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The Great Exception Revisited: Organized Labor and Politics in San Francisco and Los Angeles, 1870–1940

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In 1949, Carey McWilliams summarized, with one phrase, the character of organized labor in his adopted state: “It has been the *total engagement* of labor in California that has, from the beginning, given the California labor movement its distinctive character.” He continued, “The labor struggle in the state has not been partial and limited but total and indivisible; all of labor pitted against all of capital.” McWilliams’s saga featured a cast of radicalized workers whose frequent and often violent confrontations with management contributed significantly to what he termed the state’s “marked political instability.”¹ By focusing on dramatic

An earlier version of this essay was read at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in San Francisco on December 29, 1983. I would like to thank Bruce Dancis for allowing me to use his collection on the history of the California left.

1. McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (New York, 1949), 127, 149. My forthcoming book, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, Ill., 1987) discusses the California labor movement (especially the AFL) and state and local politics at greater length.

strikes and colorful personalities, McWilliams evoked the ubiquity of “total engagement” and then moved on to sketch the many other ways in which California diverged from the general American pattern.

Since the publication of *California: The Great Exception*, American labor history has blossomed into an empirically rich and conceptually acute field. As in other fields of social history, regional and local studies have proliferated. A widening stream of recent books and dissertations on California has greatly augmented knowledge of various sectors of the state’s work force in different periods of its history. The majority of these monographs focus on patterns of work and residence, but their authors also share a fascination with the subject of working-class consciousness—what it means and how it develops out of specific occupations and cultural traditions. These studies provide the seeds from which a serious history of California workers is growing. None of them, however, offers a broad political perspective which emulates that which Carey McWilliams offered in one short chapter written almost forty years ago.²

2. Recent monographs include Luis L. Arroyo, “Industrial Unionism and the Los Angeles Furniture Industry, 1918–1954” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979); Pedro G. Castillo, “The Making of a Mexican Barrio: Los Angeles, 1890–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1979); Frederic C. Chiles, “War on the Waterfront: The Struggles of the San Francisco Longshoremen, 1851–1934” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1981); Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Stanford, Calif., 1982); Daniel Cornford, “Lumber, Labor, and Community in Humboldt County, California, 1850–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1983); Cletus Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870–1941* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981); Joel Franks, “Boot and Shoemakers in 19th-Century San Francisco: A Study in Class, Culture, Ethnicity, and Popular Protest in an Industrializing Community” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1983); James N. Gregory, “The Dust Bowl Migration and the Emergence of an Okie Subculture in California, 1930–1950” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1983); Michael Kazin, “Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades, 1896–1922” (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1983); John Alan Lawrence, “Behind the Palaces: The Working Class and the Labor Movement in San Francisco, 1877–1901” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1979); Douglas Monroy, “Mexicans in Los Angeles, 1930–1941: An Ethnic Group in Rela-

From 1870 to 1940, California left its glorious isolation on the fringe of European settlement and became both an economic giant and a significant political region from which firebrands like Denis Kearney, Hiram Johnson, and Upton Sinclair emerged to shake the nation. In 1870, the state was still a frontier boasting only one true city. Except for a few scattered flour, sugar, and lumber mills, manufacturing in California was then limited to San Francisco and its immediate environs.³

The completion of the transcontinental railroad rapidly changed that environment. The railroad thrust California into a burgeoning national economy and attracted entrepreneurs in large-scale farming, food processing, petroleum and other extractive industries who created new markets through aggressive sales techniques and, later, the happy coincidence of a rage for automobiles. By 1940, California led the nation in the production of most crops, was the center of the international film industry, and the foremost manufacturer of ships and aircraft frames—for both commercial and

tion to Class Forces" (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1978); Joseph Bruce Nelson, "Maritime Unionism and Working-Class Consciousness in the 1930s" (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1982); Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin, Tex., 1983); Vicki L. Ruiz, "UCAPAWA, Chicanas, and the California Food Processing Industry" (Ph.D dissertation, Stanford University, 1982); Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); Harvey Schwartz, *The March Inland: Origins of the ILWU Warehouse Division, 1934–1938* (Los Angeles, 1978); Neil Shumsky, "Tar Flat and Nob Hill: A Social History of Industrial San Francisco During the 1870s" (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1972); Jules Tygiel, "Workingmen in San Francisco, 1880–1901" (Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1977).

Valuable institutional studies are Ira Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1935); Robert E. L. Knight, *Industrial Relations in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Berkeley, 1960); Louis B. and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement, 1911–1941* (Berkeley, 1963); Frederick L. Ryan, *A History of the San Diego Labor Movement* (San Diego, 1959); David F. Selvin, *A Place in the Sun: A History of California Labor* (San Francisco, 1981); Grace H. Stimson, *Rise of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 1955).

3. Robert Glass Cleland and Osgood Hardy, *March of Industry* (Los Angeles, 1929), 136–137.

military purposes. An ever-increasing flow of migrants from all classes and races came to share in the bounty such a diversified economy made possible.

However, until World War II, California's economic growth did not significantly alter the size and types of businesses most prominent in the state's urban areas. Extractive industries long remained the only ones that could compete in markets east of the continental divide. Cost, distance, and the slow development of power sources limited most California manufacturers to supplying consumer goods to a regional population that still lagged behind the concentrations found elsewhere in the nation. The Golden State almost completely lacked the mammoth steel mills and machinery works that were the hallmark of what Lewis Mumford dubbed "carboniferous capitalism." Factories, canneries, and sawmills in the state tended to be small concerns employing fewer than a hundred workers and were quite vulnerable to strikes and boycotts. The same was true for service industries—from laundries to restaurants to department stores—that employed the single largest sector of the state's nonagricultural workforce.⁴ The steady expansion of the California economy before World War II should not obscure its marked structural continuities.

The years from 1870 to 1940 also saw the California labor movement grow to maturity. During the Gilded Age, skilled workers organized themselves into trade unions which withstood the blows of open-shop employers and two severe depressions. In the Progressive era, the labor movement attained great influence for a time before being humbled in the aftermath of World War I. During the 1930s, unions re-

4. On the history of the California economy and labor force, see Margaret S. Gordon, *Employment Expansion and Population Growth: The California Experience, 1900–1950* (Berkeley, 1954); Frank L. Kidner, *California Business Cycles* (Berkeley, 1946); Gerald D. Nash, "Stages of California's Economic Growth, 1870–1970: An Interpretation," *California Historical Quarterly*, LI (1972), 315–330; Nash, *The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), 35–38, 91–103.

gained strength, albeit with a loss of political independence, and tripled their membership in less than a decade.

