

Labor and the Political Leadership of New Deal America

DAVID MONTGOMERY

Summary: This essay examines the relationship between popular initiatives and government decision-makers during the 1930s. The economic crisis and the reawakening of labor militancy before 1935 elevated men and women, who had been formed by the workers' movement of the 1910s and 1920s, to prominent roles in the making of national industrial policies. Quite different was the reshaping of social insurance and work relief measures. Although those policies represented a governmental response to the distress and protests of the working class, the workers themselves had little influence on their formulation or administration. Through industrial struggles, the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) mobilized a new cadre, trained by youthful encounters with urban ethnic life, expanding secondary schooling and subordination to modern corporate management, in an unsuccessful quest for economic planning and universal social insurance through the agency of a reformed Democratic Party.

The political and industrial conflicts of the 1930s reshaped both the role of the United States government in economic and social life and the character and influence of the labor movement in ways that formed essential features of the polity for the next forty years. The importance of this transformation made the relationship between government policy decisions and the growing labor movement a subject of intense public controversy at the time, and it has continued to generate disputes among historians to this day.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, while annotating an early edition of his own papers, had depicted the new industrial unions as both a beneficiary of his government and a tribulation to it. Introducing messages related to the steel strike of 1937, he wrote:

Labor was having its growing pains. Labor, which had been subjected to so much exploitation in the past, was just beginning to find its power under the new impetus of favorable legislation and a sympathetic Government. It had not quite grown up to such power. In some quarters irresponsible leadership had developed [. . .] From familiar circles came the old cry of the Tories: "Something drastic must be done to curb labor [. . .]"¹

¹ *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, With a Special Introduction and Explanatory Notes by President Roosevelt. 1937 Volume. The Constitution Prevails* (New York, 1941), pp. 272–274.

Much of the subsequent disagreement among historians might be considered as an exegesis on the President's statement. What David Brody has called the "liberal conception of industrial-union history" focused its attention on the role of Roosevelt's "favorable legislation and a sympathetic Government" in making rapid union growth possible and on the conservative reaction to industrial militancy that had sharply curtailed both union growth and reform legislation by the end of the decade.² A contrary position, well represented by a new anthology of essays edited by Staughton Lynd, has interpreted the "favorable legislation" itself as a reluctant response by the Roosevelt government to labor militancy. More important, it also depicts not only the government's action, but also the institutionalization of the industrial union impulse in the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) as deliberate and effective containment of more radical impulses among the workers (what Roosevelt called "irresponsible leadership"). From this point of view, the establishment of unions which defined their jurisdictions by industry and which negotiated binding contracts with businesses fragmented the community-wide solidarities from which workers had drawn strength during the early 1930s, while the legislative reforms of 1935–1936 (often called by historians the Second New Deal) undermined a growing movement for a labor party and tied the emerging union movement to the Democratic Party. Moreover, despite the angry identification of strikes and unions with Communist insurgency by contemporary conservatives, these historians assess the policies pursued by the Communist party during the Popular Front era as having served only to assist the process of cooptation.³

Although David Brody pays tribute to the "new questions" that have been posed by these revisionists, he nevertheless charges that they have not shown that "it could have been otherwise" – that real alternatives existed to "the union course that was actually taken."⁴ While the debate over historical assessment of paths not taken remains open, however, other historians have enriched the controversy by posing questions of a different order. From one direction, Lizabeth Cohen has argued that a "culture of unity", fashioned by urban immigrant life and mass consumer-

² Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1959); Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Boston, 1970); Jerold S. Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty: The La Follette Committee and the New Deal* (Indianapolis, 1966).

³ Staughton Lynd (ed.), *The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s* (Urbana, Ill., forthcoming); Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the American Working Class* (London, 1986); Elizabeth Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915–1945* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991); Peter Rachleff, *Hard-Pressed in the Heartland: The Hormel Strike and the Future of the Labor Movement* (Boston, 1993).

⁴ David Brody, *Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle* (2nd ed., New York, 1993), p. 151.

ism, made the New Deal possible. In her view the interaction between the working class and the state viewed from the base involved much more than just industrial conflict. From quite the opposite direction, Theda Skocpol and others have stressed the "relative autonomy of the state", and argued that policy-makers played their own creative roles that cannot be understood simply as reacting to social conflict and popular demands.⁵

The extent of my own agreement and disagreement with each of these positions will become evident in the pages to come. Let me assert at the outset, however, that one promising clue to resolving the disputes has been offered by Steven Fraser's biography of Sidney Hillman, a leading figure in both the industrial unions and the government.

"From the vantage point of rising new trade union, managerial, and political elites," wrote Fraser, "the CIO was a quintessentially political creature [,] whose origins and fate were entirely bound up with the rising and receding of the 'second New Deal'."⁶ His argument suggests that both the institutions and the cadre of the labor movement were more intimately tied to government policy-makers of the period than is suggested by either the image of the "relative autonomy of the state" in formulating policy or that of industrial turmoil, which the state sought to pacify by concessions. It also suggests that the workers' movement of the epoch generated new governmental leaders at the local, state, and national levels, and that the critical support offered the New Deal administration by the American version of the Popular Front was not so much a betrayal of revolutionary impulses inspired by Moscow's foreign policy as an adaptation of political strategies to the new power relationships within which workers were transforming their own lives. It may prove useful to follow that line of argument, while directing attention to what was happening in factories and neighborhoods, as well as to policy formation in Washington.

This essay will examine the relationship between popular initiatives and government decision-makers during the 1930s. It will begin with a consideration of the role of the economic crisis and the reawakening of labor militancy before 1935 in elevating men and women who had been formed by the workers' movement of the 1910s and 1920s to prominent roles in the making of industrial policies. It will then turn to the reshaping of social insurance and work relief measures and argue that, although those policies represented a governmental response to the distress and

⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, 1990); Michael Goldfield, Theda Skocpol and Kenneth Finegold, "Explaining New Deal Labor Policy", *American Political Science Review*, 84 (December 1990), pp. 1298-1317. See also, Michael Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency, Radical Organization, and New Deal Labor Legislation", *ibid.*, 83 (December 1989), pp. 1257-1282.

⁶ Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York, 1991), p. 329.

protests of the working class, the workers themselves had little influence on their formulation or administration. Finally, it will scrutinize the way the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) mobilized a new cadre, trained by youthful encounters with urban ethnic life, expanding secondary schooling and subordination to modern corporate management, in an unsuccessful quest for economic planning and universal social insurance through the agency of a reformed Democratic Party.

In the United States, as in Mexico, reorientation of the ruling party toward social reform required the formation of a new union movement. Unlike Mexico, however, the United States remained the theater of intense electoral competition. A groundswell of new voters, largely of eastern and southern European ancestry, had broadened the urban base of the Democratic Party beyond its traditional Irish-German constituency, while African Americans bargained during the 1930s with both major parties for government jobs and open access to public accommodations in the North, and also mobilized campaigns for voting rights in southern industrial centers in alliance with the new unions. Conversely, as the Lynds discovered when they revisited Muncie, Indiana, in 1935–1936, a siege mentality had unified the Protestant middle class under the Republican banner. The nation's opposing camps confronted each other with rival 1936 Labor Day parades in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, where Jones and Laughlin had its finest steel mill. Morning festivities featured company union loyalists, businessmen's lodges, and the McKinley Republican Club. They were challenged in the afternoon by adherents of the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee, thousands of coal miners and craft unionists, affiliates of the International Workers Order, and representatives of the local Farmer-Labor Party, all marching to the beat of a United Mine Workers' drum and bugle corps behind portraits of President Roosevelt.⁷

