkers, painters, electricians, and bricklayers made inviting targets for the chambers of commerce and for other business organizations anxious to attack labor. In New York, for example, following a state legislative investigation and criminal trial, building trades czar Bob Brindell ended up in Sing Sing, where one assumes, despite the prison's picturesque Hudson River location, he had little opportunity to practice his original trade, the building of docks and piers. And in some cities, such as San Francisco and Detroit, the use of lockouts, boycotts, and strikebreakers proved so effective that construction became nonunion.

In most other cities, however, the open-shop drive in construction had been halted. In Chicago, for example, American Plan supporters had galvanized their forces in the midst of the postwar depression. A legislative committee had exposed various nefarious practices within the construction industry. Faced with mounting attacks, the building trades had accepted Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis as an arbitrator in a wage dispute. Landis had handed out harsh sentences to Wobbly leaders after presiding at their 1918 Chicago trial. Because of

his reputation for rectitude and for 100 percent Americanism, he had been named commissioner of major league baseball in the wake of the 1919 Black Sox scandal. A stern and uncompromising man, he shocked the Chicago building trades' rank and file when he announced his decision—known as the Landis Award—on 7 September 1921. The decision went far beyond his original mandate and endorsed revisions employers desired in union work rules.

Businessmen, eyeing an opportunity to rid construction of unions, formed the Citizens Committee to Enforce the Landis Award. But Chicago unionists, bristling with anger at the supposedly impartial umpire's decision, turned to gangsters in mounting a counterattack. Called "sluggers" in labor circles, these professional criminals dynamited work sites and the homes of nonunion contractors. Even the murder of two Chicago policemen did not halt the campaign, which marked the full emergence of labor racketeering, a phenomenon the AFL leadership preferred to ignore. By the end of the 1920s, a decade of great growth for organized crime, mobsters had gained influence in the laborers', bakers', ladies garment workers', and other unions.

In most cities, the building trades' unions triumphed over open-shop forces because once a building boom began in 1923, contractors desperately needed skilled help, but the construction unions' ability to survive the open-shop drive could not mask the sad state of the AFL. Even the return of prosperity in 1923 failed to revive a movement that had lost the will to carry out aggressive organizing campaigns. The postwar onslaught against labor had taken Gompers by surprise; he had calculated that labor's support for the war and its fierce opposition to the IWW and to Bolshevism would win the federation the approval of the employers. Instead, once the radical threat had been removed, Gompers discovered that employers still hated all unions, regardless of ideology.

Although he had not shared the progressives' naiveté, Gompers died in 1924 a disappointed and disillusioned man. AFL chieftains chose an even more cautious and conservative leader, William Green, to replace him. Under Green's direction, AFL conventions began to resemble Rotary Club gatherings more than labor meetings. After its brief flirtation with independent politics in 1924, the AFL retreated to its voluntarist stance, even opposing proposals for unemployment insurance. The only exception that the AFL made to its opposition to state intervention came when it continued to favor protective labor legislation. This it supported because it believed laws protecting female workers could be used to keep women out of the work force. Likewise, the federation supported immigration restriction and continued to admit unions that barred African Americans. To AFL leaders, women, recent immigrants, and blacks represented forms

of cheap labor that threatened their members' wages and status. It is not surprising that, having failed to develop any ideology to counter the prevailing business philosophy, the labor movement by mid-decade had shrunk almost into insignificance and the number of strikes dropped to its lowest level in fifty years.

Labor's Initiatives and the New Shape of the American Left

Despite the decline of unions, labor activists initiated a surprising number of innovative projects during the 1920s. Many of the most forward-looking ideas emanated from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, a union founded in 1914 in opposition to the AFL's United Garment Workers. Because it did not belong to the "official" labor movement, the ACWA had room to experiment with new ideas. Also having organized the men's clothing industry, the ACWA had brought large numbers of women and recent immigrants into its ranks. A target of a fierce open-shop drive in 1920–21, the ACWA had survived a six-month New York City lockout and a lawsuit that aimed at its dissolution. The union's ability to withstand the attacks made it more defensive in outlook, but also solidified its role as the principal proponent of what had been termed the "new unionism."

