

Immigrants, Industrial Unions, and Social Reconstruction in the United States, 1916-1923

David Montgomery

Volume 13, 1984

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t13art05>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Montgomery, D. (1984). Immigrants, Industrial Unions, and Social Reconstruction in the United States, 1916-1923. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 13, 101-114.

Immigrants, Industrial Unions, and Social Reconstruction in the United States, 1916-1923

David Montgomery

IN 1912, JUST AS THE Socialist Party of America (SPA) reached the pinnacle of its national electoral strength, the prominent socialist author William English Walling called his readers' attention to two aspects of recent capitalist development which cast doubt upon the party's strategy of advancing toward socialism through a combination of electoral and trade union activity. One trend of the times, he argued, was for the leaders of industry to abandon their historic reliance on the market as the basic regulator of economic relations, an individualistic conception of social order, which had relegated the state to the role of policing the rules of the marketplace. Walling observed American industrialists and intellectuals alike embracing what he alternately called "state socialism" and, more appropriately, "capitalist collectivism." Among the developments prompting this change were the protracted deflationary trend of the late nineteenth century, business's success in consolidating previously competing enterprises into large oligopolistic units, the mounting international tension which accompanied the quest of the great powers for spheres of influence, the formidable urban and rural protest movements of the 1890s, and the unprecedented power demonstrated by trade unions as the new century began.

The "new reform programme," which Walling saw then "being put into execution" in some fashion in every industrial country, was intended to link large blocs of the population to the state through subsidies, social welfare legislation, public works, and nationalization of key sectors of the economy, so as to create "a privileged majority." This prospect he called "the logical goal of 'State Socialism' and the nightmare of every democrat for whom democracy is anything more than an empty political reform."¹ Through the adoption of reforms, many of which were among the immediate demands of the SPA, Walling anticipated the "establishment of an iron-bound class society solidly entrenched in majority rule," whose guiding principle ("the very essence") was

¹ William E. Walling, *Socialism as It Is: A Survey of the World-Wide Revolutionary Movement* (New York 1912), 45.

"That the share of the total profits which goes to the ruling class should not be decreased, and if possible should be augmented."²

This prediction did *not* lead Walling to a classical "impossibilist" position of opposition to all immediate demands (like that long espoused by Herman Titus of Washington, for example). Another alternative had been raised by the second trend of the times: the rise of revolutionary syndicalism. Although Walling was *not* a syndicalist himself, he vigorously opposed the attacks on direct action which emanated from his party's executive. "The truth from the broader revolutionary standpoint," he warned both sides in the controversy over syndicalism, "is doubtless that neither political nor economic action in isolation [from each other] can long continue to be revolutionary."³

The next year Walling carried his analysis of syndicalism a step further. The "new unionism" of the garment and textile strikes, the 1910 Philadelphia General Strike, and the struggles of metal miners and maritime workers, had represented in his view, just like recent strikes in England, Germany, and Russia, "a reaction against the rule in trade unions and in Labor and Socialist parties, of the skilled, 'the aristocracy of labor.'" The seizure of initiative by operatives and unskilled labourers "*constitutes nothing less than a revolution in the labor movement*," he concluded.⁴ Though he continued to fear that the energizing charge of syndicalism would be grounded by the quest for immediate gains, if it were isolated from political action, Walling had come to celebrate industrial conflict and the mobilization of unskilled workers as the driving forces of a democratic struggle "to take possession of industry and government *when [the workers'] organization has become stronger than that of the capitalists*."⁵

Both the capitalist collectivism which Walling had feared and the organization of the populace at the point of production in which he had found promise reached the apex of their development immediately following World War I. Economic and ideological mobilization had proceeded apace, from the Preparedness Campaign of 1916 through the final Allied offensives of 1918. A network of food, fuel, and shipping administrations, all in place by the end of 1917, was supplemented by conscription of labour and repeated Liberty Bond drives, not to mention officially-proclaimed meatless, wheatless, and heatless

² *Ibid.*, 45, 109. See Charles E. Ruthenberg, *Are We Growing Toward Socialism?* (Cleveland 1917), and Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (London and Edinburgh 1913), both of which expressed fears of a convergence between organized capital and the state, one from a revolutionary socialist and the other from a Catholic perspective. Another perceptive socialist analysis of the state may be found in Émile Vandervelde, *Socialism versus the State* (Chicago 1919).