Agencies created in Washington to encourage employers' recognition of industrial unions, especially the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and the LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee, empowered local groups of workers to exercise their own initiatives for their own purposes. The experience of the mid-1930s taught millions of workers that the police powers of the state could be used to unleash popular initiatives, as well as to repress them. Intense reaction by business and conservative groups against workers' uses of their newly won collective power, coupled with the abrupt collapse of the economy in late 1937, brought widespread victories of the Right in the federal and state elections of 1938, checked

⁷ *Beaver Valley Labor History Journal*, 1 (September 1979), p. 4; Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflict* (New York, 1937), pp. 402–486. On the Right of the 1930s, see Robert F. Burk, *The Corporate State and the Broker State: The Du Ponts and American National Politics, 1925–1940* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); Geoffrey S. Smith, *To Save a Nation: American Countersubversives, the New Deal, and the Coming of World War II* (New York, 1973).

the growth of the CIO, and encouraged Congress and the administration to refrain from additional reform legislation and to trim expenditures for relief projects. Supreme Court rulings declaring the replacement of employees who were engaged in "economic strikes" (1938) and the punishment of sit-down strikers (1939) permissible under the Wagner Act were supplemented by a wave of state legislation to restrain strikes and union practices.⁸ America's great hour of worker-driven political reform had lasted no longer than that of France.

UNIONS AND INDUSTRIAL POLICY

Both the leadership of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and their more radical rivals within the workers' movement formulated their policies for dealing with the Great Depression on the basis of their own experience during the epoch of World War I. The proportion of the labor force engaged in strikes every year between 1916 and 1922 had been far greater than that generated by the strike waves of 1934 and 1937. Moreover, the percentage of the working class that had enrolled in unions in 1920 was not to be equalled again until 1940, when conditions of war mobilization again prevailed. Not only had AFL and independent unions momentarily secured a large membership in heavy industry, as well as a more durable constituency in the skilled trades, but a self-styled bloc of "progressives" within the AFL had advocated national old-age pensions, unemployment and health insurance, a federal program of housing construction, legislation to prohibit the dismissal of workers for union membership, pacts committing unions to mutual strike support, national ownership of coal mines and railroads, and union participation in the Conference for Progressive Political Action.⁹

By the end of the depression of 1920–1922 unions had been expelled from mass production industries, total union membership had fallen by nearly 40 per cent, and the AFL's progressives had largely been relegated to the workers' education movement. Nevertheless, total union membership at its lowest ebb during the 1920s remained greater in proportion to the size of the labor force than it had ever been before the war (or than it is in the private sector in 1993), and the gap between union and non-union wages in manufacturing, mining and construction was the greatest it had ever been.

⁸ Harry A. Millis and Emily C. Brown, *From the Wagner Act to Taft Hartley: A Study of National Labor Policy and Labor Relations* (Chicago, 1950), pp. 316–322. The relevant supreme court cases were *NLRB v. Mackay Radio and Telegraph Co.* 304 US 333 (1938) and *NLRB v. Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation* 306 US 240 (1939).

⁹ David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865–1925* (Cambridge and New York, 1987), pp. 403–407, 417–424.

Unions continued to negotiate trade agreements primarily with relatively small employers, who serviced local markets. Municipal licensing regulation of construction, entertainment, conveyance and food service often contributed to the local strength of unions and tightened their bonds to urban politicians. Moreover, even when they were beleaguered by injunctions and open shop campaigns, officers of AFL unions knew that during and since the war the government had endowed them with a quasi-official status. Whenever they were challenged by the Industrial Workers of the World, the One Big Union, the Trade Union Educational League, or smaller unaffiliated Left-led unions, both local police and federal authorities could be relied upon to attack their rivals and confer with the "legitimate" unions of the AFL. In a word, the conservative practitioners of "tried and true" craft unionism did have something tangible to defend against what the teamsters' Daniel Tobin called "the rubbish at labor's door" in the 1930s.¹⁰

When the depression devastated the economy, therefore, the journal of the AFL's International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers editorialized that the federal government should consider "organized workers as assets to the state." The editor explained: "If [the government] can come into a vision of organized workers – labor unions – as technical instruments of production, as arms of the state to police and enforce fair laws – then the nation may well be on the road to a new and better prosperity."¹¹

The aspiration to employ trade unions, which workers had created by their own efforts, as instruments of government-sponsored rationalization of the market behavior of business had taken shape not only among the electricians, whose exertions were converting American industry and residences to electrical power and wiring the huge dams that both Hoover and Roosevelt presented to the public as symbols of their recovery programs, but also among both union leaders and industrialists in the coal, garment and textile industries. As Stanley Vittoz has argued, in those three incurably competitive industries, labor costs were decisive determinants of prices, and unions had been a significant presence at least since the turn of the century. It was in the same industries that the Communist Party (as earlier the IWW and OBU) was able to organize major strikes: witness the textile workers' strikes in Passaic,

¹⁰ David Montgomery, "Thinking about American Workers in the 1920s", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 32 (Fall 1987), pp. 4–24; Stanley Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy and the American Industrial Economy* (Chapel Hill and London, 1987), pp. 18–19.

¹¹ Quoted in Grace Palladino, *Dreams of Dignity, Workers of Vision: A History of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers* (Washington, DC, 1991), p. 151. The vocabulary of this resolution is that of the famous 1923 resolution of the AFL, "Industry's Manifest Duty", but that resolution had warned against "state invasion" of economic life. See Montgomery, "Thinking", pp. 15–16.

New Bedford and Gastonia, the strikes of the National Miners Union in Kentucky, New Mexico and Pennsylvania, and the historic strike of the International Ladies' Garment Workers in New York City under Communist leadership in 1926.

In both bituminous coal and women's clothing crushing strike defeats suffered by AFL unions during 1926 and 1927 had ironically left the victorious employers helpless to deter cost-cutting by their competitors, which dragged all prices relentlessly down and threatened even the mightiest firms with ruin after 1929. In June 1931 Frank E. Taplin, President of the North American Coal Corporation, circulated an open letter to his fellow mine owners, admonishing them that "the situation is even worse [now] than when we dealt with the Union." He asked them to consider carefully "whether it is better to operate with a well-regulated Union which has a legitimate right to exist", or to compete with "a lot of price-cutting, wage-cutting operators", in the unrestrained way that "fills the mines with Communists".¹²

The election of 1930 returned a Congress that was prepared to enact the major legislative demands of the AFL. The Norris-LaGuardia Act restricted the use of injunctions against unions and put an end especially to court orders which had prohibited union recruiting of miners who had signed a pledge not to join a union, as a condition of employment. The Davis-Bacon Act required the payment of the "prevailing wage" (which usually meant union wage) in construction work contracted by the federal government. Senator James Davis, who had been Secretary of Labor under President Calvin Coolidge, was soon joined by such fellow Pennsylvanians as Joseph Guffey and Henry Ellenbogen, in depicting the Sherman Anti-Trust Act as the primary obstacle to the development of cartels which could stabilize prices and of unions strong enough to enforce the same wage standards on all members of those cartels. They were a bipartisan group, so it is small wonder that in 1932 the national labor committees of the Republican, Democratic and Socialist parties were all headed by presidents of AFL unions (William Hutcheson, Daniel Tobin and Emil Rieve).

The culmination of their efforts was the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, which enjoyed its most consistent support from unions and major employers in clothing, coal mining and textiles (especially northern). That major piece of New Deal legislation, however, also owed much to a broader conception of the role of government in reshaping industrial relations, which had taken root during the 1920s in the cluster of intellectuals who gathered around the decade's "New Unions", especially the unaffiliated Amalgamated Clothing Workers of

¹² Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy*, pp. 43–44, 60–69. The quotation from Taplin is on p. 64. Taplin's argument was also the theme of Michael Musmanno's novel (later movie), *Black Fury*.