Under the direction of its president, Sidney Hillman, the ACWA sponsored an impressive number of creative projects during the 1920s. In addition to the Russian-American Industrial Corporation, founded to aid in the rehabilitation of Russia, these included establishing its own bank, working with employers to enforce standards of production so as to bring greater efficiency to unionized firms, negotiating an unemployment system funded by both employers and employees, building the first cooperative houses ever constructed by an American trade union, and continuing its efforts in the field of labor education.

Interest in labor education surged during the 1920s. In Boston, Philadelphia, Rochester, Chicago, and many other cities, unionists and college professors cooperated in the establishment of labor colleges, which offered a wide range of courses from economics and history to public speaking. Independent scholars and activists formed the Workers' Education Bureau in 1921 to coordinate the various efforts, but the AFL gained control of it in 1923. Never comfortable with intellectuals, whom it scorned as "sky pilots" and "parlor experimenters," the labor federation kept a close eye on the outsiders who participated in schools under its sponsorship.

Brookwood Labor College proved to be one of the most exciting efforts at workers' education. A product of the conference that led to the establishment of the Workers' Education Bureau and headed by A. J. Muste, a Protestant minister and antiwar leader turned labor activist, Brookwood attracted coal miners, sewing machine operators, steelworkers, and other industrial employees to its idyllic campus in Katonah, New York. The school's structure reflected Muste's idealism. The male and female students shared in the maintenance work and participated in theater and other cooperative activities. Many key leaders of the industrial union battles of the 1930s learned how to become more effective organizers while at Brookwood. But neither Muste nor Brookwood could escape labor's internecine battles. AFL leaders grew increasingly critical of the school, and Muste became involved in conflicts with various factions on the left. By the early 1930s, political wrangling had destroyed much of the original Brookwood spirit.

The Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers provided a unique opportunity for female industrial employees to study and work together. Under the direction of its president, M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr had established itself as one of the most innovative of the women's colleges. Beginning in 1921, a number of women received scholarships to spend the summer there studying academic subjects such as history and economics and developing the self-confidence to assert themselves within the male-dominated labor movement. The experiment flourished until the late 1920s, when the college's board of trustees moved against a program they feared spawned radicalism.

A number of other initiatives sustained militants disappointed by the 1919–22 defeats. Chicago trade unionists sponsored their own radio station; radical filmmakers made labor-oriented films; the Workers' Health Bureau exposed the dangers of mercury and lead poisoning and other industrial diseases; A. Philip Randolph and other African-American activists inaugurated an effort to organize the porters in Pullman sleeping cars; a labor news service, the Federated Press, supplied material to labor and socialist dailies and weeklies; and a new magazine, *Labor Age*, provided a forum for the discussion of the various projects—many of which were supported by the Garland Fund, named for a millionaire who gave away a fortune that he believed he had no right to inherit.

The initiatives kept the hopes of labor radicals alive, but the IWW barely survived the wartime and postwar repression. Founded in 1905, the Wobblies had shared the optimism and the idealism of the prewar era, although they had nothing but contempt for the ameliorative reforms of the progressives. Pas-

sionate and spirited, the IWW sought to build a revolutionary industrial union movement that would unite all workers in one big union. Violent in rhetoric but nonviolent in action, it aimed its organizing efforts at recent immigrants, African Americans, and others scorned by the AFL. Fond of bold statements, the Wobblies' songs and cartoons portrayed workers rising up in anger against fat, bloated capitalists. The imagery masked the Wobblies' weaknesses. Far too radical for most workers and lacking a sound organizing strategy, the IWW failed to build a permanent organization in the major industrial centers. On the other hand, it gained a devoted following in the West among "timber beasts," "blanket stiffs," and other migratory workers. For this reason, when the United States entered the war, employers and the governors of western states urged the federal government to crack down on "Imperial Wilhelm's Warriors," as the IWW's enemies liked to call the union.

The federal government complied. In a series of trials in Chicago, Wichita, and Sacramento, the entire Wobbly leadership was convicted of violating the wartime Espionage Act. Practically the only leader to escape imprisonment was Big Bill Heywood, the flamboyant head of the Wobblies, who had jumped bail and fled to the Soviet Union, where he died in 1929, a lonely and disheartened man.

Internal divisions also weakened the Wobblies. Many members bitterly resented Heywood's flight. Others joined the fledgling Communist movement and abandoned the IWW, which found the Soviet exercise of state power abhorrent. Wobblies also disagreed on whether to seek pardons for those they termed "class-war" prisoners. Drained by the constant trials and by the wrangling, the Wobblies bravely fought strikes during the 1920s on the docks of San Pedro, California, in the apple groves of Yakima, Washington, and in the coal fields of Colorado, but the élan and the bravado never returned.

