

share their authority with others, largely with the federal government. Even so, the government's peace-time role still remains essentially a supplementary one, as coordinator of last resort and as a supplier of funds for technological innovation.

In the past, businessmen have devoted their energies to economic affairs, giving far less attention to cultural, social, or even political matters. Precisely because they have created an enormously productive economy and the most affluent society in the world, the noneconomic challenges are now becoming more critical than the economic ones. There is little in the recruitment, training, and experience of the present business leaders — the corporate managers — to prepare them for handling the difficult new problems, but unless they do learn to cope with this new situation, they may lose their dominant position in the economy. As was not true of the merchant, wholesaler, or manufacturer, the corporate managers could be replaced by men who are not businessmen. To suggest how and in what way the managers will respond to the current challenges is, fortunately, not the task of the historian. Such analyses are properly left to social scientists and businessmen.

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MONDAY, JULY 16, 1877. Martinsburg, West Virginia. A date and place emblazoned neither in history books nor in the historical consciousness of the American people. Yet, on that day and in that location, the people of the United States stepped precipitously into the future.

On July 16, 1877, railway workers in Martinsburg, employees of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, refused to handle rail traffic or let trains pass through the town. They were protesting the implementation of a 10 percent cut in wages that had been announced simultaneously a few weeks earlier by railway executives of the major rail lines in the country. The concerted nature of the announcement would be an important element in the story to unfold. In response to the job action, the president of the B&O persuaded the governor of West Virginia to send regiments of the state militia to Martinsburg to see to the safe movement of trains. The easy access of corporate leaders to the levers of government power would

be an additional ingredient in the saga. To the dismay of B&O officials, however, the troops who arrived on the sixteenth initially fraternized with townspeople. Later that day a melee did erupt, and in the ensuing fracas a striking railwayman guarding a track switch was shot and killed. That proved to be the spark that ignited a nationwide conflagration.

Word soon spread along the tracks of the B&O, and work and traffic on the entire line ground to a halt. On Wednesday evening, angry railwaymen and their supporters gathered in Baltimore to protest directly to B&O officials. Protest turned to riot; and by night's end, 10 people were dead, 16 injured, and 250 arrested through confrontations between demonstrators and city police. Shocked by the insurrection, the governor of Maryland prevailed on the president of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes, to send federal troops to Baltimore to quell the disturbance — the first time in American history that federal forces were employed to suppress labor unrest.

The fire then spread to other communities in the country. Following the example of B&O workers in refusing to accept wage cuts, railwaymen from other lines walked off their jobs and were joined by fellow townspeople in demonstrations. Protests soon emerged in such places as Hornelsville and Buffalo, New York, and Reading, Harrisburg, and Altoona, Pennsylvania. The greatest explosion, however, was to occur in Pittsburgh. On Thursday, July 19, railwaymen from the Pennsylvania Railroad stopped rail traffic in the city. On Friday, state militia from the area were called in at the request and insistence of Thomas Scott, influential president of the road, with the aim of restoring train service. The local guardsmen, however, refused to take up their posts. Troops then had to be sent in from other parts of the state — a move that residents of Pittsburgh perceived as an invasion — and this set the stage for a brutal confrontation on Saturday. Pennsylvania Railroad executives were determined to renew freight traffic, and they arranged for troops to be stationed on the trains. As the first guarded train moved through the city, crowds gathered to block its progress. Troops then fired into the crowd of demonstrators, killing an estimated twenty people and wounding more than seventy more. Word of the massacre quickly spread, and the people of Pittsburgh took to the streets, attacking militiamen, looting stores, and setting fires to the property of the Pennsylvania Railroad. By late evening of Saturday, July 21, 1877, a red glow lit up the city, and daybreak revealed the stations and shops of the Pennsylvania reduced to embers.

Sunday did not prove to be a day of rest. Crowds continued to roam the streets, and a semblance of order would not be restored in the city until Tuesday. Over the weekend, more than two score lives had been lost, 104 locomotives and 2,153 railcars had been destroyed, and few buildings of the Pennsylvania Railroad remained standing.

Chicago was next. Three days of serious disturbances began in that city on Monday, the twenty-third, and confrontations between protestors and police would lead to eighteen dead. The railroad strikes in Chicago evolved into a general strike as workers across trades in the city walked off their

jobs in sympathy. Order was restored only with the arrival of Illinois guardsmen from other parts of the state and a contingent of federal troops just fresh from fighting Native Americans on the Plains. After Chicago, the contagion spread further west to St. Louis, Kansas City, Galveston, and even San Francisco. Only two weeks after its onset did the fever run its course. Trains first rolled again on a normal basis through Martinsburg on July 27, through Pittsburgh on July 29, and through Chicago on August 3.