America (ACWA). Created in 1914 by a secession of primarily Jewish and Italian workers from the AFL's United Garment Workers, the ACWA grew to control major centers of men's clothing production, despite incessant attacks from the AFL (and in Baltimore the IWW), frequent treatment as an "outlaw union" by the courts, and a concerted attempt by employers to stamp it out in 1921. It became, along with the smaller Full Fashion Hosiery Workers, the lodestone of left-liberal hopes during the Harding and Coolidge years, when the rest of the trade union movement had lapsed, in Selig Perlman's apt phrase, into a "curious blending of 'defeatism' with complacency."¹³

Not only was the leadership of the ACWA graced by some of the ablest men and women ever to hold union office in the United States (like Sidney Hillman, Joseph Schlossberg, Bessie Abramovitz, Augusto Bellanca, J. B. S. Hardman, and Aldo Cursi), but the New Unionism they symbolized combined vigorous commitment to workers' education, a labor party, comprehensive social insurance, government assistance to collective bargaining, and friendly ties to Soviet Russia (especially during its New Economic Policy) with an innovative quest for both union standards and higher productivity. That quest drew into the Amalgamated's orbit a constellation of social scientists and social engineers, including Morris Cooke, Mary Van Kleeck, Wesley Mitchell, Leo Wolman and Ordway Tead, along with business leaders like Edward Filene and Henry Dennison, for whom stimulation of mass consumption was a more compelling objective than absolute mastery over their own employees. Together they cultivated what Steven Fraser calls "micro-regulation" of the economy: securing high earnings, raising productivity, evening out seasonal patterns of layoffs, introducing company-based unemployment insurance, policing the behavior of subcontractors, and creating a nucleus of experienced arbitrators, whose decisions introduced an element of predictability into industrial relations. In localities where no employers' association existed to deal with the union, the ACWA organized one.¹⁴ Consequently, the New Unionism was one major contributor to the assembling and training of the cadre of the New Deal.

NRA CODES AND POPULAR INITIATIVES

The most important agency through which workers exercised their own initiatives and generated new political leadership was the industrial union. As many historians have agreed, the resurgence of trade unionism unleashed by the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 and 1934 was most successful in industries with long-established union traditions

¹³ Selig Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement* (New York, 1928), p. 232.

¹⁴ Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, pp. 261–277.

and prominent business leaders who regarded the NRA Codes and even strong unions as necessary to check ruinous price competition. Moreover, the national officers of the unions which benefited most from the Act, such as the mine workers, men's and women's clothing workers, textile workers (who emerged strong in the North, though defeated in the South), teamsters, longshoremen, seamen and building trades, had been securely established in office since the World War I epoch and had learned from those years to press for government policies hospitable to union growth, and to operate cautiously within the terrain those policies permitted. Even the central labor unions of Detroit, Akron, Bridgeport, Bessemer and other cities, that played major roles in mobilizing local solidarity in support of new unions, had usually been dominated by the same individuals for years. Many of them were old socialists, like Detroit's Frank X. Martel, who seemed to rekindle some of the ardor of their own youth.¹⁵

The most famous strikes of 1934, those of the Pacific Coast maritime workers, Minneapolis truckers and Toledo Auto-Lite workers, were led by Communists, Trotskyists and Musteites, who drew on the political vision and organizational experience of their revolutionary parties to defy established union leaders and to project new personalities into positions of lasting influence. Even the organizing campaigns that were most carefully managed by veteran AFL officials, however, also unleashed popular mobilizations in areas that had long been quiescent and churned up new activists, who challenged local elites and established union leaders all over the land.

For example, the rapid organization of eighty-seven locals in Alabama by the United Mine Workers (UMWA) inspired the local Communist Party to abandon its nearly defunct National Miners' Union in favor of rank-and-file committees of UMWA members. Miners struck in defiance of the union's leadership against the low wage scales authorized by the NRA bituminous coal code in the South and also against the widespread practice of subcontracting, by which operators evaded many code provisions. Although a strike of 15–20,000 miners against the regional differential in February 1934 was unsuccessful, subcontracting was ended. Local Communist Party membership rose to more than 500 in spite of fierce police repression, while strikes in laundries, iron mines, and packing-houses, coupled with incessant struggles in support of relief recipients,

¹⁵ Warren R. Van Tine, *The Making of a Labor Bureaucrat: Union Leadership in the United States, 1870–1920* (Amherst, Mass., 1973) examines the emergence of long-term leadership, but its reinvigoration has been best captured by Cecelia F. Bucki, "The Pursuit of Political Power: Class, Ethnicity, and Municipal Politics in Interwar Bridgeport, 1915–1936" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1991), and by such biographies as Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*; Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine, *John L. Lewis: A Biography* (New York, 1977); and Christopher H. Johnson, *Maurice Sugar: Law, Labor, and the Left in Detroit, 1912–1950* (Detroit, 1988).

set the stage for a May Day parade of more than 5,000 participants, who were brutally attacked by Birmingham's police and some 1,500 White Legionnaires. Since almost all local Communists were black workers, few of them were able to rise to eminence even in the CIO, let alone local government, in the segregated South. But with the help of party schools some became prominent trade unionists, like Henry O. Mayfield, Joe Howard, Ebb Cox and Hosea Hudson. More important, as Robin Kelley has shown, the women's auxiliaries of the unions came to rival the unions themselves in membership and activism, especially through their battles to place families of strikers on relief rolls and to register African Americans as voters.¹⁶

In the anthracite region of eastern Pennsylvania, where especially autocratic districts of the miners' unions had survived more than a decade of declining markets and chronic unemployment, class solidarity in the NRA context upset established relationships of local economic and political power. The subcontracting system, which made some union miners exploiters of others, had survived the recognition of the United Mine Workers and even a large strike against the practice led by the IWW among the largely Italian laborers of the Old Forge region in 1916. Although the United Mine Workers had enjoyed a virtual closed shop and union dues check-off since that time, a wildcat strike against subcontracting in 1933 spread rapidly through the northern region, encompassing Wilkes-Barre, Old Forge and Scranton. Because President Lewis had decreed that any local officer who entertained a strike motion would be expelled, the miners learned to take strike votes with no one on the podium and no debate. When UMWA officials attempted to drive members back to work, the informal leaders of the strike (most of whom had earlier been friendly to the Communist NMU, but not party members) organized a new union, the Anthracite Miners' Union of Pennsylvania.

As was the case in the Alabama coal fields, unemployed councils and organizations of miners' wives and daughters were especially prominent in mobilizing strike support. Wilkes-Barre added an unusual twist: its school children struck classes in sympathy with their fathers. Within two months, however, the anthracite strike was broken, when thirty leaders were imprisoned for violating an injunction (despite the Norris-LaGuardia law), the president of the rebel union was killed by a bomb mailed to his home, and a German-born anarchist was executed on very

¹⁶ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), pp. 60–69. The Communist Party's decision to supplement its dual unions in favor of aggressive work within the AFL had been reached in July 1933 at an Extraordinary National Conference in New York, two years before the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern. James R. Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue in the American Labor Movement, 1920–1950" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1975), pp. 142–161.

dubious evidence that he had sent the bomb. Activists from the defeated union then joined with the Communists to field a Luzerne County Labor Party ticket for the 1934 elections.¹⁷

The nation-wide textile strike in September 1934 renewed mass action in the region. The anthracite fields were unusually highly urbanized for a North American coal mining region, and during the second and third decades of the twentieth century they had attracted many textile (especially silk) mills, which employed women from miners' families. The 1934 strike was especially fiercely fought at the large, paternalistic Duplan mills of Hazleton, but the women who regularly assaulted scabs and bombarded that factory with rocks also formed motorized flying squadrons to dispense the same treatment to mills in Wilkes-Barre, Scranton and other towns. A huge rally convened by Hazleton's Central Labor Union in the auditorium of St John's Greek Catholic school resulted in a general Labor Holiday called by all unions of the region on 12 September. Twenty thousand workers marched through the town's streets behind banners of their unions and unemployed councils, to the cadence of three popular orchestras and bands provided by the UMWA and war veterans' organizations.¹⁸

The virtual unanimity of the Hazleton holiday and the marchers' consistent praise for the NRA provided clear evidence that the established unions had embraced the popular movement, and that it would be the Democratic Party that swept the polls in November, leaving the new labor party hardly 5 per cent of the region's vote. Nevertheless, one more incident in the little town of Kelayres, south of Hazleton, suggested the dimensions of the upheaval involved in the triumph of the Democrats.