³ Walling, *Socialism as It Is*, 385.

⁴ William E. Walling, "Industrialism or Revolutionary Unionism," *The New Review*, 11 January 1913, 45-51; 18 January 1913, 83-91, quotations at 48, 88.

⁵ Walling, *Socialism as It Is*, 426. This argument is remarkably different from the repudiation of "class war" found in presidential candidate Allan S. Benson's *The Truth about Socialism* (New York 1916), 42-80.

days. George Creel's Committee on Public Information laboured tirelessly to cement whole communities of foreign-born residents, as well as the trade unions, to the patriotic cause. Under the guidance of the National War Labor Board, the Ordnance Bureau, the Railway Administration, and other agencies, industrial relations were reshaped by the promotion of shop committees to resolve workplace disputes, the use of union wage and hour standards to set local norms, and in some industries the cultivation of union growth as a counter-weight to strikes and anti-war sentiment. Thus the powerful United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) agreed to a contract clause in the Central Competitive Field fining any worker who participated in a work stoppage, in order, as the union's Illinois president explained, "to protect the great majority of the mine workers against the radical and indifferent element among the employees."⁶ Simultaneously, the metal trades unions, which had long been held in check by aggressive "open shop" employers' associations, learned to use the new war agencies as shields behind which to expand their strength. Between 1915 and 1920 the membership of railway, streetcar, and sailors' unions expanded by 111 per cent, to make transportation the most highly unionized sector of the economy. Union membership also grew by 67 per cent in the building trades, 113 per cent in clothing, 280 per cent in metal fabricating, and 368 per cent in textiles.⁷

Immediately after Germany signed the armistice, however, industrialists launched a campaign to dismantle the Railway Administration, the War Labor Board, the Fuel Administration, and other regulatory agencies. Their success in putting the Labor Board out of business by June 1919, and returning the railroads to private hands in February 1920, stripped the unions of governmental protection, while business embarked on a militant crusade to roll back the union tide. To make matters worse for labour, the government soon committed itself to vigorously deflationary policies and resuscitated virtually defunct agencies, like the Fuel Administration and the Shipping Board, when it needed them to combat coal and maritime strikes. Both local and federal wartime measures restricting freedom of speech and of assembly and the use of mails remained in place at least into the mid-1920s. They were augmented by a new wave of state sedition and criminal syndicalism statutes. Especially after the Seattle General Strike of February 1919, police roundups of members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Union of Russian Workers, the Communist parties, and anarchist groups became endemic. Last but not least, the 1918 and 1920 electoral triumphs of the Republican Party, which was pledged to deregulating the economy, driving down prices, and guaranteeing that the country's new-found military and economic might would be employed as its leaders alone saw fit, seemed to bear out Walling's prediction of "an iron-bound class society solidly entrenched in majority rule." Union member-

⁶ Quoted in Frank J. Warne, *The Workers at War* (New York 1920), 115.

⁷ My calculations from data in *Monthly Labor Review*, 15 (July 1922), 167-9.

ship, which had passed the five million mark at the beginning of 1920, began a steady decline, which was to continue for the next dozen years.

Both the creation and the dissolution of regulatory agencies had taken place in the context of the largest and longest strike wave in the history of the United States. Between 1916 and 1922 well over a million workers struck each year (more than four million in 1919), producing a ratio of strikers to non-agricultural workers more than double that of any other historic period including 1886-7, 1901-4, 1933-4, or 1945-6. The so-called "munitions strikes" of May 1916, had set off this strike wave, and it reached an early climax in July and August 1917. Although workers with long histories of craft unionism, such as carpenters and machinists, were prominent in these strikes, those in extractive and processing industries, where unionism had previously enjoyed little success, were especially active. Moreover, the strikes of 1917 tended to be very large. There were 67 cessations of work involving more than 10,000 workers apiece, a larger number than was to appear in the Labor Department's figures for 1919. Although the frenzied efforts of government agencies succeeded in making most of the numerous strikes of 1918 short and limited in scope, that year did witness city-wide general strikes in Kansas City, Waco, and on two separate occasions in Billings.