Throughout this period, the character of the labor movement in the San Francisco Bay area and the Los Angeles basin, where a majority of wage-earners lived, shaped their counterparts elsewhere in California—similar to the influence, both ideological and material, which an imperial capital wields over its colonies.⁵ This character can be described as “total engagement” but with quite a different meaning from that which Carey McWilliams advanced. Unfortunately, an answer to the question of whether California was an *exception* to the national pattern of unionism must await other longitudinal studies of state and regional union movements.⁶

Three major characteristics emerge from the labor history of what were California’s two largest cities. First, with little opposition, urban federations of skilled craftsmen dominated the labor movement until the 1930s. White women, agricultural workers of all races, and menial laborers in the cities sometimes acted on their own, but the objectives and accomplishments of their isolated struggles were limited in

5. In each decade, the combined nonagricultural workforce in the *cities* of Los Angeles and San Francisco alone was close to or more than 40 percent of the state total. After 1890, San Francisco’s share steadily declined from that year’s high of 37.5 percent; while that of Los Angeles increased rapidly. Figures compiled from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *A Compendium of the Ninth Census, 1870* (Washington, D.C., 1872), 594–595, 618–619, 622–624; *A Compendium of the Tenth Census, 1880* (Washington, D.C., 1885), 1356–1357, 1390–1399; *A Compendium of the Eleventh Census, 1890* (Washington, D.C., 1892), 394–395, 570–571; *Abstract of the Twelfth Census, 1900* (Washington, D.C., 1904), 85, 126–129; *Population at the Thirteenth Census, 1910* (Washington, D.C., 1914), XIV, 96–207, *passim*; *Abstract of the Fourteenth Census, 1920* (Washington, D.C., 1923), 500, 504; *Abstract of the Fifteenth Census, 1930* (Washington, D.C., 1933), 321, 323, 325, 327–328; *Population at the Sixteenth Census, 1940* (Washington, D.C., 1943), II, 537, 662, 634.

6. To date, most work has focused on individual cities or company towns. An excellent study of this type is Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984). Useful state profiles are Gary M. Fink, *Labor’s Search for Political Order: The Political Behavior of the Missouri Labor Movement, 1890–1940* (Columbia, Mo., 1973); Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia, 1885–1917* (Seattle, 1979).

almost every case by the ideological and institutional hegemony of craft unionists.

Key to this supremacy was the sustained influence of strong, citywide central labor federations in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. The attraction of such organizations went beyond their economic utility. "City centrals" sponsored and financed whatever labor newspapers existed, and because of their inclusive, representative nature, they could forcefully bring working-class demands to the attention of state and municipal officials. Unlike cities in the East and Midwest where, according to David Montgomery, "central labor unions were squeezed out of the role of local working-class leadership" after the 1880s by the increased power of individual locals, citywide federations in California remained, as the centuries changed, the place where strategy was made and influence generated for the labor movement as a whole.⁷ Inevitably, their leaders came from the largest and economically most powerful unions in each city—usually teamsters, sailors, carpenters, metal workers, and longshoremen.

Second, these dominant groups incorporated much of the critique and rhetoric of the political left rather than opposing it as did the national AFL leadership. Carey McWilliams's description of a "more or less indigenous radicalism which has always gone hand-in-hand with the labor movement" can be explained by labor's ability to adapt the ideas of Marxists and egalitarian utopians like Henry George to its own trade unionist ends.⁸ The most successful unionists routinely spoke to workers and the general public in a language filled with allusions to "class struggle" and "monopoly rule." Yet only a small minority had a desire, much less a strategy,

7. David Montgomery, "New Tendencies in Union Struggles and Strategies in Europe and the United States, 1916–1922," in James E. Cronin and Carmen Sirianni, eds., *Work, Community, and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900–1925* (Philadelphia, 1983), 101. The one union paper not sponsored by a city central was the *Coast Seamen's Journal*, organ of the Sailor's Union of the Pacific.

8. McWilliams, *California*, 129.

for overthrowing the capitalist system. Their aim instead was to increase the power of trade unions in every area of society as a counterweight to organized corporate might. In this effort, radical ideas and radical activists were tremendously useful: the former provided a vision attractive to many Californians; the latter organized with almost incorruptible dedication. However, control of labor's offensive always lay with those working-class leaders whose only loyalty was to their unions and not to any left organization that may have been involved.

Third, the California labor movement pursued its aims as much through political activity as by exerting its muscle at the workplace. Unionists unstintingly yoked their fortunes to candidates, parties, and legal reforms that promised to make the government more responsive to working-class concerns. In fact, it is difficult to identify any significant figure in the history of California unionism who subscribed to the national AFL's vaunted policy of "voluntarism"—the notion that electoral partisanship and labor legislation would only restrict the freedom of unions and embroil them in endless factional disputes.⁹ Moreover, until World War I white workers in California's urban centers often had a "labor party" for which to vote. From the scanty evidence collected thus far, it seems they gave that party at least a plurality of their votes, although none of the chosen vehicles was a frequent winner or dedicated itself to social change once in office.¹⁰ When

9. This was also the case in many other states. See Gary M. Fink, "The Rejection of Voluntarism," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, XXVI (1973), 805–819. For the policy itself, see Michael Rogin, "Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Apolitical Doctrine," *ibid.*, XV (1962), 521–535.

10. The only statistical studies of this focus on San Francisco. See Jules Tygiel, "Where Unionism Holds Undisputed Sway—A Reappraisal of San Francisco's Union Labor Party," *California History*, LXII (1983), 196–215; Steven Philip Erie, "The Development of Class and Ethnic Politics in San Francisco, 1870–1910: A Critique of the Pluralist Interpretation" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1975). However, during the Progressive era, the Los Angeles press reported that working-class areas in the city gave Union Labor, Public Ownership, and Socialist candidates the bulk of the votes they received.

they could not mount an independent ticket, most union leaders aligned themselves with one of the major parties and, in return, received nominations, and appointments for themselves, and legislation to benefit their members.

Political involvement flowed naturally from the labor movement's claim to be the representative of all *white* working-class Californians. That the campaign for Asian exclusion required continuous pressure on office-holders in both Sacramento and Washington, D.C., contributed to this self-image, but it was not the sole influence. Craft unionists regularly participated in municipal campaigns in which the issue of Chinese and Japanese immigration played only a minor role. When they entered local races—both to advance their careers and as spokesmen for class-identified causes—labor leaders usually did so with the expectation they would win. Unlike in the East and Midwest, where unionists who ran for office were normally treated like uninvited guests trying to crash an elite affair, their California counterparts had participated confidently in the electoral fray since the gold rush.¹¹

Thus, the most salient feature of California urban labor was not, as Carey McWilliams believed, its radical ideology or militant tactics, but the ability of existing unions to direct working-class discontent to their own ends. The most influential labor leaders proved themselves to be both ecumenical towards political factions within their own ranks and fierce opponents of management at times of industrial conflict. This combination allowed California unionists to avoid bitter internal quarrels that, in other parts of the nation, often split the movement into irreconcilable parts. California's north-south differences did hinder the *success* of statewide organizing efforts, but the basic *character* of unionism was essentially similar above and below the Tehachapi Mountains. The labor

11. For examples from several cities of unionists in the 1880s who tried to enter local political systems that had hitherto been closed to working-class candidates, see Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and America Politics* (Urbana, Ill., 1983). On political activity by labor in gold rush San Francisco, see Roger Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846–1856: From Hamlet to City* (New York, 1974), 96–98.

movement encompassed more than just unions, but affiliates of the AFL and, later, the CIO skillfully harnessed to their wagons most radical parties, working-class ethnic associations, and single-issue labor reform groups.