Lizabeth Cohen, John Bodnar, Gary Gerstle, John Bukowczyk, Cecelia Bucki and other historians have scrutinized the consolidation of immigrant fraternal organizations, business and political leadership that followed the virtual closing of immigration from eastern and southern Europe by the National Origins Act of 1924. All of them have observed, as Louis Adamic had done back in the 1930s, that immigrant self-help efforts were bankrupted by the Great Depression, and that even the business and professional strata of immigrant communities appealed for federal relief, showing no nostalgia whatever for the "rugged individualism" preached by President Herbert Hoover. Just as common hatred for Prohibition had turned ethnic leaders toward the Democrats, so the economic crisis made

¹⁷ Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American Radical* (Pittsburgh, 1981), pp. 167–173; Christopher Sterba, "Textile Labor Conflict in the Anthracite: The General Labor Holiday in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, September 12, 1934", 19 (unpublished paper, cited by permission of author); Patrick M. Lynch, "Pennsylvania Anthracite: A Forgotten IWW Venture, 1906–1916" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Bloomsburg State College, 1974).

¹⁸ Sterba, "Textile Labor Conflict", pp. 29–37.

them spur on the Democrats' turn to what Hoover had condemned as "state invasion" of economic life.¹⁹

It was the distinctive contribution of Ewa Morawska, however, to note that the closing down of new immigration had also curbed the expansion of immigrant elites, leaving established business, clerical, and professional leaders fiercely protective of their domains and encouraging their rivals within the ethnic communities (both petit bourgeois and worker) to challenge their hegemony with populist and pan-ethnic appeals, that often earned the most favorable response among the American-educated youth.²⁰ In Kelayres, where most men worked (when there was work) for the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre Coal Company, the Bruno family, whose progenitors had come to the mines from Cosenza in Calabria in the late 1880s, ruled the town in the shadow of the corporation until 1934. By the time the depression broke, various Brunos ran a hotel, a cigar factory, a general store, the local bank, and the local Republican Party. Among the cousins could be found the tax assessor, a school director, the high school's principal, two justices of the peace, a county detective, an officer of the Coal and Iron Police, and a poor relief director.

Unease with the Brunos' regime turned to rage when the economic crisis prompted various members of the family to foreclose mortgages on homes and stores of other townspeople, deny relief funds to the needy while pilfering money for themselves, and use the school buses to transport bootleg beer. It was, in fact, aggrieved shopkeepers who first mobilized neighbors (with Ukrainian, Slovak, Irish and Polish, as well as Italian names) to challenge the Brunos, first inside the Republican Party, and then with the eager support offered them by the state's Democrats. Hostilities mounted to the point where Bruno women would not go to church unarmed. The night before the elections, a large angry parade behind an American flag and banners hailing President Roosevelt was fired on from the Brunos' residential enclave. Five men were killed instantly, and twenty more men, women and children were seriously injured. State police entering the Bruno homes found an arsenal of weaponry, as well as slot machines, and escorted fourteen leaders of the town's Republican Party out to stand trial for murder. Election day broadcasts by the Democratic Party trumpeted news of the massacre perpetrated by the Republicans. Some 20,000 people attended the

¹⁹ Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870-1940* (Pittsburgh, 1977); Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City* (Cambridge and New York, 1989); John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), pp. 65-84; Bucki, "Bridgeport"; Louis Adamic, *My America, 1928-1938* (New York and London, 1938).

²⁰ Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890-1940* (Cambridge and New York, 1985), pp. 252-265.

funeral, where they heard the victorious Democratic gubernatorial candidate George Earle proclaim that the victims had "died in the trenches of the New Deal."²¹

In short, a fixation on the well-known surge of votes toward the Democrats in neighborhoods dominated by immigrants and their descendants can mask political upheavals within those communities that were brought to a crescendo by the 1933–1934 strike wave. The forging of a New Deal coalition, which has been so eloquently described by Elizabeth Cohen's account of Chicago, was often a far less benign process than she has depicted. Victorious Democratic candidates (or New Deal Republicans like Fiorello LaGuardia and Vito Marcantonio) may have been securely rooted in their ethnic communities, but they also had to challenge entrenched leaders within those communities. As Gary Gerstle has shown in the case of Woonsocket and Hyman Berman in that of Minnesota, it was the renewed economic distress and conservative reaction of 1938–1939 that allowed older ethnic leaders their moment of revenge, usually behind appeals to anticommunism, ethnic nationalism and antisemitism.²²

SOCIAL INSURANCE AND SOCIAL WORKERS

Emergency relief for the unemployed and the Social Security Act of 1935 brought significant benefits to many workers, but both the prior history of state legislation and the decisions of the federal government during the 1930s served to minimize the role of workers' organizations in shaping policy or providing administrative personnel. Early in the twentieth century the American Association for Labor Legislation had assembled academics and other reformers, who wished to devise governmental measures to protect working people against the hazards of industrial life. During the brief but highly visible depression of 1914–1915, the association's carefully crafted proposals for publicly-funded insurance against old age, sickness and unemployment, similar to measures that had recently been adopted by Britain's parliament, won the support of many state branches of the AFL and serious consideration by legislative commissions in several states, especially Massachusetts.

Nothing came of these efforts. By the early 1920s proposals for governmentally regulated and funded social insurance had met with defeat in state legislatures or in the courts. The electorate (which had

²¹ John Cerullo and Gennaro Delana, "The Kelayres Massacre", *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 57 (July 1983), pp. 331–361. The quotation is on p. 337.

²² Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*, pp. 230–259; Hyman Berman, "Political Antisemitism in Minnesota during the Great Depression", *Jewish Social Studies*, 38 (Summer–Fall 1976), pp. 247–264. Oddly, Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, has little to say about either the local officials or Congressional representatives elected by Chicagoans during the New Deal era.

shriveled to an all-time low) adamantly favored lower taxes, and the managers of major industrial firms, which had successfully fought off unionization of their employees, clearly preferred to introduce pensions, health benefits, stabilization of employment and even dismissal pay for long-term employees (which more than 300 firms had instituted before the Great Depression) on their own initiative and for their own employees. Management considered such benefits a means to encourage the loyalty of workers to the enterprise and an antidote to the insurance offered by ethnic fraternal lodges and trade unions. Government insurance threatened not only to increase the tax burden, but also to invade the domain of managerial discretion in the direction of the firm and the cultivation of loyal employees.²³