The strike wave of 1916-22 had four important characteristics. First, many strikes covered vast geographic areas, while others galvanized intense class loyalties within the confines of a single urban area. Among those of the former type were the efforts to close all the plants of General Electric (1918-19) and American Can (1921), or the strikes called against all of New England's telephone companies (1919), merchant shipping on all three coasts (1921), all railroad lines (as in the unofficial switchmen's strike of 1920 and the official shopmen's strike of 1922), all steel manufacturing (1919-20), and all northern textiles (1922). Groundswells of sympathetic action and/or simultaneous strikes shut down Kansas City (1918) and Seattle (1919), and Philadelphia's shipyards, machine shops, building trades, and textile mills (1921). Strike activity on this scale bore little resemblance to the cautious craft unionism of pre-war years.

Second, these strikes gave new impetus to attempts to form industrial unions, or at least some form of all-grades organization, on the part of union officials, as well as that of rank-and-file rebel groups. Consider, for example, the wage movement of the railway unions in 1920 and the new role of metal trades councils. The executives of seventeen unions, representing together more than 80 per cent of all the country's railroad workers, methodically carried demands for wage adjustments through a number of government agencies, while impatient rank-and-file movements goaded the officials onward with a drum beat of protest meetings and unauthorized strikes. The awards handed down by the United States Railway Labor Board in July represented a defeat for the carriers' efforts to break up national union agreements: the unions secured contract coverage and wage increases for virtually all grades of

employees. Nevertheless, the very fact that the negotiations occurred at all was a reminder that in February Congress had resoundingly defeated the unions' demand for national ownership of all lines. Moreover, the threat, so explicitly feared by union leaders during the wage movement, that "a strike, with our Government arrayed against us," would mean "defeat, and in all likelihood" the reduction of the workers to "an unorganized mass," was simply postponed for two years — until the national shopmen's strike of 1922.⁸

Metal trades councils had existed since the late nineteenth century. They were alliances of local craft unions, such as moulders, machinists, and blacksmiths, to deal with a single employer (like General Electric in Schenectady) or a cluster of employers (like the shipyards of Seattle). Their powers had been narrowly limited by the subordination of each craft local to the rule of the international union with which it was affiliated. Toward the end of the war, however, metal trades councils assumed greater initiative in bargaining, calling strikes, and encouraging sympathetic actions, often in defiance of the prescribed procedures and sanctions of the international unions. Although the councils did not represent industrial unionism *per se*, the Metal Trades Department of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), saw this behaviour as an intolerable abrogation of the powers of international union executives by local activists (often from other trades), an endemic disruption of union contracts, and a drain on union strike funds, not to mention an hospitable terrain for revolutionary agitation. Consequently AFL leaders devoted much of their time and energy in the post-war years to the taming of these local councils.

Third, neither the IWW nor the One Big Union (OBU) played the leading role in any of the big strikes of the epoch, despite the significant growth in IWW membership during 1916-7 and again after the war among logging, maritime, and mine workers. Nevertheless, if we may use the word in the Sorelian sense, the myth of "One Big Union" was ubiquitous. It informed the coalitions of political and ethnic organizations which led the 1919 strikes of textile workers in Paterson, Passaic, and Lawrence. It burned brightly in the relentless agitation of that same year to free Tom Mooney from jail, in the July 4th protest stoppages to which that agitation gave rise, and in the protracted strike of the Illinois coal miners, which was set off by roving "Crusaders" shutting mines in protest against the earlier punishment of Mooney strike participants, and which culminated in a convention of insurgent delegates from 141 miners' locals. Dissatisfied with the UMWA's earlier appeal for nationalization of the mines, that convention, awash with the dream of revolutionary workers' control, called for "the mines to the miners."⁹ The OBU myth also blended harmoniously with the widespread tendency of workers to express

⁸ On the wage movement, see *Machinists Monthly Journal*, 31 (October 1919), 931-2; *ibid.*, 32 (March 1920), 226-40; *ibid.*, 32 (August 1920), 728-36. The quotation is from IAM Vice-President J.F. Anderson, *ibid.*, 31 (October 1919), 931.