What explains the unrivaled supremacy of craft unionists who utilized both economic leverage and electoral coalitions in their search for power? Three interrelated factors seem to have been crucial. First, California was a society in which ethnic divisions among whites were *politically* inconsequential. In the San Francisco Bay area, the two major population groups were Caucasians from the “old immigration” (especially Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians) and Asians (predominately Chinese with a small number of Japanese). In Los Angeles, native-born whites and Mexicans predominated.

The impact of this demographic composition was profound. Workplace hierarchies based on nationality seldom sprouted among whites—in sharp contrast to the steel mills, meat-packing plants, and textile factories of the East, where craftsmen, semi-skilled machine operators, and laborers often spoke different languages and rarely made common cause across a gulf of cultures.¹² In California, white workers bonded together across religious lines, as well as those between immigrants and native-born. They united both *for* positive goals such as high wages and local political power and *against* the supposed threat of Asian labor. For Californians, “the working class” was a racially specific term which enabled white wage-earners to perceive themselves as an embattled majority.

In Los Angeles, Mexicans did not weaken the ethnic unity among whites because, until the 1930s, they seldom worked in the same industries as Anglos and were segregated into menial occupations when they did. Moreover, most lived in a *barrio* apart from the rapidly expanding city which surrounded it. As late as 1926, when Mexicans comprised at

12. David Brody gives an excellent illustration of this process in *Steelworkers in America: The Non-Union Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 80–111.

least ten percent of the Los Angeles population, a spokesman for the city's chamber of commerce could still state, "We do not have a varied group of different kinds of nationalities in southern California such as they do in some of the larger eastern cities."¹³ This invisibility meant that the contentious relationship between organized labor and capital in the Los Angeles area was relatively uncomplicated by horizontal fissures based on ethnicity. Until World War II, Mexicans, Asians, and Afro-Americans usually entered the majority's consciousness only as voiceless "hands" who dwelled at the bottom of society.

A second reason for the movement's general character in California was the existence of a labor market segmented, in this "middle period" of the state's history, between rural laborers and urban craftsmen. Only one insignificant industry employed *primarily* unskilled workers. That was, of course, agriculture—what Carey McWilliams termed California's "peculiar institution" because of the dominance of huge farms employing nonwhite migrant workers who lived in a style reminiscent of the slave South. All other major industries were urban ones which, except for wartime shipbuilding, resisted the concentration of ownership which had taken hold in the manufacture of durable goods east of the Mississippi River.¹⁴

Urban industries that employed the most manual workers—such as transportation and the maritime trades, con-

13. Romo, *East Los Angeles*, 61. The figure of ten percent is derived from statistics that are unavoidably imprecise due to the U.S. Census Department's categories. See the estimate and explanation in Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 200. In 1920, seventy-two percent of employed Mexicans in Los Angeles were classified as unskilled laborers. Los Angeles City Survey, *The Mexican in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1920).

14. See Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field* (Boston, 1939). On industrial concentration in California, see Robert G. Cleland and Osgood Hardy, *The March of Industry* (Los Angeles, 1929), 266–271, and nationally, Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 345–376. As with many topics in California economic history, this matter needs far more study than it has yet received.

struction, metal manufacturing, and the production of consumer goods such as garments and coffee—were either strongholds of unionism (in San Francisco) or continual battlegrounds between union organizers and open-shop managers (in Los Angeles). In neither city was the pressure of a “reserve army” of agricultural laborers a serious problem. Thus, skilled workers competed only with the desire of employers to whittle away their hard-won rights and privileges on the job, not with a mass of frustrated job-seekers hungry for their positions and qualified to assume them.

A third reason for California labor’s “total engagement” was the utter lack of deference which characterized white workers’ approach to political activity. Since the gold rush, white workers had projected an angry egalitarianism that was constantly renewed as each new generation sought to explain the gulf between California’s material abundance and the slim reward earned by most of the population.¹⁵ The absence of a hereditary governing class in the Far West made these glaring inequalities of wealth seem all the more onerous and encouraged the search for political solutions. Workers could not break the economic power of Leland Stanford or Harrison Gray Otis, but they could vote. In response, the California legislature, long before the New Deal, passed scores of measures advocated by organized labor.¹⁶

Union activists who had served an apprenticeship in labor and/or radical movements elsewhere in the industrial world brought with them an unabashed zest for politics. Among San Francisco leaders, such was the background of Irish-born Frank Roney, an erstwhile Fenian and head of the

15. Alexander Saxton’s *The Indispensable Enemy* gives a superb analysis of this ideology.

16. Until the 1930s, enforcing these acts was difficult outside San Francisco. See Gerald D. Nash, “The Influence of Labor on State Policy, 1860–1920: The Experience of California,” *California Historical Quarterly*, XLII (1963), 241–257; Earl C. Crockett, “The History of California Labor Legislation, 1910–1930” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 1931); Lucile Eaves, *A History of California Labor Legislation with an Introductory Sketch of the San Francisco Labor Movement* (Berkeley, 1910).

Nebraska Labor Reform Party, who became a pioneer organizer in the Bay City; of State Building Trades Council autocrat Patrick H. McCarthy, who joined the Carpenters' union in Chicago less than a week after he landed there from Ireland in 1881; of the Norwegian Andrew Furuseth—long-time leader of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific—and the Australian-born Harry Bridges who galvanized the maritime uprising of the 1930s. In Los Angeles, Fred Wheeler—king-pin of the local carpenters union, organizer of the Central Labor Council and perennial Socialist candidate in the years before World War I—had been an active unionist in Florida and took part in statewide labor affairs as soon as he arrived in California in 1892. Lemuel Biddle, known in the 1880s as “the Grand Old Man of the Los Angeles labor Movement,” bequeathed to a number of fledgling unions and radical groups in southern California his experience in the Philadelphia Knights of Labor and the Socialist Labor Party of Ohio.¹⁷

Unfortunately, we know very little about the early organizers of Mexican and Asian workers. But most of them, like the nationalist anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón and the pro-Communist members of the Chinese Workers Mutual Aid Association, seem to have grounded their appeals in the experience of fighting against the landlords and foreign occupiers of their homelands.¹⁸

The history of urban labor in California from 1870 to 1940 can be separated into three eras—each of which represents a stage in labor's ongoing engagement with political

17. Frank Roney, *An Autobiography*, edited by Ira B. Cross (Berkeley, 1931); on McCarthy, see Kazin, “Barons of Labor,” *passim*. On Wheeler, see Stimson, *Rise of Labor*, 205, 224–225, and Paul Bullock *et al.*, *Building California: The Story of the Carpenters' Union* (Los Angeles, 1982), 112; on Biddle, see Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement*, 98–99.

18. Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Sembradores, Ricardo Flores Magón y el Partido Liberal Mexicano: A Eulogy and Critique* (Los Angeles, 1973); H. M. Lai, “A Historical Survey of Organizations of the Left Among the Chinese in America,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, IV (1972), 13–14.

ideas and political power. Despite the different fortunes of the movement in Los Angeles and San Francisco, the aims of working-class activists and the associations formed to achieve them remained essentially the same in both cities throughout the entire period.

From 1870 to 1898, the ideological and organizational contours of the labor movement were established. Workers experimented with a wide range of collective forms—-independent parties, radical sects, producer cooperatives, union federations, and craft-based locals—before settling upon a durable amalgam of “business unionism” infused with prodigious political ambitions.