In this context the state of Wisconsin played a role in the development of social insurance comparable to that of the ACWA in "microregulation" of the economy. The Socialist-led State Federation of Labor provided an important lobby, as did its counterpart in Pennsylvania, but the measures introduced into the legislature were developed by scholars from the University of Wisconsin (most famous among them John R. Commons), who carefully tailored the proposals to minimize the opposition of business and taxpayers. The funds were contributed by potential beneficiaries, rather than general state revenues, and in the case of unemployment insurance, companies which maintained their own reserve funds avoided taxation. Of the six states which enacted old age pensions before 1928, two had them ruled unconstitutional (Pennsylvania and Arizona), and only Montana and Wisconsin had actually paid out benefits. Four years later Wisconsin passed the country's first unemployment benefits law. "When the New Deal came," Theda Skocpol has argued, "Wisconsin experts' were uniquely well positioned to be called to Washington, D.C." and influence "the formulation and implementation of the Social Security Act."²⁴

Their influence did not go unchallenged in Congress. The Rank and File Conference of AFL activists, with the Communist painter Louis Weinstock its secretary-treasurer, had developed an alternative plan for comprehensive social insurance financed by general revenues, which was introduced into the House of Representatives in 1934 by Ernest Lundeen of Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party. For the rest of the decade the Lundeen bill enjoyed the support of the Workers' Alliance, all local

²³ Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992), pp. 161-310; Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, pp. 410-416, 438-457; Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse, 1923-60* (Urbana, Ill., 1983), pp. 11-24; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 160-211. On voters and taxes, see Bucki, "Bridgeport", pp. 244-267, 371-379.

²⁴ Roy Lubove, *The Struggle for Social Security, 1900-1935* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 164-170; Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, pp. 157-158, 198, 237.

labor parties and the CIO. A poll conducted by the *New York Post* in 1935 found respondents favoring the proposal over the administration's social security bill by a ratio of one hundred to one. During the subsequent debate, the administration, according to Edwin Witte who headed the staff of the President's Committee on Economic Security, used the Lundeen bill "as a scarecrow to get action on its bill."²⁵

The aim of the Lundeen bill was to guarantee a minimum standard of living for every resident of the United States. As Mary Van Kleeck of the Russell Sage Foundation, who had redrafted Lundeen's bill in 1935, told Congress: "*Social insurance should not be split into categories.*" It provided for social insurance against all loss of wages, whether through unemployment, part-time work, sickness, old age, or maternity and for all "workers and farmers without discrimination because of age, sex, race, or color, religious or political opinion, or affiliation, whether they be industrial, agricultural, domestic, or professional workers, for all time lost." The bill received the enthusiastic endorsement of executive secretary T. Arnold Hill of the Urban League, because its uniform benefits and universal coverage, which were absent from the administration's bill, had "special meaning for Negro workers."²⁶

Most innovative of all was the Lundeen bill's provision that social insurance should be administered, under general rules prescribed by the Secretary of Labor, by "commissions composed of the rank and file of workers' and farmers' organizations." No idea was further from the mind of the Roosevelt administration than the use of workers' organizations to administer social insurance funds, the way trade unions in Belgium, Sweden and England administered government unemployment compensation, or placing representative workers on the staff of administrative agencies, as German health insurance had done since Wilhelmine times. Quite the contrary. New Deal policy-makers and Congress preferred old age pensions and unemployment compensation funded entirely by contributions of employers and employees, with no benefits to be paid out until an adequate reserve fund had been accumulated (two years later). They were also to be administered by civil servants. Although the CIO called the Social Security Act of 1935 "a step in the right direction", all its vigorous lobbying between 1944 and 1948 to revive the Lundeen bill, reincarnated as the Murray-Wagner-Dingall bill, failed to prod the government toward universal social insurance.²⁷

²⁵ Quoted in Kenneth Casebeer, "The Workers' Unemployment Insurance Bill: American Social Wage, Labor Organization, and Legal Ideology", in Christopher L. Tomlins and Andrew J. King (eds), *Labor Law in America: Historical and Critical Essays* (Baltimore and London, 1992), p. 250.

²⁶ Casebeer, "Workers' Unemployment Bill", pp. 250, 232, 247.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232; Faue, *Suffering and Struggle*, p. 149; Nelson, Barrett and Ruck, *Steve Nelson*, p. 160; Herbert Harris, *American Labor* (New Haven, 1939), pp. 403-405, 410n; Alan Derickson, "Health Security for All? Social Unionism and Universal Health Insur-

The Social Security Act contained another provision, which underscored labor's remote influence on social welfare policy: it returned control of all relief expenditures other than work projects to the states. Since all states except South Carolina and Georgia had enacted mothers' pensions (sometimes called widows' pensions) before the coming of the New Deal, the law made federally-aided but state-administered Aid to Dependent Children the basic national system of poor relief, rather than the universal income guarantees proposed by Lundeen.

The favored form of relief had its origin in campaigns mobilized at the turn of the century by the General Federation of Women's Clubs, National Congress of Mothers and National Consumers' League, for public funds to enable widowed and impoverished mothers to care for their own children, without swelling the ranks of the lowest-paid wage earners. Their demand for "mothers' pensions" was launched from White House conferences, it secured the endorsement of the AFL and influential fraternal lodges, and it overwhelmed the opposition of private charity organizations, which had feared a restoration of the municipal "outdoor relief", that they had stamped out by protracted struggle in the nineteenth century. So difficult did politicians find it to resist the appeal to motherhood and the family circle, that the twenty states which enacted mothers' pensions between 1911 and 1913 did so by nearly unanimous tallies. By 1920 twenty more states had followed suit, and in 1931 all but two had joined the ranks.²⁸

This was the form of relief that was systematized by the New Deal and passed on to our own times. As it turned out, however, the women's organizations had been more successful in securing the enactment of mothers' pensions than they were in shaping their implementation. Tax-shy state legislatures authorized such paltry appropriations that widows were more likely to be on waiting lists than receiving benefits, and the actual pensions were so small that beneficiaries had to supplement them by stealthily taking in work that paid far less than women's wages in factories, stores or offices. More important for the long run, professional social workers, often from the very agencies that had opposed the laws in the first place, assumed the task of determining which applicants displayed life styles that would make them worthy of the state benefits.

ance, 1935-1958", *Journal of American History*, 80 (March 1994), pp. 1333-1356; *Final Proceedings of the Eighth Constitutional Convention of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, November 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 1946* (n.p., n.d.), pp. 81-83. On European social insurance, see George Steinmetz, "Workers and the Welfare State in Imperial Germany", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 40 (Fall 1991), pp. 18-46; James E. Cronin and Peter Weiler, "Working-Class Interests and the Politics of Social Democratic Reform in Britain, 1900-1940", *ibid.*, pp. 47-66.

²⁸ Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, pp. 321-479. On the campaign against outdoor relief in the nineteenth century, see David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge and New York, 1993), pp. 71-82.

Largely through the growing influence of the National Conference of Social Work, the men and women who administered both public benefits and private charities increasingly adhered to the same professional code. They regarded with contempt all signs of "sentimentalism" in dealing with the poor.²⁹

The cadre for the New Deal's relief administration was drawn from the ranks of the professional social workers, led by those who came with Harry Hopkins from the state of New York to staff the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). In the memory of American workers, no act of the New Deal evokes a warmer response than the massive scale of its relief effort. From the vantage point of the social work profession, however, the FERA was, in William Brock's words, "a government by experts at the expense of elected amateurs. It was a government by outsiders: outside the political system, outside the bureaucratic establishment, and belonging to a profession that had yet to win public recognition."³⁰

By the time Aid to Dependent Children was returned to the states in 1935 (under the direction of the new Social Security Administration rather than the female-staffed Children's Bureau), the National Conference of Social Work approved the transfer of responsibility, confident that its standards would now prevail in every state without Harry Hopkins' oversight. Branches of the Workers' Alliance subsequently waged many protests about the size and rules of relief allocations to women, some of them successful. But they could only protest. Unlike the Wagner Act, which empowered workers to fashion and use their own agencies, the administration of poor relief remained outside of the workers' grip. More research is needed before one can say how often and under what circumstances the united Communist-Socialist organization for the unemployed, the Workers' Alliance, was able to cultivate local relief officials friendly to its point of view. It is clear, however, that many a recipient shared the sentiments of one who wrote to the Minneapolis Workers' Alliance: "I myself would have liked nothing better than in broad daylight to heave bricks of patent dynamite into the windows of bureaus and agencies that are supposed to be established for the benefit of unemployed girls."³¹

²⁹ Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*, pp. 520–522; William R. Brock, *Welfare, Democracy, and the New Deal* (Cambridge and New York, 1988), pp. 27–49. For a perceptive analysis of professionalization, see Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890–1945* (New Haven, 1993).