The decline of the IWW led to an important shift on the left. Before the war, members of the Socialist Party and the Wobblies had conducted their debates in full public view. Once the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, many leftists embraced the Communist model of organizing, which differed from that used by the Socialists and the IWW. Rather than tolerating diverse points of view, the Communists believed that when critical policy decisions had been made, they had to be rigorously followed by all members of the organization.

After healing its own internal divisions, a united Communist Party (known initially as the Workers' Party) emerged in 1923. The Communists ostensibly operated above ground, but they never abandoned their secret ways. As did all of the world's Communist parties, the American party followed the direction set forth by the Comintern, which was based in Moscow. Viewing the proletariat as

the agent of revolution, the party tried to bore its way into existing unions. This strategy alienated the heads of practically every major union and caused a deep rift within the ILGWU. The Communists' duplicitous methods even alienated John Fitzpatrick, the highly respected head of the Chicago Federation of Labor, who had at first been willing to work with them.

By the late 1920s, the Communists, following the directive set forth by Moscow, had begun to form unions to rival the AFL. These remained paper organizations, but with the decline of the Wobblies, only the Communists were ready to go to the aid of workers in need of help. This proved particularly true in the textile industry, where workers desperately needed assistance during strikes. In Passaic, New Jersey, in 1926, in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1928, and in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929, the Communists played a critical role during long, bitter, and eventually unsuccessful strikes. These battles provided experience to the Communists that would be valuable when they later joined forces with the reinvigorated labor movement that emerged by the mid-1930s. But in the midst of "Coolidge Prosperity," the left, outside a few isolated mill towns, had practically disappeared as a vital force on the American scene.

The "Return to Normalcy": The Postwar Experience of Women Workers

During the wartime mobilization when millions of men donned uniforms, women had begun to find forms of employment that had previously been closed to them. For the first time, significant numbers of women began to be employed as welders, drill press operators, machinists, and streetcar conductors. Most of the women who filled these positions had been previously employed in restaurants, laundries, or hotels, or in other service positions. Not surprisingly, many of the working women had jumped at the opportunity to double or even triple their earnings in war-related industries.

The entry of women into new trades encouraged those who had been active in the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a unique Progressive Era organization that brought women workers and middle-class reformers together. Members of the WTUL helped working women organize trade unions and win respect from the male trade unionists, who had only grudgingly accepted women into their ranks. With the assistance of the WTUL, women workers won a number of hard-fought garment strikes between 1910 and 1916 and began to gain staff positions (though nowhere near in proportion to their numbers) in the ILGWU and the ACWA.

The immediate postwar period brought some further encouragement to those who hoped that women could play a more prominent role in the labor movement. When more than four thousand New England telephone operators in April 1919 struck the Wire Administration (a federal agency, headed by Postmaster General Albert Burluson, which had taken over operation of the telephone lines), many male trade unionists gave them support. Seeking both wage increases and relief from Burluson's tyrannical rule, the women, who belonged to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, won most of what they demanded, although efforts to organize telephone operators in other parts of the country proved largely futile.

Telephone operators worked in what was seen as the female employment sphere, and thus their activity did not threaten men. But when women tried to maintain their positions in male bastions, they ran into a brick wall. This was best demonstrated in Cleveland, where 173 women fought for more than a year to hold on to jobs as streetcar conductors that they had gained for the first time during the war. The Cleveland local of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Railway Workers had opposed the hiring of women from the beginning. The men had some basis for their position because in some trades, women had been introduced by employers in order to lower wages or to weaken unions. But the women, anxious to fill positions with much to offer compared to work in factories, laundries, or restaurants, had evinced a desire to join the union and had been hired at the same wage rates as the men. Union arguments that this was not a suitable or a proper job for women appeared to some observers to mask a more basic fear: that men would suffer a loss of status if women performed the same jobs they did.

The dispute over whether the women should retain their jobs went before the National War Labor Board, which heard the case in its dying days. AFL unionists, including Samuel Gompers, lined up in support of their brethren fighting to keep streetcar employment a male bastion. The Cleveland Chamber of Commerce and the WTUL, which usually took opposite positions on labor matters, backed the women workers, who were determined to keep their positions. The women also received the support from Cleveland suffragists and feminists and from Frank Walsh, who had resigned from the National War Labor Board when he saw it veering in a promanagement direction. Walsh agreed to represent the women before the labor board and cautioned unionists that they risked alienating women by so vehemently opposing their entry into previously all-male positions.