⁹ Sylvia Kopald, *Rebellion in Labor Unions* (New York 1924), 100, 121.

direct links between urgent workplace demands and global political aspirations. What better illustration of this tendency could be offered than the joint call of metal trades councils from the various works of General Electric for a strike to win the following objectives: official recognition of shop committees, reinstatement of laid-off employees and planned sharing of the available work, the release of all political prisoners, and the reconstitution of all delegations to the Paris Peace Conference, so that half their members would be workers.¹⁰

None of these activities, which clearly manifested the spirit of the One Big Union, took place under the guidance of the IWW or the OBU. The miners and electrical workers were AFL members. Their rhetoric borrowed heavily from the vocabularies of Daniel DeLeon and of the British shop stewards' movement. The textile strikers had repudiated both the AFL and the IWW. The OBU as an organization did become a significant presence in Lawrence under the leadership of Ben Legere between 1920 and 1924; but its growth came in the ebb tide of the great strike wave, not at its peak.

The quality of the OBU myth is illustrated by the nation-wide maritime strike of May to July 1921. Two major AFL unions were involved in this struggle, both of them federations of craft organizations, and both led by apostles of gradualism, conciliation, and craft separatism. Above all, both presidents, T.V. O'Connor of the Longshoremen and Andrew Furuseth of the Seamen, insisted that their separate memberships should not become entangled through sympathetic strikes in each other's affairs. By 1919, however, a dream of unity between the men on the docks and the men on the ships had gripped workers on the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts. A Marine Workers Affiliation in the harbour of New York brought out longshoremen and freight handlers in support of the demands of tugboat and ferry boat hands in January 1919, and then won the support of harbour personnel, dock workers, and seamen in a second strike three months later, in defiance of both international unions. One branch of the International Seamen's Union (ISU), the Marine Cooks and Stewards, deviated so far from the unions' lily-white craft traditions that it recruited 4,000 members into a New York-based Oriental Seafarers' Association.

Meanwhile on the Pacific coast, longshoremen found themselves locked into a prolonged and losing battle against employers' efforts to displace their union with company-controlled "blue book" hiring halls. Large numbers of men who had migrated to the docks and steam schooners from the logging camps of the northwest after the war had imbibed deeply of IWW teachings, and many a sailor had carried home tales of Australia's General Strike of 1917. The appeals of such workers for amalgamation of longshore and seafarers' unions gained powerful support inside the ISU in January 1921, when Vance Thompson was elected editor of the *Seamen's Journal*, in place of Furuseth's ally Paul Scharrenberg. English-born Thompson had once fought the IWW as

¹⁰ *Dispatch* (Erie), 26 November 1918, quoted in "The 1918 Strike at Erie General Electric," *UE 506 News*, January 1980, 2-3.

openly and as relentlessly as had Scharrenberg, but by 1921 he was convinced that if the ISU was to preserve its newly-won power (it then enrolled 90 per cent of America's unlicensed seamen), it needed to support the members' aspiration for solidarity both among all men on the ships and between sailors and longshoremen. The depressed condition of maritime shipping in 1921 lent the conviction special urgency.

The great confrontation began 1 May 1921, when new terms of employment determined by the United States Shipping Board were put into effect. Under the Board's decree, all preferential hiring for men dispatched from union halls was to cease, union agents would no longer be permitted to come aboard ships in harbour, unions were no longer to pass upon the qualifications of applicants for licensed grades, wages were to be cut 15 per cent, and overtime pay was to be eliminated as "foreign to the spirit and customs of the sea." Admiral Benson, the Board's chairman, quickly issued a "sign or get off" order to seamen, so that only those who individually agreed to the Board's terms could legally obtain jobs at sea, and he mustered the government's fleet of merchant ships, which had been built for the war, into service to break the strike. Between May and July as many as 125,000 sailors and longshoremen were on strike or locked out on all three coasts. The strike gradually crumbled under the combined weight of masses of unemployed desperate for work and draconic government decrees and injunctions. Eastern ports reopened first. Soon after on the Pacific coast, scab longshoremen were mustered onto the docks by "blue book" hiring halls. The Marine Engineers negotiated a separate pact in June, leaving the steam schooners' local, whose members transported lumber, bearing the brunt of the fight. The officers of that craft then agreed to a reduction of wages, on the condition that union representation survive. Among the provisions of the agreement, however, was one specifying that steam schooner crews would allow non-union longshoremen to unload their ships. At this clause the members rebelled.