³⁰ Brock, *Welfare, Democracy*, p. 174.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–260; "Leah" to *United Action*, 16 September 1935, quoted in Faeu, *Suffering and Struggle*, p. 63. See Meridel Le Sueur, *The Girl* (Minneapolis, 1978). There were instances of workers being elected to poor boards, but they seem to have been less numerous than such elections had been during the late nineteenth century.

While relief for women was remanded to state authorities, where professional social workers held sway, relief for men was directed toward work projects, whose relationship to the labor movement was more complex. Jobless men had often been employed on municipal construction before the Civil War, but bourgeois reformers had largely eliminated the practice during the last third of the nineteenth century. Labor organizations, including the AFL, raised the cry for public employment with every downturn of the economy from 1893 onward. At the same time that the AFL rejected contributory social insurance, it adopted in 1915 an elaborate program for public works, municipal lodging for homeless men and repeal of state vagrancy laws. Faced with the devastating depression of 1929, the federation revived those demands, while placing its greatest hopes in work-sharing plans voluntarily instituted by unions and by major employers, and in its persistent but unsuccessful campaign for legislation to establish a thirty-hour work week.³²

When the FERA in 1934 channeled some 4,000,000 adults from the ranks of its 27,000,000 relief recipients into work projects, therefore, the labor movement endorsed the action. Its main concerns were to establish pay differentials based on skill and to prevent projects from competing with unionized private construction firms. By the time the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 the challenge of generating public sector jobs, which would be socially useful without throwing other people out of private employment, had elevated the agency to a crucial role in the thinking of advocates of national economic planning. "If a thousand jobless workers in a community are to be employed on public projects," wrote the WPA's labor relations director Nels Anderson, "the problem is, first, to ascertain the type of work they can do and then to apply it to work the community would like to have done."³³

The schools, port facilities, dams, murals, plays, and historical research and restoration undertaken by the WPA not only enriched American life, but also gave the government a very different economic role from that required by planning through business cartels (as with the NRA) or by fiscal policy. Small wonder the conservative Congress of 1939 slashed its appropriations, investigated its projects, abolished wage differentials based on skill, imposed a loyalty oath on employees, and compelled the dismissal of everyone who had been in its employ for eighteen months. In 1943 Congress abolished both the WPA and the National

³² Alexander Keyssar, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts* (Cambridge and New York, 1986); Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, *Work without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work* (Philadelphia, 1988), pp. 147-250; Harry A. Millis, *How Collective Bargaining Works: A Survey of Experience in Leading American Industries* (New York, 1942), pp. 213, 223.

³³ Nels Anderson, *The Right to Work* (New York, 1938), p. 135.

Resources Planning Board, sparing only those planning agencies that were directly related to the war emergency.³⁴

Labor's relationship to WPA administrators varied by locality from hostility to such intimacy as enabled the CIO to enrol thousands of steel workers dismissed during the 1937 recession directly into the WPA. In turn, the Workers' Education Division of the WPA assigned unemployed teachers to develop study programs for unions. In general, it was the Workers' Alliance that battled constantly against reductions in the WPA's budget or pay scales, helped workers register, became as familiar as the furniture in the agency's offices, hailed the vision of a planned economy, and led the extraordinary strikes of WPA workers against the cut-backs of 1939. In fact, Trotskyists complained that the preference of the Workers' Alliance for consultation over direct action had given that organization "the character of a *company union*" for the Roosevelt administration.³⁵

THE CIO AND THE STATE

Although rank-and-file militancy propelled the industrial union impulse, and workers who were committed to creating some form of labor party and an industrial order whose priorities were set by social needs, rather than market imperatives, kept the cause alive after the bitter set-backs suffered by unions in the auto, steel, and textile industries in 1934, it was the Second New Deal (1935–1936) that gave birth to the Committee for Industrial Organization. The angry debates over industrial unionism, multi-craft strikes, racial discrimination and social insurance at the 1935 convention of the AFL aligned those union leaders who were afterwards to announce the formation of the CIO, and who were, in Steven Fraser's words, "connected by a thousand threads to a newly emergent managerial and political elite", which was transforming the political and industrial life of the country, against an "AFL old guard [which] not only lacked those strategic and managerial connections and objectives, but moreover often adamantly opposed [. . .] essential elements of the New Deal–CIO agenda."³⁶ The contrast makes it clear why the CIO not only

³⁴ James Patterson, "Comparative Welfare History: Britain and the United States, 1930–1945", in Wilbur Cohen (ed.), *The Roosevelt New Deal: A Program Assessment Fifty Years After* (Austin, Tex., 1986), p. 136.

³⁵ David Montgomery and Ronald Schatz, "Facing Layoffs", in Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge and New York, 1979), pp. 146–147; Faue, *Suffering and Struggle*, pp. 154–164; Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 298–302; Morris Llewellyn Cooke and Philip Murray, *Organized Labor and Production: Next Steps in Industrial Democracy* (New York, 1940), p. 227; Art Preis, *America's Permanent Depression: The Truth about Unemployment* (New York, n.d.), p. 18.

³⁶ Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, pp. 335–336.

tapped – indeed came to personify – the reform impulses of the epoch, but also why it simultaneously unleashed grass-roots creativity and steered the impulses it nurtured toward a program of governmental economic planning, guided by a reformed Democratic Party – a program totally at odds with the traditions of working-class radicalism in the United States.

The staff of the NLRB, and especially Thomas Emerson and the other young liberal lawyers of its Review Division, worked intimately with CIO unions. So did that of the LaFollette Civil Liberties Committee, which exposed to public scrutiny the arsenals assembled by great corporations, their links to right-wing paramilitary and assassination units, and their techniques of mobilizing public opinion against strikers. During the first three years after the Wagner Act had been ruled constitutional, 81 per cent of the more than one million secret ballots cast in certification elections favored unionization. Craft unionists were understandably indignant when board decisions favored large, inclusive bargaining units, applied the principle of majority rule to set aside agreements reached by craft unions and employers, and otherwise helped CIO unions win 75 per cent of the early elections. Quite clearly, it had been the enactment of the Wagner Act that convinced John L. Lewis and his colleagues who formed the CIO that the hour had struck for the successful unionization of mass production industries. In their view, the reshaping of the union movement and the reshaping of government's economic role went hand in hand.³⁷

Lewis, who had but five years earlier supported Hoover for reelection, made the connections explicit in October 1937:

Time was, before the depression, when the representative labor leader would have said "Guarantee labor the right to organize and we shall do the rest." Now he knows that modern mass production industry [. . .] [is] uncoordinated, uncorrelated and overcapacitated. With the guarantee of the "right to organize," such industries may be unionized, but, on the other hand, better living standards, shorter working hours, and improved employment conditions for their members cannot be hoped for unless legislative or other provisions be made for economic planning and for price, production, and profit controls. Because of these fundamental conditions, it is obvious to industrial workers that the labor movement must organize and exert itself not only in the economic field but also in the political arena.³⁸

The 300 delegates to the convention of CIO activists to which Lewis spoke went on to call not only for freedom to assemble peaceably, strike, and bargain collectively, but also for Congress to enact the Lundeen social insurance bill, for federal licensing of corporations to

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 349–352, 404; Goldfield, "Worker Insurgency", p. 1268; Dubofsky and Van Tine, *Lewis*, pp. 211–232.