The era opened with what Isaac Kalloch, a Baptist preacher who became a controversial mayor of San Francisco in 1879, called the “terrible Seventies.”¹⁹ The effects of a nationwide depression—exacerbated by a severe drought and the arrival of cheap eastern goods on the new transcontinental railroad—and the failure of either major party to halt Chinese immigration persuaded many wage-earners to break with their old political loyalties. The Workingmen’s party of California (WPC) captured the labor vote in the late 1870s and then self-destructed, leaving an assortment of radical groups to pick up the pieces.

The WPC also filled a vacuum left by the collapse of craft unions that had been created in the 1860s, and it sparked a labor revival. For all the attention paid to Denis Kearney’s demagogic oratory and the controversies that swirled around the party’s role in writing the new state constitution of 1879, the WPC’s functional role is often neglected. The party served as an invaluable bridge to more stable and popular unions.²⁰ Its sweeping victory in San Francisco and Los Angeles muni-

19. Lawrence, “Behind the Palaces,” 28.

20. On the collapse of unions in the 1870s, see *San Francisco Evening Post*, July 23, 1877; Cross, *History of the Labor Movement*, 13, 49, 52, 58. See also Michael Kazin, “Prelude to Kearneyism: The July Days in San Francisco, 1877,” *New Labor Review*, no. 3 (1980), 5–47; Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement*, 5–6. On the rise and fall of the WPC, see Saxton, *Indispensable Enemy*, 115–156.

cipal elections demonstrated the appeal to white workers of a platform that attacked both Chinese immigration and a monopolized economy. Members of the WPC also had to pay an initiation fee and regular dues, practices soon adopted by trade unions. The party's major shortcoming, in the view of labor activists, was its domination by opportunists like Kearney and those animated by racial hatred alone. Shorn of those failings, it provided an excellent model for those who wanted to fuse political mobilization with a spirited call for the redress of economic grievances.²¹ During the 1880s, skilled workers in California's urban centers reestablished their unions, most of which are still operating, on this broad new basis.

Under the tutelage of Gilded Age leaders like Frank Roney, these unions were far from autonomous bodies of conservative artisans, ever-jealous of their privileged status. For example, Roney and a group of revolutionaries belonging to the semisecret International Workingmen's Association organized the Coast Seamen's Union in 1885, intending it to be a battalion in an ever-widening class struggle. Central labor councils led by socialists of various hues sprouted in both major cities during the 1880s and 1890s. Roney also advocated the formation of trade councils linking together all crafts in the same industry, thus creating the functional equivalent of an industrial union. In 1886, when the San Francisco Iron Trades Council won a closed shop in the city's iron mills, it sparked the Pacific Coast's first Labor Day parade. Grand Marshall Frank Roney led the orderly procession of 10,000 union men and a few women. Symbolic of labor's political influence, Democratic Governor George Stoneman rode behind Roney in an event that contrasted sharply with the contemporaneous bloodshed in Chicago's Haymarket Square.²²

21. Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement*, 23–24; Roney, *Autobiography*, 261–313.

22. Roney, *Autobiography*, 233–237; Marian Dixon, "The History of the Los Angeles Central Labor Council" (M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1929), 7–9; Kazin, "Barons of Labor," 73–80; Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement*, 89; Ira B. Cross, "Labor Day Parades in the Metropolis," *Labor Clarion* (organ of the San Francisco Labor Council), Sept. 2, 1910.

Gilded Age unionists shared a political mission as well as a penchant for organizations that bridged craft boundaries. At any given time in the late nineteenth century, a remarkable variety of ideas and proposals circulated through working-class communities in California. Individuals readily moved from the Workingmen's party to insurrectionist anarchism, the Socialist Labor party, utopian land colonies, producer cooperatives, groups espousing the creeds of Henry George and Edward Bellamy, and various factions within the two major parties. As Alexander Saxton has written, "Everything in the house of labor in those days was interpermeable; ideas overlapped; personnel swapped places."²³

Yet there *was* a common thread in this dense variety of projects for the melioration and/or replacement of the capitalist order. White workers were articulating a desire for full participation in the economic realm which they already possessed in the political sphere. They sought democratic control of and fair compensation from their society, not its destruction. For example, Henry George's proposal for a confiscatory "single tax" on all unimproved land attracted immense popular support in the state because it seemed a rational way to level income while avoiding the class violence which had recently broken out in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other industrial cities. The vision in *Progress and Poverty* of a Jeffersonian paradise in which a harmonious community would dole out plots of land to worthy individuals even moved Leland Stanford, in the 1880s, to call himself a "disciple of Henry George."²⁴

Politics of a more conventional type involved the majority of working-class activists. All over the state, union men ran for office on a program that included the eight-hour day,

23. Saxton, *Indispensable Enemy*, 165.

24. Charles A. Barker, "Henry George and the California Background of *Progress and Poverty*," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, XXIV (1945), 105. The utopian colonies which flourished in this period—often with union support—were also attempts to return to an artisanal "golden age." See Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (San Marino, 1953), 163.

public ownership of utilities, police neutrality during strikes, and the permanent exclusion of Chinese labor. During the 1880s and 1890s, working-class candidates were far more successful in San Francisco under the Democratic party of "Boss" Christopher Buckley and upper-class reformer James D. Phelan than they were in Los Angeles where a Republican machine kept unions powerless in the name of efficiency and nonpartisanship. Still, the Los Angeles labor movement regularly sponsored individual candidates and entire independent tickets in the hope that a large sympathy vote would force a relaxation of the open-shop blockade.²⁵ During the severe depression of the 1890s, leading unionists in the two cities temporarily joined the People's party, helped to write the state platform, and stood for office as Populists. Despite the party's base among small farmers, even the most class-conscious labor activists were willing to experiment with what, until the fusion campaign of 1896, appeared to be a growing force for basic social change.²⁶

Unarguably, California labor's most successful political campaign during the Gilded Age was the one waged against the Chinese, culminating in the federal Exclusion Act of 1882. Using boycotts, union labels, and the unifying agency of "city centrals," white workers and the politicians whom they championed developed a sense of mastery that endured into the next century. "Much of the present strength of the California labor movement is due to the sense of common interests and the habit of united action which were acquired in this great campaign," wrote pronoun economist Lucile Eaves

25. Alexander Saxton, "San Francisco Labor and the Populist and Progressive Insurgencies," *Pacific Historical Review*, XXXIV (1965), 422; Robert Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles, 1850-1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 207-210; Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement*, 142-194.

26. California populism has generated little study. A narrative account is Donald Walters, "Populism in California, 1889-1900" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1952); also, see Saxton, "San Francisco Labor," 424-427.

in 1910.²⁷ In one of the cruelest ironies of California's past, unions increased their membership and social power at the expense of workers from another race.