After a membership meeting in San Francisco had thunderously voted down the contract — and, in effect, committed their already beleaguered strike to the cause of reviving longshore unionism — local unions up and down the coast joined the Federation of Marine Transport Workers of the Pacific Coast under Vance Thompson's leadership. Furuseth himself then rushed to San Francisco, persuaded a reconvened membership meeting that the earlier decision had been suicidal, signed the contract to rescue the steam schooner craft from the general wreckage of maritime unionism, and then expelled Thompson and some 30 other activists from the ISU as "One Big Unionists."¹¹

¹¹ This account of the maritime strikes is based on Joseph B. Nelson, "Maritime Unionism and Class Consciousness in the 1930s," Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1982, 98-127; Paul S. Taylor, *Sailors' Union of the Pacific* (New York 1923), 134-46, 167-83; Alexander Trachtenberg, ed., *American Labor Yearbook, 1919* (New York 1920), 168-70; *Seattle Union Record*, 30 April, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 18 May, 14, 20 June, 21 July 1921.

Thus, in a pattern typical of the early 1920s, small craft unions of marine engineers and steam schooner sailors under authoritarian leadership survived in an otherwise open shop industry. In the name of fending off threats by employers' associations and the Shipping Board to screen ships' crews for subversive political views, the unions conducted their own purges.

Here was the context in which the IWW gained a renewed lease on life. On 1 May 1923, members of its Marine Transport Workers shut down several ports, among them San Pedro, Mobile, New York, and Baltimore, with demands for a wage increase and for a general amnesty for "class war prisoners." Some 15,000 lumber workers walked out at the same time, also under IWW leadership. On the Pacific coast strikes linking local grievances to calls for the release of political prisoners flared up sporadically through the summer and culminated in an effective four-day strike of loggers in September, which featured "Carrie Nation direct action" to close down speakeasies, which plied the loggers with illegal grog. The fiercest battles of the season, however, were fought on Liberty Hill in San Pedro, during a July protest strike against the conviction of five fellow-workers on charges of criminal syndicalism.¹² This little-known upsurge of direct action in 1923 rivals the familiar textile workers' strike wave of a decade earlier for the claim of being the largest mobilization of strikers under IWW leadership. Nevertheless, the loggers' and maritime strikes took place in a general atmosphere of industrial peace, after the great strike wave of 1916-22 had subsided. Its ebb tide had evidently stranded large but isolated clusters of highly politicized workers on the barren beach of the Coolidge Prosperity.

The fourth characteristic of the long strike wave was the prominent role of immigrants. Ethnic communities and immigrant nationalism shaped the course of these struggles. In making this point, however, it is important to note both the numerical significance of "foreigners" and the diverse meanings of that term. Unfortunately no reliable figures are available to reveal the nativity of industrial workers in the United States. What is evident from the 1920 census data is that 13 per cent of the whole population was foreign-born. If children who were born in the United States of foreign parentage are added to the numbers of foreign-born, the total population living within an immigrant ambience turns out to be 36,606,896 — almost 35 per cent of the total and a number greater than the entire United States population had been at the close of the Civil War. Although not all of these people were working-class, it is safe to say that the immigrant milieu dominated urban working-class life at the time.

Within the immigrant ambience the three largest ethnic blocs were comprised of Germans, Irish, and Britons, who among them accounted for 40 per

¹² See John S. Gams, *The Decline of the IWW* (New York 1932), 68-73; Fred Thompson, *The IWW: Its First 75 Years* (Chicago 1981), 141-8; Vernon S. Jensen, *Lumber and Labor* (New York 1945), 145; Ludwig Lore, "IWW Trial," *Class Struggle* (September-October 1918), 380-1.

cent of the total. Although the same three groups also provided the three largest categories of foreign-born, they stand out especially because of the high ratios of American-born children to the foreign-born among them (3.2 to 1 for the Germans, 3 to 1 for the Irish, and 2.1 to 1 for the British). By way of contrast, *immigrants from the rural periphery of industrial Europe roughly equalled in numbers their American-born offspring*. They included more than three million Italians and their children, almost three million Scandinavians, and two-and-a-half million in the Polish cluster.