³⁸ Quoted in Harris, *American Labor*, p. 408.

guarantee their operation in conformity to established social standards, for expanded WPA projects to secure the "right to work", for state action to stimulate housing construction, for stabilization of farm prices, and for legislation to end monopoly control over radio communication.³⁹

Those delegates were the offspring of the ethnic communities in the nation's industrial centers, and they had been taught the realities of economic life by the vast corporate enterprises for which they worked and the scientific management practiced there. The partial revival of industrial output between 1933 and 1937 had found major employers as ardently committed as they had been in the 1920s to a relentless quest for higher productivity, intense and systematic supervision, avoidance of overt reduction of hourly wages, and the cultivation of loyal employees. Spurred on by the legal obligation to permit collective bargaining under the NRA codes, companies had reinvigorated employee representation plans on such a scale that by the time the Wagner Act outlawed employer sponsorship of those plans, some 2,500,000 workers had been enrolled in them. By early 1937, when the total value of manufacturing production had reached and surpassed that of 1928, output per worker-hour was 22 per cent higher. Hourly real wages averaged 36 per cent higher. At the same time, unemployment still stood at more than 14 per cent of the labor force, and almost 10 per cent had been out of work a year or more.⁴⁰

As Richard J. Jensen has demonstrated, the depression enabled managers to be very selective in hiring and retaining workers, and they made the most of their opportunity. Those who held jobs tended to be highly trained both through schooling and in their own specialties on the job, long-term employees but not older than 45, and men (and increasingly women) with families to support. Between 1933 and 1939 factories hired some 400,000 workers a month with remarkable consistency, but could and did choose new employees carefully. Those who had earned high wages elsewhere were the most likely to be selected. Those who had completed more than eight years of school were heavily favored, even in the hiring of unskilled workers (a remarkable development, considering how widespread illiteracy had been among common laborers twenty years earlier). So few northern companies outside of railroads, steel and meat packing hired any black workers for production jobs that those which hired any tended to hire many (like Ford Motor Company), and were well known for that reason among African Amer-

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 410–411. On radio communications, see Robert W. McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting, 1928–1935* (New York, 1993).

⁴⁰ Richard C. Wilcox, "Industrial Management's Policies Toward Unionism", in Milton Derber and Edwin Young (eds), *Labor and the New Deal* (Madison, Wis., 1957), p. 288; Richard J. Jensen, "The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 19 (Spring 1989), pp. 557–559.

icans nationally. Among the hundreds of firms surveyed by the WPA in the highly diversified industry of Philadelphia, Atlantic Refinery, Franklin Sugar, Westinghouse, Diston Saw and Midvale Steel stood out as those that *did* have black production workers.⁴¹

In stark contrast to the ethnic diversification of the work-force during the century's first two decades and during the 1940s, the combined impact of the restriction of European immigration, corporate hiring policies during the depression, and the continuous growth of secondary education tended to homogenize the industrial work-force. These developments intensified the impact of mass consumerism and the insecurity of industrial life, with which Lizabeth Cohen has made us familiar, in preparing urban communities to produce what she has called the "CIO's culture of unity".⁴²

Stanley Vittoz argues correctly that "business opposition to the Wagner Act was probably more unified than its response – positive or negative – to any other single piece of New Deal legislation."⁴³ No sooner had the Act been passed than eighty-three injunction proceedings were filed in courts to restrain its operation. The fact remains, however, that the CIO brought United States Steel, General Motors and General Electric under contract before the Supreme Court had ruled the Act constitutional and allowed the NLRB to function. During the first two years of the board's operation it issued ninety-five cease and desist orders against employers: only four resulted in compliance. During the decisive General Motors sit-down strike, John L. Lewis made it clear to Michigan's Governor Frank Murphy that he had no interest in an election by the workers on the question of union certification. "The important thing", he declared, "is we have enough men to close the plants and we have closed them." Moreover, even after the board began conducting frequent certification elections in 1937, CIO unions more often than not won recognition simply through threat of strikes.⁴⁴

What mattered most to workers was that the publicity and reinstatement of dismissed activists produced by the board, coupled with the relief benefits provided strikers' families by governors like Murphy and Earle, and Supreme Court rulings which used the Wagner Act as a legal

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 563–571; Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840–1950* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992), pp. 44–55; Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917–1933* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 105–112; Yale researchers found a strong preference of New Haven employers for white workers. E. Wright Bakke, *The Unemployed Worker: A Study of the Task of Making a Living without a Job* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 247–248.

⁴² Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, pp. 333–349.

⁴³ Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy*, pp. 149–150.

⁴⁴ Karl E. Klare, "Judicial Deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the Origins of Modern Legal Consciousness, 1937–1941", *Minnesota Law Review*, 62 (1978), pp. 275, 286; John L. Lewis, quoted in Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down: The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor, 1970), p. 256.

basis for striking down municipal ordinances that barred union activity in public spaces and proclaiming picketing a form of speech protected by the constitution, expanded the social space within which workers could mobilize during the last half of the decade. By comparison, board and court rulings channeling that mobilization into contractual relations with employers appeared to most workers to be but a temporary set-back. Although the number of such rulings mounted rapidly after 1937, their restrictive implications did not become fully apparent until after World War II.⁴⁵

Successful unionization of major companies often brought in its wake an abrupt overturning of the local government in smaller factory towns. In the autumn elections following the recognition of the CIO by United States Steel seventeen towns in the Pittsburgh region threw out Republican regimes that had governed them since early in the century and replaced them with labor-oriented Democratic administrations. Elmer J. Maloy, who became mayor of Duquesne, and John Mullen of Clairton, had both achieved prominence within the company's employee representation plan, before assuming leading positions in the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. Both had to oust entrenched and ineffective Democratic organizations in primaries, before they could go on to replace Republican mayors, who had served the steel corporation like invulnerable autocrats. Not only did the new administrations disarm the mill police and assist local unionization, they also eagerly solicited WPA projects, which had been shunned by their predecessors. The new atmosphere in the mill towns also inspired local black youth to refuse any longer to accept racial segregation in the communities' movie theaters and ice cream parlors.⁴⁶

The political innovations inspired by the CIO were ardently opposed not only by discomfited local business, ethnic and political leaders, but also by the officialdom of the AFL. The older labor federation remained by far the larger of the rival labor bodies, and in the late 1930s it grew more rapidly than the CIO. In contrast to the CIO's membership, which was concentrated in highly capitalized manufacturing firms, that of the AFL was more diverse. It included, among others, construction workers, waitresses, office employees, sailors, railroad maintenance workers and truck drivers. The federation's most aggressive unions, the electricians,

⁴⁵ A good discussion of the restrictive rulings, which assessed their early impact more severally than I do, is James B. Atleson, *Values and Assumptions in American Labor Law* (Amherst, Mass., 1983), pp. 19–66. The Supreme Court decisions on public space and free speech are *Hague v. CIO* 307 US 469 (1939) and *Thornhill v. Alabama* 310 US 88 (1940).