The events of July 1877 shocked the nation, and the toll was enormous. The nation's commerce had been effectively stilled; railroad companies lost more than \$30 million in lost property and business; railwaymen went without pay during the strikes, and many returned to work only to be discharged for their protests and blackballed from further employment in the trade; thousands had also been jailed, hundreds wounded, and at least fifty killed.

From the last two decades of the nineteenth century through World War II, ongoing and vexing conflict between capital and labor marked the American experience. The great railroad strikes of July 1877 represent the formal and abrupt beginning to this history. In the immediate years following the unrest of that month and until the turn of the new century, industrial strife was particularly intense and violent. The severity of the unrest can only be understood as a twofold response: while economic insecurity, not hardship per se, definitely spurred revolt, Americans from different walks of life also took to the streets to support striking workers in the period to challenge the growing, encroaching political and economic power of concentrated capital and the threat the corporation posed to cherished democratic republican values and practices.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the country was also rocked by other kinds of explosions. Most notably, the period witnessed evolving and escalating protest by American farmers. Various social critics and reformers also came to the fore to question contemporary developments, galvanize public opinion, and suggest changes in economic and political practices. The economic instabilities of the times and the sway of the new corporations figured significantly in the complaints of farmers and intellectuals as well.

Unrest during the last decades of the nineteenth century would lead to a restructuring of American institutions and the creation of a new American political economic order. This remaking, however, occurred slowly over a fifty-year period, in stages and unsystematically, and would involve no single set of actors. Various groups would emerge and, often with cross-purposes and differing motives, contribute to the same building of a new United States. What is of interest is the *convergence* of efforts. What was sought in common was greater security and a more administered economy and polity. . . .

Despite the clear advantages held by business managers in countering the job actions of workers — access to the policing powers of government, the ability to hire strikebreakers in great numbers, especially with immigrants

and African Americans in desperate search of work — the deck obviously was not completely stacked against the strikers. One important weapon they had at their disposal was community support. An interesting statistic compiled by labor bureau officials speaks to this point. Strikes were recorded as ordered or not ordered by established unions. In the early 1880s, more than 50 percent of all strikes did not involve a formal trade union organization. The proportion of work stoppages orchestrated by unions rose over the next two decades, but by 1900, one-third of all strikes were still waged without union intervention.

The absolute grassroots insurgent nature of many late-nineteenth-century strikes has to be appreciated. State and federal investigative commissions established to determine the causes of the unrest of the period often searched in vain to find leaders or organizations to which responsibility could be assigned. The strikes also appeared to be as much community uprisings as work stoppages. Investigators found and local newspapers reported ample evidence of widespread support for strikers. Workers from trades not directly involved walked off their jobs in sympathy; local shopkeepers offered food and extended credit to families of strikers; editors of community newspapers blasted company officials for not dealing fairly with their employees; townsmen called up for service in state militia fraternized with their neighbors who were on strike and failed to take up positions in guarding business properties. Community members also took to the streets in protest with strikers. Arrest records for the period reveal people from all walks of life incarcerated for rioting, arson, and attacks on police forces during labor upheavals. Women participated in demonstrations as visibly as men. During railroad strikes, brigades of women greased and soaped tracks to impede the passage of trains.

Why did people who were not directly involved in labor disputes join in protest with striking workers in large numbers? Economic bad times is a contributing factor. Community uprisings accompanying strikes generally occurred during years of economic depression. Yet, material grievance alone cannot explain local insurgencies. The target of community aggression was corporate enterprise. During disputes, corporate property was attacked, not the businesses of local entrepreneurs. Tension exploded to riot when troops sent at the behest of corporate leaders entered the local scene. Reporters covering the disturbances discovered local shopkeepers sympathizing with striking workers and joining protest because the national based corporations threatened their existence; in the case of the railroads, proprietors were angered both at the physical incursions of the carriers and the seemingly unjust rates charged them for shipping goods. The very livelihoods and the autonomy of members of communities appeared challenged by the impersonal decisions made by executives in remote and unapproachable corporate headquarters.

The distrust of the first generation of Americans to be faced with the corporation is explicable; less easy to fathom is the violence. Protestors picked up bricks and rifles to defend their communities and republican

ideals. The common ownership of guns in a nation where the right to bear arms was constitutionally protected is part of the explanation for the dramatic loss of life and limb in labor uprisings. The frontier also played somewhat of a role. Not every American community witnessed death and destruction during the labor upheavals. However, historians have been unable to discern patterns of insurgency; labor insurrection occurred in both metropolitan areas and small towns. Unrest unfolded in medium-sized cities as well, but notably in newly developed industrial communities — common to the Midwest — without established elites or ways. Finally, and crucially, the determination of American corporate executives to suppress strikes and unions at all cost and to employ public and private police forces to silence protest was also a key ingredient in the remarkably fierce battles that transpired. Fire was fought with fire.