The three more-established immigrant communities had played decisive roles in the formation of American craft unions and in providing their leadership. In Warren Van Tine's survey of 200 turn-of-the-century "business unionists," 42 per cent had been born in Europe.¹³ In an important sense, however, they envisaged their participation in American trade unions as a badge of assimilation. Thus J.E. Roach, a prominent Irish-born officer of the AFL in New York city spoke scornfully of "foreigners" to investigator David Saposs and scoffed at the proposal that union publications be printed in foreign languages. Despite his Irish birth, Roach explained, he had no use for Gaelic; he was an American. Similarly, Daniel Tobin from the AFL's Executive Board was skeptical of Saposs's ideas for Americanizing immigrants, and he believed that "the foreigners" would lose interest in unions "as soon as normal times come." Tobin did not bother to mention that he had been born in County Clare.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the great strike wave had inspired significant new currents of thought among this body of immigrants. Workplace organization and a comprehensive programme for social reconstruction provided basic themes for this new thinking, and both themes were evidently shaped by British examples, as well as by American experience. Shop stewards, shop committees, and works councils were envisaged as agencies for direct mobilization of rank-and-file strength, with little or no regard to craft lines. Moreover, they were far better suited than local craft unions to deal with the everyday complexities of piece work and incentive pay, time-study, and other mechanisms of up-to-date industrial management, which had rendered traditional union work rules and standard rates irrelevant. Thus the organization of in-plant representation became inseparably enmeshed in ideological debates over "workers' control," as that term came to enjoy widespread popularity in the labour movement.

But workplace organizations had been promoted, in various forms, by governmental agencies and by anti-union employers, as well as by enthusiasts of workers' control. In fact, the shop committee of the post-war era did not have an unambiguous significance, but rather served as a theatre of conflict,

¹³ Warren R. Van Tine, *The Making of a Labor Bureaucrat: Union Leadership in the United States, 1870-1920* (Amherst, MA 1973), 19.

¹⁴ Interview with J.E. Roach, 17 February 1919, David Saposs Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Dave [Saposs] to Bill [Leiserson], 22 January 1919, Saposs Papers.

used by the state to promote industrial peace, by revolutionaries to link everyday grievances to intensely political issues of class mobilization, and by sophisticated managers to cultivate among the workers a sense of loyalty to the firm's objectives, and consequently to isolate the employee representatives from "outside" interferences (be they union, revolutionary, or ethnic).¹⁵ To a class-conscious worker like James Robertson, of the Seattle Boiler Makers local no. 72, workplace organization represented industrial unionism "from the bottom up." Introducing a series of lectures, which he presented to his fellow shipyard strikers under the auspices of the Seattle Metal Trades Council, Robertson explained:

If the facts of economic evolution teach us anything, and if the trend of that evolution, as evidenced by the Shop Stewards' Movement in Britain, is a reliable criterion to go by, then the natural development of the labor movement in America will not be a reform instituted by the "top" for the "bottom," but a transforming process, now taking place in the rank and file of labor in the workshop, an organic development which constantly strives toward the conscious co-operation of the whole working class — One Big Union.¹⁶

Labour's programme for social reconstruction was the focal point not only of a new wave of union-based and farmer-labour parties, which flourished in the wake of the war, but also of the "progressive bloc," which emerged within the leadership of the union movement. Officers from various levels of the coal miners', machinists', railway workers', clothing workers', and textile workers' unions rallied around proposals for public ownership and worker operation of railroads and mines, repeal of wartime repressive legislation, amalgamation of related craft unions, trade with revolutionary Russia and Mexico, affiliation with the Amsterdam International Federation of Trade Unions, and collaboration with the British Labour Party on social and international policy. Delegates to the 1919 AFL convention who thought along these lines were electrified by the speech of the "fraternal delegate" from Britain's Trades Union Congress, Margaret Bonfield, who described the imminent birth of a new, democratic England, the offspring of its Labour Party, its shop stewards, its co-operatives, and its Triple Alliance of miners, dockers, and railwaymen.

The progressives never represented more than a militant minority within the AFL. Yet in 1919 they seemed to be riding the crest of a wave of working-class militancy. Moreover, the resistance of the AFL's Old Guard to all innovations, firmly entrenched though it was in the unions' bureaucratic structures, was

¹⁵ For a fuller discussion of workplace organization, see David Montgomery, "New Tendencies in Union Struggles and Strategies in Europe and the United States, 1916-1922," in James E. Cronin and Carmen J. Sirianni, eds., *Work, Community, and Power* (Philadelphia 1983), 88-116.