Union power was consolidated and extended during the quarter-century from 1898 to 1922, which began with the economic boom touched off by the Spanish-American war and ended in the recession-wracked aftermath of World War I. During this period, San Francisco emerged as the quintessential union town: the closed shop prevailed in construction, transportation, and the bulk of manufacturing industries as well as an array of service trades, such as white-owned steam laundries and most restaurants and bars.²⁸ Los Angeles provided a contrasting study in weakness. Except for a flurry of organizing in 1910 and 1911, unions in the southern metropolis made little headway against the disciplined and well-financed juggernaut of the Merchants and Manufacturers Association headed by Harrison Gray Otis and F. J. Zeehandelaar. Even though Los Angeles was rapidly overtaking its fire-charred and peninsula-bound rival in wealth and population, its unionists of necessity still looked to San Francisco as their citadel. The major institutions that thrived within the Bay City were simply more mature versions of the central federations first created during the 1880s and 1890s. The San Francisco Labor Council (SFLC) contained over a hundred affiliates that ran the gamut from Michael Casey's Teamsters and Andrew Furuseth's Sailor's Union of the Pacific, which held a potential stranglehold over the distributive arteries of the West Coast, to small, predominately female unions like the Glove Workers and Bottle

27. Lucile Eaves, "Labor Day in San Francisco and How Attained," *Labor Clarion*, Sept. 2, 1910.

28. Unions represented roughly a third of the wage-labor force and benefitted from the small-scale, regional nature of most San Francisco businesses. Knight, *Industrial Relations*, 375–378.

Caners, which barely survived on the margins of the city's economy.²⁹

A frequent rival of the SFLC for the allegiance of local workers was the Building Trades Council of San Francisco, perhaps the most powerful local section of the AFL anywhere in the nation during the Progressive era. The BTC acted, in almost every respect, like an industrial union. Its leadership—headed by ex-carpenter Patrick H. McCarthy and Norwegian radical (and erstwhile cement mason) Olaf Tveitmoe—ruled on all strikes, jurisdictional disputes, and requests for higher wages and lower hours that arose from any of its fifty-three affiliated locals, which ranged from “aristocratic” bricklayers to poorly paid street laborers. In 1901, the BTC demonstrated its tactical versatility when it built and operated a state-of-the-art planing mill that defeated a lockout against the eight-hour day in that industry. For the next two decades, San Francisco construction was a closed-shop industry. In 1901, McCarthy and his allies created the State Building Trades Council in order to expand their empire from San Diego to Eureka using the tool of a quarterly working card, issued only to dues-paying members.³⁰

The BTC also organized its San Francisco locals into a political machine which boosted union men to seats on the Board of Supervisors and the state legislature. In 1909, BTC officials took control of the Union Labor party, which had recently been weakened by a series of trials in which many of its officeholders had confessed to taking graft from utility com-

29. Paul S. Taylor, *The Sailors' Union of the Pacific* (New York, 1923). In 1908, University of California professor Jessica B. Peixotto estimated that only three to four percent of female workers in the state were members of unions, almost all of them in San Francisco. “Women of California as Trade-Unionists,” *Publications of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae*, Series III, no. 18 (1908), 40–49. Also, see Lillian Ruth Matthews, *Women in Trade Unions in San Francisco* (Berkeley, 1913).

30. On the history of the BTC in this period, see Frederick L. Ryan, *Industrial Relations in the San Francisco Building Trades* (Norman, 1935); Kazin, “Barons of Labor.”

panies. Two years later, building tradesmen and their allies convinced San Francisco voters to elect Patrick McCarthy mayor. The Irish immigrant was the first labor leader ever chosen to run a major American city. "Labor is now fighting with both fists—politically and industrially," wrote Olaf Tveitmoe in 1911. "And in the language of the 'pug,' it 'carries a knockout blow in each mit.'"³¹

San Francisco served as the model for what California unionists could accomplish politically. Labor parties sprouted up in San Jose and Eureka, and some activists even dreamed of a unified organization capable of capturing the state government. Los Angeles union men tried hardest to imitate the success of their northern brethren. The Los Angeles Central Labor Council coordinated drives for new membership, and the Los Angeles Building Trades Council synchronized strikes among the various construction crafts. But Angeleno unionists were not able to sustain their organizing campaigns despite frequent infusions of money and personnel from San Francisco and the national AFL. Before World War I, both Los Angeles central federations together never included more than 6,000 affiliated members, only a tenth the membership of the San Francisco Labor Council and BTC at their zenith.³²

During the Progressive era, white workers in California took as prominent a part in the anti-Japanese campaign of their time as had their predecessors to whom Chinese were the major villain. This time, however, union officials initiated the campaign, and no freelance orator-politicians emerged to challenge their control. "Sandlot agitation is a thing of the past," P. H. McCarthy wrote in 1900, referring to the site near San Francisco's City Hall where Denis Kearney had once

31. *Organized Labor* (weekly newspaper of the California State Building Trades Council, edited by Tveitmoe from its founding in 1900 to 1919), Sept. 9, 1911. On the graft trials, see Walton Bean, *Boss Ruef's San Francisco: The Story of the Union Labor Party, Big Business, and the Graft Prosecution* (Berkeley, 1952).

32. Kazin, "Barons of Labor," 423–434; Stimson, *Rise of Labor*, 242–244, 292.

whipped up the crowds.³³ McCarthy and his counterparts in other unions managed the anti-Japanese campaign as they did strikes and boycotts against employers—as one of several priorities that had to be balanced to further the ends of organized labor as a whole. In 1913, Olaf Tveitmoe, in his capacity as president of the labor-financed Asiatic Exclusion League, even called for a temporary halt to anti-Japanese activities, lest they jeopardize the success of the upcoming Panama-Pacific International Exposition that had hired thousands of union construction workers.³⁴

This pragmatic stance also characterized the relationship of mainstream unionists towards the organized left, specifically the Industrial Workers of the World and the Socialist party. Both groups had significant numbers of supporters in the state. In 1914, the IWW boasted some forty locals and 5,000 members and was the only organization that seriously tried to organize farm laborers of all races against the abysmal regime under which they lived and worked.³⁵ At its height from 1910 to 1913, the California Socialist party claimed over 6,000 members (including 2,000 in Los Angeles County alone), support inside many unions (especially the carpenters, painters, culinary trades, and machinists) and among woman suffragists, and was able to elect two state assemblymen and the mayors of Berkeley and Daly City.³⁶

33. *Organized Labor*, April 14, 1900.

34. Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley, 1962), 51–52. Thus, Carey McWilliams was wrong to write that “From 1900 to 1910 a union charter in California was, in some respects, primarily significant as an authorization to engage in anti-Japanese agitation.” *California*, 140–141. Unions began to grow again in the late 1890s, several years before Japanese were widely perceived as a threat, and they always had a political agenda far broader than Asian exclusion. On Los Angeles labor and the Japanese, see John Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese of Los Angeles, 1900–1942* (Urbana, Ill., 1977), 32–36.

35. David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (New York, 1980), 37; Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 81–87; Hyman Weintraub, “The Industrial Workers of the World in California, 1905–1931” (M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1947).