Spontaneity and community support notably marked labor protest, but over the course of the last decades of the century, trade unions assumed a greater presence and importance in strikes. A trade union revival had first occurred in the 1850s. With economic recovery after the depression of the late 1830s and early 1840s, skilled workers on the local level reestablished their antebellum craft societies and then joined with workers from other localities to found national organizations. The arrival of skilled German and British workers, who were highly politicized and had trade union experience, fueled the rebirth; and vast improvements in transportation and communications during the 1850s allowed for (and demanded) greater cooperation across geographical boundaries.

The revival of trade unionism in the 1850s was followed by increased labor organization and strikes during the Civil War, especially as workers attempted to keep their wages in line with rising wartime prices. In another kind of labor protest, white workers in the North during the war took to the streets to protest the inequities of the military draft system, taking their wrath out on recruitment officers and, tragically, often on African Americans as well.

An expansion of trade union activity and membership during the Civil War led to the formation of the National Labor Union in 1866, the nation's first national federation of unions. Under the leadership of William Sylvis, an articulate iron molder, the NLU convened yearly conventions where trade unionists and various labor sympathizers discussed issues of the day. Delegates supported motions in favor of the eight-hour day, government monetary policies that favored debtors, federal land distribution programs for working people, increased efforts at labor organizing, and most notably, the building of so-called producers' cooperatives (if yeoman producership was increasingly untenable with rapid industrialization, then republican principles could be sustained with yeoman cooperatives). The NLU maintained a visible presence for five years, with some strike and legislative success, but the movement then dissipated and passed from the scene. The organization failed to survive the depression of 1873 and was

further incapacitated by internal divisions over economic policy, political activism, and gender and racial issues. From the ashes of the NLU, however, rose another trade union federation, drawing upon and extending many of its predecessor's ideals, but having a much greater impact. This organization was the Knights of Labor.

Uriah Stephens and James Wright, skilled garment cutters, founded the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor in Philadelphia in 1869 as a secret organization. Little is known about the society in its early years, though it did survive the depression of 1873 and included some 500 lodges and 6,000 members by 1877. In 1878, the order went public (although a good many of the rituals of the original clandestine organization were maintained), and under the leadership of Terrence Powderly, a machinist by trade, members of the "producing classes," regardless of occupation, nationality, race, religion, or sex, were encouraged to join a movement bent on achieving better working conditions and a new social order based on equality and cooperation. Explicitly barred from membership were bankers, stockbrokers, lawyers, liquor dealers (temperance remained a guiding principle of the organization), and gamblers.

In the early 1880s, the society grew and spread throughout the country; recent analyses of the organization's surviving documents reveal lodges established in every state and county of the nation. In 1885, striking Knights railwaymen in the West won their spectacular victory over the powerful Jay Gould, boosting the organization's fortunes and membership to 750,000. The year 1886 saw the order at its peak of prominence as Knights of Labor members rushed into political activity, launching successful independent party ventures throughout the United States. From this zenith of visibility and impact, however, the Knights of Labor declined precipitously under the force of increased employer resistance to Knights-led strikes, internal divisions, and the defection of craft unionists from the cause. By the mid-1890s, few traces of the order remained.

An overview of the history of the Knights can thus be rendered, but understanding the Knights phenomenon has always provided difficulties for historians. For one thing, the activities of the federation varied from year to year and place to place. The organization itself was a crazy quilt of local assemblies of individuals, neighborhood groups, reform associations, existing craft unions, and workers variously organized by factory, trade, and geographical locale, and wider city, district, and state assemblies. The order stood for the enrollment of all workers — upholding the principle of so-called industrial unionism — yet craft unions joined the federation and maintained their autonomy and identities. The order made unprecedented strides in organizing women and African American workers though gender and racial divisions still marked its history.

Knights activists moved into independent political party activity with a vengeance in 1886, yet an ambivalence toward politics, politicians, and the role of government — stemming from the republican and antistatist sentiments and ideals of those drawn into the movements — blunted the

Knights' political initiatives once Knights candidates found themselves actually elected to office. Temperance and chivalric behavior were hallmarks of the order, yet a number of Knights officials were involved in swindles and intrigues that rivaled the worst corruptions of the age. The organization stood officially for the abandonment of the wage labor system, but with the exception of support for public ownership of financial and transportation institutions, Knights leaders openly repudiated socialism. Knights officials upheld the building of producers' cooperatives as a principal goal and ideal, yet their actual record on establishing cooperative ventures was poor. Finally, and most notably, while the organization's leadership formally renounced strikes and espoused harmonious relations with fair-minded, hard-working employers and arbitration in the case of disputes, its members nonetheless participated fervently in hundreds of strikes under the Knights banner.