¹⁶ James Robertson, *Labor Unionism. Based upon the American Shop Steward System* (n.p., n.d.), copy in U.S. Department of Labor Library. I am indebted to Steven Sapolsky for bringing this item to my attention.

then seriously undermined by the open discontent of the most traditionally-minded sections of Irish and German members with Samuel Gompers' affinity for Woodrow Wilson. Top leaders of the carpenters, typographers, teamsters, and miners had come together as the "Indianapolis Movement" early in 1917, to elevate Dan Tobin to the Executive Council over Gompers' opposition. Although the new group shared Gompers' animus toward the IWW and socialism, its roots in Catholic Action had nurtured strong suspicion of the state, and its ethnic base harboured deep hostility toward the British Empire. With ardent support from the Hearst press chain, the Indianapolis Movement defied Gompers' wartime no-strike pledge and in 1921 backed John L. Lewis as a candidate for president against Gompers himself. Of all its rallying cries, the most popular was: freedom for Ireland!¹⁷

Nationalism intersected with union struggles and visions of social reconstruction among the more recent immigrants, just as it did among the more established groups. Tireless cultivation of independence movements by middle-class leaders among Polish, Croat, Slovak, Finnish, and other workers had been systematically seconded by the Committee on Public Information during the war. Prominent Italo-Americans, like Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia, had ardently supported Italy's territorial claims, first to rally their people to the American war effort, and then to oppose President Wilson after his betrayal of their hopes. Just as their German origins had helped many socialists adhere to their party's anti-war stance, so did major groups of Slovene, Finnish, and Russian-born Jewish socialists break with that position in order to offer armed support to revolution in their countries of origin.

One reason nationalism exerted a strong influence on the strikes and industrial union efforts in textiles, steel, chemicals, and other industries after the war, is that strike mobilization among the recent immigrants was significantly based in the community, rather than simply at the workplace. Fully 13 per cent of the 10,538 strikes recorded between 1919 and 1922 lasted more than 94 days. The strike of woollen mill workers in Lawrence, which began on 3 February 1919, for example, was not settled until mid-June. In flagrant ignorance of the IWW's gospel of short strikes, the struggles of recent immigrants often turned into brutal endurance contests, in which the network of family savings, ethnic fraternal organizations, grocers, and churches sustained the strikers. Whole families attended strike meetings, which were often held in nationality halls and often expressed nostalgia for the old country, along with anger at the new. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the immigrants often also manifested a deep sense of internationalism. Their meetings opened to the strains of "The Internationale," and their parades proudly ranged men and

¹⁷ The Indianapolis Movement has been virtually ignored by historians, but see Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers* (New York 1957), 362-7; Maxwell C. Raddock, *Portrait of an American Labor Leader: William L. Hutchison* (New York 1955), 80-108, 124-5; Ludwig Lore, "Progress Backward," *Class Struggle*, 2 (September-October 1918), 507-12.

women of many nationalities behind American flags. Special meetings in Lawrence were devoted to cultivating solidarity among workers from nations which were in conflict in Europe, like Russians and Poles or Belgians and Germans. The leaders of the Lawrence strike, Ime Kaplan, Sam Bramhall, Joseph Salerno, Edward Franchesi, Mike Bolis, Annie Trina, William Balzonis, and Carl Vogt had all repudiated the IWW but all had shared a first youthful experience in the strike of 1912. Now they conducted what John A. Fitch aptly called "a strike for wages carried on in a revolutionary atmosphere."¹⁸

In Lawrence, as in Passaic and Paterson during the 1919 strikes, the relationship between the recent immigrants and the AFL's United Textile Workers of America was very simple: the immigrants had nothing to do with that union, and it wanted nothing to do with them. Rather than returning to the IWW, however, they formed new coalitions of local activists to lead the struggle and eventually, with the support of the independent Amalgamated Clothing Workers, formed a new industrial union, the short-lived Amalgamated Textile Workers of America. Here in the silk and woollen mills was to be found immigrant-based industrial unionism in its purest form.