36. The fullest accounts of the California Socialist party are by Ralph E. Shaffer, “A History of the Socialist Party of California” (M.A. thesis, University of

AFL leaders in the state generally regarded leftists as allies who, in a dogmatic and clumsy fashion, were pursuing the same goals and attracting the same enemies as they did. For example, when thousands of IWW sympathizers suffered injury and incarceration during the 1912 San Diego Free Speech Campaign, Olaf Tveitmoe and California Labor Federation official Paul Scharrenberg visited that city and reported that their “sympathizers and their acts are part of the workers’ struggle for better conditions and brighter lives.” Such tolerance was possible because the IWW did not compete with established California unions in their urban bases. Except for free speech fights, which left few traces after the jails emptied, IWW organizers focused on the farms of the Central Valley where their agitation won only transitory victories.³⁷

Moreover, the AFL sometimes stole the syndicalists’ thunder. The IWW’s messianic creed was color-blind and thus appealed to a number of Mexican revolutionaries turned labor organizers in Los Angeles and the surrounding citrus-growing region. But it was Job Harriman, a socialist lawyer associated with the Los Angeles Central Labor Council (CLC), who in 1908 defended Ricardo Flores Magón, champion of the Mexican left, against charges that he had violated the federal Neutrality Act. And it was CLC functionary Fred Wheeler, a moderate socialist like Harriman, who won the

California, Berkeley, 1955); and Shaffer, “Radicalism in California, 1869–1929” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1962). The membership total is from “Radicalism in California,” p. 166. For the influence of socialists in the woman suffrage movement, see Bruce Dancis, “The Socialist Women’s Movement in the United States, 1901–1917” (Senior thesis, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1973), 202–233; Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870–1920* (Urbana, Ill., 1981), 118–120.

37. San Francisco Labor Council, Special Investigating Committee, “San Diego Free Speech Controversy, Report Submitted, April 25, 1912,” p. 12, copy in Doe Library, University of California, Berkeley. In 1915, state AFL leaders also came to the defense of Blackie Ford and Herman Suhr, two Wobblies convicted of murder after the famous episode (often inaccurately termed a “riot”) at a Wheatland, California, hop farm. See Cletus E. Daniel, “In Defense of the Wheatland Wobblies: A Critical Analysis of the IWW in California,” *Labor History*, XIX (1978), 499–500.

council's backing for a 1903 strike by Japanese and Mexican beet workers in Oxnard that the national AFL had spurned for candidly racist reasons.³⁸

Harriman and Wheeler embodied the close relationship that existed between their majority, reformist wing of the Socialist party and the mainstream of the California labor movement. Members of this faction—who ranged from Wheeler the veteran carpenter to the eccentric millionaire Gaylord Wilshire—considered themselves a loyal, if more idealistic, part of the AFL. Horrifying more doctrinaire Marxists, they sought fusion with municipal labor parties in San Francisco and Los Angeles in the vain hope that a pragmatic electoral strategy would advance the cooperative commonwealth more than would the preservation of ideological purity. The “right” had its base in Los Angeles, but worked comfortably with ambitious union leaders throughout the state, all of whom needed the votes of radical workers and professionals to win public office.³⁹

The rival “revolutionary” wing of the Socialist party was strongest in the Bay Area where its most prominent figures were lawyer and theoretician Austin Lewis, labor organizer Tom Mooney, and editor-essayist Maynard Shipley. These men sympathized with the IWW and were unremittingly

38. On Harriman's role, see Gómez-Quíñones, *Sembradores*, 33; on Los Angeles labor's support for Magón and his two codefendants, see Stimson, *Rise of Labor Movement*, 321–332; on Wheeler, see Juan Gómez-Quíñones, “The First Steps: Chicano Labor Conflict and Organizing, 1900–1920,” *Aztlán*, III (1972), 25; and Tomás Almaguer, “Racial Domination and Class Conflict in Capitalist Agriculture: The Oxnard Sugar Beet Workers' Strike of 1903,” *Labor History*, XXV (1984), 325–350.

39. Useful documents of the California “moderate” socialists include Gaylord Wilshire, *Socialism Inevitable* (New York, 1907); Stanley Wilson, *The Gospel of Socialism* (Los Angeles, 1913) (Wilson was, for a long time, editor of the official Los Angeles Central Labor Council newspaper, *The Citizen*, as well as a popular Christian socialist orator); J. Stitt Wilson, *How I Became a Socialist and Other Papers* (Berkeley, 1912). California was also home to one of the leading black socialists of the pre-World War I period, Reverend George Woodbey of Los Angeles. See Philip S. Foner, ed., *Black Socialist Preacher: The Teachings of Reverend George Washington Woodbey and his Disciple, Reverend G. W. Slater, Jr.*, (San Francisco, 1983); and Foner, “Reverend George Washington Woodbey: Early Twentieth Century California Black Socialist,” *Journal of Negro History*, LXI (1976), 136–157.

hostile to the entrenched leaders of the San Francisco AFL whom they condemned as “class collaborationists.” Yet unwilling to ally with the established labor movement and unable to build an alternative to it, the revolutionaries left only a small impression on California workers. It is telling that Tom Mooney, who made numerous attempts to organize non-union employees of Bay Area utility companies, drew little notice until 1916 when he was arrested for the gruesome Preparedness Day bombing, an act he did not commit.⁴⁰

A major reason why revolutionary socialism had so little success among trade unionists is that AFL leaders in California co-opted some of its visionary content. Labor officials endorsed an array of reformist and utopian schemes in their quest for a larger share of power for the movement and the people it represented. Two decades after Henry George’s death in 1897, the “single tax” remained on the political agenda of the State Building Trades Council and the California Federation of Labor. In 1914, when Job Harriman grew disillusioned with the struggle for municipal socialism and started the cooperative Llano del Rio colony in the Antelope Valley north of Los Angeles, the State Building Trades Council vigorously defended the experiment and added, “the unions ought to have a tract of land where every striker could put in his labor in support of himself and his family.”⁴¹ Such sentiments allowed AFL leaders to present the labor movement as the capable vanguard of a better world that socialists could only proclaim.

Besides potential competitors on their left, California

40. On the left wing of California’s Socialist party, see Miriam A. DeFord, *Uphill All the Way: The Life of Maynard Shipley* (Yellow Springs, Ohio, 1956); Richard H. Frost, *The Mooney Case* (Stanford, Calif., 1968), 1–70; Austin Lewis, *The Rise of the American Proletarian* (Chicago, 1907); and Lewis, *The Militant Proletariat* (Chicago, 1911).