The National War Labor Board first ruled in favor of the union and then reversed itself, but the outcome was decided on the local level rather than in Wash-

ington. Faced with the determined hostility of the AFL and union threats to strike to ensure their firing, the women had no chance of keeping their jobs. Women who had been hired as streetcar conductors in Detroit met the same fate. Even in Kansas City, where the union local proved far more supportive of the women, they were unable to retain their positions—a clear signal that segregation by gender in employment remained unaffected by the temporary wartime changes.

Outraged by the AFL's stance in the Cleveland case, the WTUL had trouble finding allies in a labor movement that became increasingly defensive and inward-looking as the decade wore on. Many female reformers hoped that the Women's Bureau, which had been established in 1920 as a permanent agency within the Department of Labor, would now assume much of the responsibility for representing the interests of women workers. During the 1920s, this department became home to a number of activists who had been members of the WTUL. Headed by Mary Anderson, this agency conducted numerous studies of female workers and assiduously fought efforts to revoke or to nullify legislation that had been passed to protect women.

Both the WTUL and the Women's Bureau focused their attention on women employed in industry. But by the 1920s, most women who worked were not doing factory labor. They were far more likely to be employed as domestic servants, telephone operators, department store clerks, nurses, and clerical employees, or if they filled positions requiring some college education, as teachers, librarians, and social workers.

The basic pattern for female employment had been established during the late nineteenth century. Women were far more likely to work in nonindustrial than in industrial settings. Most women entered the paid work force when they were between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, and worked until they married and had children. This meant that the female work force had been disproportionately young, though unmarried women and many married African-American women (because of the low earnings of African-American men) had remained permanently employed. Jobs defined as female paid lower wages than male jobs that required equivalent training. Women almost never supervised men and had limited opportunities for promotion.

The clerical field best illustrates the extent to which no significant changes occurred during the 1920s. At one time, many men began their employment careers as clerks before being advanced to managerial positions. But with the invention of the typewriter and other new office equipment, clerical employment became far more specialized. One generally began as a secretary, stenographer, or bookkeeper and finished as a secretary, stenographer, or bookkeeper. By 1900,

decreasing numbers of men filled these positions, as women—usually after having completed a high school commercial course or having attended a secretarial school—poured into offices.

The 1920s saw a perpetuation of these trends. Because of the improving economy, industrial corporations, banks, insurance companies, and other business firms greatly expanded their office staffs and experienced little difficulty filling these slots. For American-born women from immigrant backgrounds, office work offered a far more pleasant environment than work in a factory. For rural women, it offered an opportunity to move to the city. For women from families of skilled workers, it offered a respectable form of employment.

By the end of the 1920s, office work had become a female employment ghetto; men had practically disappeared from the field. Clerical workers, often employed in large offices, faced the same rigid work discipline as factory employees. The pay remained low, although it compared favorably to the pay for other female jobs. At most, one could hope to be promoted to executive secretary or to head bookkeeper. But the jobs did offer an opportunity to meet a potential spouse holding a managerial position and to dress up for work, no small consideration in an increasingly fashion-conscious society.

The mid-decade economic boom provided jobs for women in many other fields as well. But by the end of the 1920s, there had only been a small increase in the number of married women who worked. Schoolteachers who married still faced automatic firing, and many insurance companies and banks refused to hire married women. Women still faced a stark choice between marriage and a career. Quotas established by universities and barriers erected by professional organizations meant that by 1930, there were fewer women doctors and lawyers than in 1910. Expectations that the war would bring about permanent changes had proven false, and winning the right to vote clearly had no impact in the economic realm. Many of the pioneers of the women's movement expressed disappointment about the frivolity and the lack of career ambitions of women attending college in the 1920s, a decade that saw few significant changes in terms of female employment.

Labor in the New Era

By 1925, many pundits were proclaiming that the United States had entered a new era of labor-capital peace. They had plenty of evidence to support this belief. Welfare capitalism and other initiatives had apparently made labor content. The industrial surge that began in 1923 provided relatively steady work to fac-

tory employees. A low inflation rate erased one of labor's sore points. So few strikes or walkouts occurred that the Department of Labor's Mediation and Conciliation Service (established in 1914 to settle disputes) had little to do.