Quite different was the effort to unionize the steel industry: there the AFL's "progressives" and recent immigrants met face to face. The National Committee to Organize Iron and Steel Workers attempted to recruit all grades of steel workers through a joint effort of 35 craft unions, which yielded direction of the drive to the Committee itself. The result was a highly-centralized operation, which sought both to tap the enthusiasm of the "foreigners" and to guide it into carefully controlled channels. Director Edward Evans of the Chicago District explained it this way:

The organizers have constantly been met with the following argument from the English-speaking workers. We will join you but we are afraid of the foreigners, as they are hot heads and will want [an] immediate strike, which may lead to rioting and blood shedding. The Committee feels that they have convinced the English speaking workers that they have the situation sufficiently in hand to be able to avoid any such occurrence. The Committee is, however, not so confident as they make themselves out to be, since . . . [it] was only by pleading and threatening that they have controlled [the immigrants] so far. It seems that the foreign workers regard the union as all powerful and [do] not understand its aims, demand the immediate discharge of all foremen under whom they are working, as well as other action which the Committee does not feel itself competent to carry out.¹⁹

William Z. Foster and his committee saw themselves in combat not only with the Steel Trust, but also with two foes within the immigrant communities,

¹⁸ John A. Fitch, "Lawrence: A Strike for Wages or Bolshevism?" *Survey*, 42 (5 April 1919), 45. For a thorough analysis of the textile strikes of 1919, see David Goldberg, "Immigrants, Intellectuals, and Industrial Unions," (Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University, 1983). Vogt had led the Lawrence German branch out of the IWW in compliance with the Socialist Party's condemnation of direct action in 1913. IWW, *Eighth Convention* (Chicago 1913), 18, 124-5.

¹⁹ Interview with Edward J. Evans, 27 December 1918, Saposs Papers.

whom they called the "clan leaders" (middle-class nationalists) and the "intellectuals" (revolutionaries). Consequently, in their organizing meetings they deliberately avoided discussion from the floor, kept the proceedings brief, and tried simply to whip up enthusiasm for the union. Organization of industrial unions did not take place "from the bottom up" in this setting of ethnic suspicions. Indeed, the example of steel lends credibility to Sylvia Kopald's theory that rank-and-file defiance of union administrations *within* the AFL flourished best where the workers were ethnically a rather homogeneous group.²⁰ Where recent immigrants developed their own organizations, they tended to avoid all dealings with the AFL. Where older and more recent immigrants were involved in the same movements, the former attempted to keep a tight grip on organizational activities.

Moreover, in the Chicago region and on the Minnesota Iron Range, at least, the AFL "progressives" waged a secret but relentless struggle against the IWW. So strong was the hostility of Finns on the Mesaba Range toward the AFL that the Committee's chief organizer there believed that "The only hope is to win over the Italians and Slavonians, thereby splitting the immigrants. The Finns seem to be hopeless." John Corpi, the IWW organizer in Duluth agreed with that assessment. "The steel trust may be fighting the AFL in Pittsburgh because the IWW is not strong there," he argued, "but here they are encouraging it in order to counter-act the IWW." The Finns especially, he said, "have no confidence in the AFL."²¹

The Great Steel Strike, when it came, incorporated all four features of the strike wave that have been described here. It was nation-wide in scope; it enlisted all grades of workers within the industry, in defiance of craft-union traditions; it was sustained, in many places for longer than three months, by the communal solidarities of the immigrants; and it breathed the spirit of One Big Union, while being led by unionists opposed to the IWW. Even among those who had refused to join the strike were people, like a machinist in McKeesport, who was interviewed by Mary Senior six months after the strike's end. He refused to divulge his name, but he confided that he loved to read the socialist *Call* and believed that "only One Big Union could help in steel."²² After the workers' post-war defeats the militant few devoted themselves to building the IWW, the OBU, or the Communist Party, or perhaps to sustaining the isolated, tattered remnants of progressive leadership within the AFL, in preparation for the next round of struggle. For most workers, as for the McKeesport machinist, what had briefly been a class-inspiring myth became, at most, a quiet, personal reverie.

²⁰ Kopald, *Rebellion in Labor Unions*, 261-4.

²¹ Interview with Alfred Bordson, 10 July 1919; interview with John Corpi, 9 July 1919, Saposs Papers.

²² Interview with Mr., 3 August 1920, Saposs Papers.