41. Arthur Young, *The Single Tax Movement in the United States* (Princeton, N.J., 1916), 163–167; *Organized Labor*, April 27, 1912; Commonwealth Club of California, *Transactions*, XI (1916); Franklin Hichborn, “California Politics, 1891–1939,” III, 1805, bound typescript in Stanford University Library; *Organized Labor*, July 9, 1910, Jan. 29 and Feb. 19, 1916.

unionists also had to confront the far more serious challenge of progressivism. Every union in the state supported measures, such as the public ownership of utilities and initiative, referendum, and recall, which were also dear to the hearts of Hiram Johnson and his associates in the Lincoln-Roosevelt League. But working-class activists, in addition, advocated state-financed health insurance and a strict anti-injunction law, both of which made all but the most radical progressives recoil.⁴² During the legislative sessions of 1911 and 1913, union lobbyists worked closely with Johnson's "insurgent" majority to pass the state's first effective workmen's compensation act, an eight-hour law for women and children, and a number of other bills. In gratitude, working-class voters swung decisively to progressive Republicans in elections for the rest of the decade. At the state level, the AFL became a valued ally in Johnson's battles with conservatives in his own party.⁴³

However, back in the cities, the relationship of organized labor to elite reformers was more contentious. Within the local environment, labor had something to lose—the promise and sometimes the reality of urban rule. In San Francisco, the Union Labor party was twice toppled from power by associations of wealthy progressives: first, in 1906–1907, by the graft prosecution that Rudolph Spreckels and James D. Phelan financed; and second, in 1911, by James Rolph, Jr., a genial politician who had the support of every banker and major employer in the city. That same year in Los Angeles, after the McNamara brothers, James and John, confessed to bombing the *Times* building, socialist-labor candidate Job

42. Eaves, *History of California Labor Legislation*, 440–441; Philip Taft, *Labor Politics American Style: The California State Federation of Labor* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 56; *Organized Labor*, April 6, 1918. In 1918, many articles advocating state health insurance appeared in the California union press.

43. Michael P. Rogin and John L. Shover, *Political Change in California: Critical Elections and Social Movements, 1890–1966* (Westport, Conn.), 35–89. The most complete account of the reform legislation appears in Crockett, "History of California Labor Legislation," *passim*.

Harriman lost his race for mayor to progressive incumbent George Alexander. In 1913, after narrowly missing the run-off election, Harriman threw his support to “stand-patter” Harry Rose rather than endorse the mild reformer who opposed him.⁴⁴

Labor politicians who ran on independent tickets faced a difficult task. They had to assure manual wage-earners, their natural constituency, that a “workingmen’s administration” would improve their lives while simultaneously convincing members of other classes that a victorious labor party would not plunge the city into riot and bankruptcy. Spontaneous strikes and acts of violence scared away undecided voters, and the daily press trumpeted in banner headlines any mistakes made by union candidates and officeholders. So it is not surprising that Union Laborites and Socialists usually failed to win and always failed to hold municipal power. As Democrats across the country had defeated the local workingmen’s parties of the 1830s and 1880s by adopting some of their demands and recruiting their ablest candidates, so progressive Republicans rescued the cities of California in the 1910s from the spectre of what they termed “class rule.”⁴⁵

The forced retreat from city government cost labor dearly in the immediate aftermath of World War I. The Mooney-Billings case, the massive strike wave, and a turn toward radicalism inside many unions frightened San Francisco employers into mounting a broad, well-financed offensive against centers of labor strength among longshoremen, sailors, and the building trades. With no intervention by the Rolph administration, the “best union town” in the nation became, by the end of 1921, an open-shop stronghold. In Los Angeles, employers used injunctions to break a number of major strikes, effectively puncturing the brief optimism of

44. Kazin, “Barons of Labor,” *passim*; Fogelson, *Fragmented Metropolis*, 214–217.

45. Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy*, *passim*; Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Homewood, Ill., 1978), 270–279.

AFL organizers who, during the war, had built the Central Labor Council to an unprecedented membership of 40,000 affiliated workers.⁴⁶

The political climate was no more favorable in Sacramento. The state Criminal Syndicalism Act, passed in 1919, was aimed specifically at the IWW and members of the infant Communist Labor party. However, Governor William Stephens made clear that the act, which banned the *advocacy* of violence “as a means of accomplishing a change in industrial ownership or control or effecting any political change,” could be used against rebellious unionists, regardless of their political views. Thus, the state AFL, no hotbed of radicalism in the 1920s, lobbied throughout the decade to overturn the law.⁴⁷ In San Francisco and Los Angeles, an ideologically splintered labor movement tried to rally working-class precincts to back pro-union candidates. But the conservative tide either defeated their favorites or, once in office, persuaded them to move swiftly to the right.⁴⁸ Disheartened, unionists returned to the political margins from which they had escaped a half-century before.

The decade of the 1930s is remembered as a time when millions of workers, with the aid of the federal government, challenged the major industrial corporations in the nation and won recognition for their unions. This upsurge was no-

46. On San Francisco, see Cross, *History of the Labor Movement*, 250–254; Ryan, *Industrial Relations*, 134–166; and Nelson, “Maritime Unionism,” 104–118. On Los Angeles, see Perry and Perry, *History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 106–162.

47. Howard A. DeWitt, *Images of Ethnic and Radical Violence in California Politics, 1917–1930: A Survey* (San Francisco, 1975), 7–8; Crockett, “California Labor Legislation,” 288–289; George W. Kirchwey, “A Survey of the Workings of the Criminal Syndicalism Law of California” (California Committee, American Civil Liberties Union, 1926), copy in Bancroft Library, Berkeley.

48. In 1919, the Los Angeles CLC set up an elaborate precinct organization to mobilize union members for boycotts and elections. However, Meredith Snyder, the victorious candidate whom the CLC supported in that year’s mayoral election, refused to take labor’s side in a street railway strike. This prompted all three union appointees in his administration to resign from their city jobs. Perry and Perry, *History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 121.

where as impressive as in California. Longshoremen, warehousemen, farm laborers, retail clerks, and the mélange of trades in the motion picture industry led the way with well-publicized organizing campaigns and massive strikes that inspired other wage-earners to follow their example.⁴⁹ Radicals, especially members of the Communist party, played a critical role as motivators, educators, and handlers of detail. By the time the United States entered World War II, San Francisco had regained its reputation as a union town, and Los Angeles had finally shed its image as a paradise for open-shop employers. Almost 200,000 workers, including men and women of *all* races, joined freshly minted affiliates of either the AFL or the CIO.⁵⁰ Of the state's major industries, only agriculture and banking were still able to operate free from organized workers and union contracts.

The rank-and-file movement of the 1930s, which was the engine of labor's California revival, severed organizational connections that had endured for a half century, but it marked less of a *political* departure than most observers realized at the time. The San Francisco general strike of 1934, which grew out of a walkout by maritime workers up and down the West Coast, did touch off a whirlwind of activity, affecting practically every manual occupation in the state. Harry Bridges, who advanced in three years from spokesman of a radical faction on the San Francisco waterfront to head of the International Longshoremen's and Warehouse-

49. Elements of this upsurge are discussed in many works, including those cited in footnote 2 above by Cletus Daniels, Douglas Monroy, Joseph Bruce Nelson, Harvey Schwartz, Vicki Ruiz, and Luis L. Arroyo. Carey McWilliams evoked the period well in *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York, 1979), 64–97. During the 1920s in Los Angeles, organizing successes in the film, garment, and furniture industries (the latter two with a heavily Mexican American workforce) provided a springboard for gains made in the next decade. See Murray Ross, *Stars and Strikes: Unionization of Hollywood* (New York, 1941); Arroyo, "Industrial Unionism," 23–25; Perry and Perry, *History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 221–222.