⁴⁶ For most of this information I am deeply indebted to an unpublished paper by Eric Leif Davin of the University of Pittsburgh, "The Littlest New Deal; SWOC Takes Power in Steeltown, A Possibility of Radicalism in the Late 1930s". See also George Powers, *Cradle of Steel Unionism: Monongahela Valley, Pa.* (East Chicago, Ind., 1972).

machinists and teamsters, continued to be dominated by craftsmen employed by smaller employers who serviced local markets, but those unions also effectively competed with the CIO for the support of mass production workers in the aircraft, armaments and electrical products industries, while sizable groups of textile and automobile workers left the CIO for the AFL in 1938 and 1939. Nationwide, when the CIO reached its early membership peak in 1937, the AFL outnumbered it by better than two to one. In Chicago, a union stronghold, there were five AFL members for every one worker in the CIO in 1939.⁴⁷

The active cooperation of AFL officials, like John Frey, in investigations of the CIO by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the federation's decision in 1938 to withhold endorsement from any candidate for public office who accepted the support of the CIO contributed significantly to the conservative electoral triumph of that year, to the downfall of Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party and to crippling divisions within the American Labor Party of New York.⁴⁸ To mollify the larger labor federation, President Roosevelt appointed William M. Leiserson to the NLRB in April 1939, with an explicit mandate to "clean up the mess" of favoritism to the CIO and "Communist influence". Leiserson's eminence as a scholar friendly to patterns of collective bargaining which had grown out of historic trade union methods, rather than government design, made him acceptable to the AFL. As its leaders had hoped, Leiserson reoriented board rulings to accommodate institutionalized craft union practices, encourage stable contractual relations between unions and employers, and strengthen the capacity of leaders to restrain job actions initiated by the rank-and-file. Within two years he had also witnessed with satisfaction the departure of lawyer Thomas Emerson, and also of the board's leading champions of industrial unionism, Nathan Witt, Edwin S. Smith, and chairman Harry A. Madden.⁴⁹

At the same time, the government's decisive role in reshaping industrial relations and the CIO's close ties to New Deal administrators in Washington and in state capitals pressed Left-wing parties which clung to their traditional strategy of mobilizing a mass movement openly

⁴⁷ Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective", *Journal of American History*, 65 (March 1979), pp. 1021-1042; Barbara Warne Newell, *Chicago and the Labor Movement: Metropolitan Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, Ill., 1961), pp. 205, 208.

⁴⁸ David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor: From the Great Depression to the New Deal* (New York and London, 1982), pp. 117-120; Daniel Nelson, *American Rubber Workers and Organized Labor, 1900-1941* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), pp. 223-233; Gerald Meyer, *Vito Marcantonio: Radical Politician, 1902-1954* (Albany, NY, 1989), pp. 25-26; Fraser, *Labor Will Rule*, pp. 430-440.

⁴⁹ Christopher L. Tomlins, *The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960* (Cambridge and New York, 1985), pp. 204-224.

arrayed against capitalism and independent of the existing major parties increasingly to the margins of political life. On the Pacific Coast, where mass unionism had developed most rapidly, unbending champions of the revolutionary syndicalist heritage, like Harry Lundberg of the Seamen's Union and Ralph Chaplin (author of the song "Solidarity Forever") fought vigorously, even physically, in the ranks of the AFL against the new CIO. In Minnesota, where the Farmer-Labor Party dominated the state government, Trotskyist leaders of the teamsters union organized large demonstrations against that party's popular front orientation after Barcelona's May 1937 events. Their calls for expulsion of Stalinists from the party won the endorsement of some of its most honored founders. They could not stem the tide of support for the New Deal, however, because the most important reforms instituted by the state government had all come to depend on money from Washington, while the Republican state senate blocked more radical measures.⁵⁰

Consequently, the CIO greeted coldly attempts to challenge the growing conservatism that gripped the country after 1937 by reviving the movement for a national farmer-labor party. The Communist Party itself responded to the growing tide of anticommunism by identifying its own program closely with that of the CIO and cultivating personal ties with individual union leaders. The distinguishing features of the party's position were reduced to its foreign policy and its unrelenting denunciation of "Trotskyites". Although Communist-led unions continued to rely on vigorous mobilization of shop floor activists, the party's shop units and shop papers, which had been catalysts of such many struggles before 1938, were abandoned.⁵¹

When C. Wright Mills examined the country's union officials at the end of World War II, he discerned important contrasts between the generation produced by the New Deal experience and their predecessors. Whereas 42 per cent of the union officers surveyed in 1924 had proclaimed their affiliation with some party other than the Republicans and Democrats, in 1944 less than 10 per cent did. In every corner of the land new activists had emerged out of the struggles of the 1930s. They were predominantly youthful. At the 1939 convention of the United Electrical Workers-CIO only one member of the General Executive Board and no member of the staff was over 35 years old. In contrast

⁵⁰ Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana, Ill., 1988), pp. 202-244; Faue, *Suffering and Struggle*, pp. 111, 134-145; Millard L. Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis, 1979), pp. 244-261; Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London, 1987), pp. 146-147.

⁵¹ Mark Naison, "Remaking America: Communists and Liberals in the Popular Front", in Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten and George Snedeker (eds), *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U.S. Communism* (New York, 1993), pp. 65-69; Steve Rossworm (ed.), *The CIO's Left-led Unions* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992).

to the unions that had been well established by the 1920s, few of the officers of the newer unions were foreign born. Immigrants who had played major roles organizing their workmates often considered it to the unions' advantage to have "American boys" represent them to the public. Sons and daughters of twentieth-century immigrants shared the spotlight with colleagues of Irish and German ancestry, many of whom had first gained prominence by guiding company unions, of which they had been officers, into the CIO.⁵²

The new cadre were products of inter-war decades in which almost half the nation's youth completed high school, and many even had a taste of college education, before the depression drove them from the classroom. Indeed, many of them remembered the schools of the 1920s as a cultural battleground for children of immigrants. Both the Mexican American Movement and its larger successor, El Congreso Nacional de los Pueblos de Habla Español, which were energized by the CIO, Mexico's nationalization of its oil, and the Spanish Civil War, drew heavily on educated cadre, whose school experience had been especially bitter. Mills found in 1946 that the average schooling of CIO leaders was slightly over twelve years, in contrast to nine years for officers of older craft unions. Nevertheless, education provided by unions and Left parties had often transformed activists' view of the world. As Cleophas Williams, a black longshoreman from San Francisco, remembered the California Labor School: "It was a beautiful experience to see how you could be in concert with other workers to improve your lot, and not be out there saying 'You got to hustle, hustle, hustle, and get ahead, son.'"⁵³

The new activists, for all their militancy, enlightenment and workplace base of power, matured within statist orbit of the New Deal and the CIO. By the end of the decade there was no other serious game in town.

⁵² Party affiliations are my calculations, based on figures in C. Wright Mills, *The New Men of Power: America's Labor Leaders* (New York, 1948), p. 183; United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America, *Proceedings, Fifth Convention* (New York, 1939), p. 87; Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown, Conn., 1982), pp. 9–14; Schatz, *Electrical Workers*, pp. 80–101.

⁵³ Richard A. Varbero, "Philadelphia's South Italians in the 1920s", in Allen F. Davis and Mark H. Haller (eds), *The Peoples of Philadelphia: A History of Ethnic Groups and Lower-Class Life, 1790–1940* (Philadelphia, 1973), pp. 255–275; Lynd and Lynd, *Middletown in Transition*, pp. 230–241; Mario T. Garcia, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960* (New Haven, 1989), pp. 145–165; Garcia, *Memories of History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley, 1994); Richard J. Altenbaugh, *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* (Philadelphia, 1990); Cleophas Williams quoted in Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley, 1988), p. 147.