One of the most remarkable signs of change came in 1923 when the U. S. Steel Corporation voluntarily abandoned the twelve-hour day and adopted three eight-hour shifts. In 1919, Judge Elbert Gary had fought this demand tooth and nail, but by 1923, pressures had mounted on U. S. Steel. Engineers produced studies demonstrating that a shift to the eight-hour day would harm neither productivity nor profits; religious leaders harshly criticized the steel firm's labor policies; Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover urged U. S. Steel to abandon this relic of a more ruthless era. Finally Judge Gary acted, and the nation's press hailed this evidence that business had become more responsible and more sensitive to workers' needs.

Giving added substance to the belief that the United States had entered a new era, American industry during the 1920s far outpaced any of its international competitors. Mastering the techniques of mass production, investing heavily in new machinery, and making use of scientific management, American firms achieved astonishing gains in productivity. The greatest growth came in the electrical, rubber, automobile, and machine tool industries, all of which were centered in the Great Lakes region stretching from Buffalo through Cleveland and Detroit to Chicago and Milwaukee. Workers poured into these cities, abandoning farms, small towns, and mining communities. Other parts of the nation appeared stagnant compared to the booming urban Midwest, and the cities' new movie palaces, department stores, skyscrapers, and factories indicated that America had entered a new era—one that many referred to as the Machine Age.

Detroit symbolized both the triumph of the machine and the vibrancy of urban life during the Roaring Twenties. The center of the American automobile industry, its factories attracted whites from Appalachia, African Americans from the Deep South, and immigrants from Mexico. Run at a ruthless pace, its assembly lines burned out many a worker. Its employers, staunch proponents of the open shop, blacklisted any employee suspected of union activity. But workers did not engage in overt protest. If they were dissatisfied, they simply quit and took other jobs. With their earnings they could afford to purchase a Model T, the car that Henry Ford had developed for the masses. Workers with families began to purchase their own homes and, for the first time in their lives, experience the luxury of indoor plumbing. Enjoying the latest dances, dressing in the most up-to-date styles, and purchasing liquor supplied by rumrunners, young workers—known as the "suitcase crowd" because they came and went—

gave Detroit a reputation for a lively night life. With money in their pockets, workers flocked to dance halls, ballparks, motion-picture houses, amusement parks, and other places of urban entertainment, and evinced little desire to join labor unions.

Admirers of the business system hailed the decline in labor unrest and boasted that the American standard of living had far outstripped that of any other country in the world. As evidence, they cited not merely the availability of the automobile but the mass production of such new consumer items as the radio, phonograph, refrigerator, and other household appliances, which had become available to large numbers of people making use of installment buying. Enjoying its new status, business emerged as a profession in itself, and major universities rushed to establish business schools. Publicists maintained that progressive-minded businessmen had been responsible for the prosperity—a prosperity that stood out even more because the European economies could not shake off the aftershocks of the Great War.

By mid-decade, labor activists had good reason to despair. Demoralized by the postwar defeats, militants struggled to understand how the passion that had inspired a series of mass walkouts dating back to the late nineteenth century had seemingly disappeared from the labor movement. The AFL, its work confined mainly to industries that were old and sick, inspired no one. In the highly influential book *A Theory of the Labor Movement*, published in 1928, University of Wisconsin labor economist Selig Perlman argued that partly due to the “enormous strength of private property in America,” the United States had the world’s “least class-conscious labor movement.” Challenging many of the assumptions of the intellectual supporters of labor, Perlman claimed that a second industrial revolution had brought about a “new” capitalism and that businessmen had proved far more innovative, dynamic, and flexible than labor leaders.

The Great Depression revealed the weaknesses of the system. Without unions, workers had no way to win wage increases or to share in the great productivity gains. Income distribution remained unequal and 1 percent of the population controlled approximately 30 percent of the nation’s wealth. The 1926 Tax Act promoted by Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon put money in the hands of the rich, who invested much of it in the great bull market of the late 1920s. Most workers still lived insecure lives, fearful that layoffs would threaten their survival. In retrospect, the period of prosperity proved brief. But at the time, an impressive number of observers believed that the business cycle had been conquered and that the United States would never again have a major depression. Class conflict had seemingly disappeared from the American scene, although the country was still torn by racial, ethnic, and religious disputes.