50. In 1938, there were 300,000 union members in the state, three times the total in 1933. Schwartz, *March Inland*, ix. Almost half the state's 1,222 union locals in 1939 had been chartered for less than a decade, Calif. Dept. of Industrial Relations, *Labor in California: Biennial Statistical Report, 1939–1940* (Sacramento, 1940), 48.

men's Union (ILWU) and director of the California CIO, symbolized to supporters and enemies alike a "syndicalist renaissance" that seemed to threaten the perpetuation of the social order.⁵¹

However, once the initial flush of organizing fervor had cooled, the new industrial unionists revealed goals no different from those espoused by craft workers in earlier periods. Agricultural laborers—whether under the leadership of a "revolutionary" union formed by the Communist party (the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union) in the early 1930s or a more stable affiliate of the CIO (the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America) later in the decade—were beaten, shot, and Red-baited. But at each point, they demanded only higher rates for the crops they picked, better treatment from supervisors, and recognition for their union.⁵² On the docks of San Francisco and San Pedro, longshoremen sometimes refused to load cargo destined for Mussolini's war in Ethiopia and Japan's invading armies in China. However, the daily struggle to gain a secure income and control over the hiring process was the real work of the union that Bridges headed.

The needs of the young, thinly rooted industrial labor movement also shaped the political behavior of the California left in the 1930s. During the Popular Front period from 1935 to 1939, the Communist party's labor strategy essentially merged with that of CIO head John L. Lewis. Moreover, since Republicans in the state were campaigning to restrict picketing and weaken New Deal programs that benefited workers, only foolhardy left sectarians actively opposed Democratic candidates.⁵³ In its single-minded emphasis on

51. The phrase is borrowed from Nelson, "Maritime Unionism," 12.

52. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest*, 105–140.

53. During the 1934 gubernatorial campaign, California Communists were "premature Popular Fronters" who wanted to support Upton Sinclair for governor but were prohibited by their national leaders from doing so. Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York, 1984), 270. In her 1936 race for state controller, veteran Communist Anita Whitney did draw 100,000

increasing the power of the CIO as a bulwark against fascism, the Leninist party was ironically following the same path taken by Job Harriman's "right-wing" socialists during the Progressive era. To gain influence and legitimacy among working people, both generations of California radicals had to closely align themselves with the limited aims of the existing labor movement.

Although organized labor eventually became the cornerstone of Democratic strength, at first its leaders cautiously guarded their autonomy from the party that had not controlled the state house since the nineteenth century. In 1934, the California AFL endorsed Socialist-turned-Democrat Upton Sinclair for governor the day after his fall campaign platform was published. The radical author pleased unionists by praising the striking maritime trades and promising good jobs for the unemployed and freedom for Tom Mooney. However, the labor federation was cool towards Sinclair's EPIC (End Poverty in California) plan for the cooperative ownership of excess land and industry, a concrete elaboration of ideas that Henry George had first made popular. In fact, the state AFL had preferred George Creel, a Roosevelt ally whom Sinclair defeated in the Democratic primary. The aging officials of the state labor federation were anxious about the fate of trade unions inside future EPIC enterprises where, Sinclair guaranteed, no one would toil more than two hours a day.⁵⁴

After Sinclair lost the general election, the California AFL and the infant unions attached to the CIO both took a more active role in state politics. Their common aim was to place in Sacramento a Democratic administration that would

votes—an indication that the California Communist party had more support than its state membership of 2,500 indicated, Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, Conn., 1982), 19.

54. Clarence F. McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair and the EPIC Movement, 1933–1936" (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1955), 15, 213–214, 218–226, 244–245, 304–305; Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 288, 306.

safeguard and extend the power the labor movement was rapidly gaining at the workplace. In 1935, the Los Angeles Central Labor Council joined with a dwindling cluster of EPIC clubs to contest, unsuccessfully, that spring's municipal elections.⁵⁵ A year later, Labor's Non-Partisan League, although created by the CIO, mobilized unionists from both federations to aid Roosevelt's landslide reelection.

In 1938, these efforts climaxed with the victory of Culbert Olson, a left-wing New Dealer who courted labor more assiduously than had Sinclair. That year, AFL President William Green endorsed the Republican incumbent Frank Merriam, but most of his California affiliates ignored his advice and worked alongside CIO activists in the Olson campaign. The Democrat's strong opposition to Proposition 1, a measure that would have prohibited secondary boycotts and picketing by nonstrikers, made labor unity seem essential.⁵⁶ When Olson, a week after taking office, pardoned Tom Mooney, California unionists rejoiced that their status as political outsiders had ended. "It was a big day for the working class," remembered San Francisco ILWU leader Henry Schmidt about the tumultuous San Francisco crowd that celebrated Mooney's release from San Quentin. "They don't come very often."⁵⁷

Thus, from 1870 to 1940, California labor had evolved from a lily-white social movement composed of struggling craft unions, leftist sects, and working-class reform groups into a multi-racial formation dominated by large industrial unions. Organized labor had won a legitimate place in the state's political and economic life, one that all but isolated devotees of the far right accepted.

55. McIntosh, "Upton Sinclair and EPIC," 346. The joint slate was called the United Organizations for Progressive Political Action and was endorsed by both Sinclair and Raymond L. Haight, former Progressive party candidate in the 1934 gubernatorial race.

56. Robert E. Burke, *Olson's New Deal for California* (Berkeley, 1953), 14–34.

57. Henry Schmidt, "Secondary Leadership in the ILWU, 1933–1936" (1983), 277, transcript of interview, Bancroft Library, Berkeley.

But ironically, the broadening of labor's constituency was accompanied by a narrowing of its political aspirations. The growth of unionism in the 1930s also brought an end to the tradition of craft-centered radicalism which had animated the movement since the gold rush. Even left-wing activists in the CIO did not seriously propose victorious workers' parties, collectively owned plots of land, or plans for sweeping tax reform that had been popular among the Western European immigrants and native-born whites who established labor's presence during the Gilded Age. Once they won legal protection through the Wagner Act and a number of other New Deal measures, most unionists welcomed integration into the Democratic coalition headed by Franklin Roosevelt nationally and Culbert Olson in Sacramento. In triumph, statist liberalism occupied the ideological ground that the labor movement had once reserved to itself. With the coming of World War II, the federally financed boom in the steel, aircraft, shipbuilding, and petroleum industries bound organized labor even more tightly to its friends in high places, which by the mid-1940s included liberal Republican Governor Earl Warren.⁵⁸ A big day for the working class has not come again.

By the 1960s, the California left, except for a few remnants of Communist party influence in the ILWU and a handful of smaller unions, became synonymous with the deeds and slogans of activists from the college-educated middle class and Third World communities like Watts, East Los Angeles, and San Francisco's Chinatown where unions have always led a sporadic existence. Meanwhile, the dominance of service and clerical occupations in the state has made increasingly archaic old definitions of "the working class" and "class consciousness" that were based on the historical experience of blue-collar wage-earners. To its shrinking membership, the ILWU may be a scrupulously democratic union with a

58. On the prolabor position of state Republican officeholders in the 1940s and 1950s, see J. David Greenstone, *Labor in American Politics* (New York, 1969), 151.

glorious past, but that image means little to a young Chinese woman who commutes from the suburb of Daly City to a data processing job at Bank of America in downtown San Francisco.

Workers who are active in their unions still, without being aware of it, routinely follow the seventy-five-year-old advice of Olaf Tveitmoe to “fight with both fists” when they canvass and raise funds for liberal Democrats. But the society in which that phrase once had radical implications no longer exists.