The Knights of Labor thus defies simple characterization. Can it be deemed a backward-looking movement aimed at recreating a mythical yeoman producer past, as some historians have suggested? Not really. Knights leaders and followers harked back to a more harmonious time, yet they were permanent wage laborers, decidedly immersed in modern issues like arbitration proceedings, challenging traditional mainstream politics, and struggling to find new forms of relationships. Was the organization instead a typical reform movement merely bent on extending the benefits of capitalism to the yet unbenefitted? Not really, again. The Knights were ambivalent about the capitalist system, definitely antagonistic to corporate or monopoly capitalism, and certainly not boosters of capitalism in general.

Was the organization an alternative movement looking forward to the building of a "cooperative commonwealth" (a frequently invoked phrase) to replace the bureaucratic and corporate future that loomed ahead? There is evidence to substantiate this interpretation, but how widely this vision was held by those enrolled is unclear. Was it, as other historians have suggested, a democratic movement at heart, an attempt to significantly widen political participation? Ample proof exists for this contention as well, though the notion hardly provides a comprehensive understanding. Was it simply a trade union effort? Certainly not.

Perhaps the only solution is to term the Knights of Labor an amorphous social movement of laboring people; the extent to which hundreds of thousands of American working men and women were enlisted, educated, and politicized in the 1870s and 1880s is what is to be ultimately appreciated. Recognition of the mobilization is apparent from studies of local Knights' activity and the countless meetings, lectures, parades, and picnics attended by those moved to join. If historians have to remain unsure in their estimations of the Knights, the Knights of Labor moment in American history nonetheless continues to fascinate.

Some trade unionists of the era, however, viewed the Knights venture as just pure folly. Leaders of the so-called brotherhoods of railway workers, for example, expressly forbade their members from joining the Knights;

the brotherhoods, in fact, avoided participation in all of the great uprisings of the day. Leaders of most craft unions similarly viewed the Knights with a jaundiced eye. Among detractors of the Knights, the key and historically critical figure was Samuel Gompers.

Samuel Gompers was born in England in 1850 and immigrated to New York City at the age of thirteen. Entering the cigar-making trade, he found himself immersed in a community of skilled English and German immigrant workers who ate, drank, and breathed Marxism and socialism. Gompers thus received lessons about the seeming hard truths of capitalism: a permanent proletariat had been formed; capital was concentrating and gaining overwhelming economic and political power; realism was in order; focused and well-organized trade unions had to be established to achieve gains for workers.

Despite this sober perspective, Gompers and his fellow craft trade unionists were swept into the Knights crusade. Having risen to the leadership of the Cigar Makers' International Union, he joined with other skilled men in 1881 in founding the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, which allied with the Knights. Over the next five years, however, Gompers and his associates became increasingly disenchanted with the movement. They resented Terrence Powderly's attempt to dictate policy, found themselves engaged in various jurisdictional disputes (what constituted a local or an assembly of the Knights organization remained a fuzzy and disputed matter), deemed most Knights pronouncements as naive and Knights-sponsored strikes as quixotic, and saw the sudden move of Knights members into independent party politics as misguided and wasteful of valuable time and energy. In 1886, Gompers thus led numerous craft unions out of the Knights of Labor and into his newly formed American Federation of Labor. The absolute loss in membership and the defection of the best-organized of the Knights' members contributed greatly to that order's subsequent demise.

Under Samuel Gompers' leadership, both the constituent unions of the AFL and the offices of the federation grew in strength and permanence. Gompers himself became the most important labor leader in the country, listened to by politicians, businessmen, and the press. Until his death in 1924, he was arguably the chief spokesman for the working people of the United States. This all occurred, however, because Gompers forged a limited agenda.

Gompers' strategy for the AFL included the following:

1. Organize the organizable — that is, skilled workers who possessed leverage in the workplace and who could win victories.
2. Do not pour energies into enrolling less skilled, easily replaced workers. In practice, this meant ignoring women, blacks, and most immigrants.
3. Build strong organizations with high dues, well-paid officers, and strike funds and other benefits that would engender the great loyalty of members.

4. Fight for what can be gained — “bread and butter” issues — meaning higher wages within reason, shorter hours, and work rules that curtailed the arbitrary decision making of firm managers.
5. Do not become involved and waste time and money in independent political action, much less radical political activity. Work within the system, in other words.
6. Support mainstream politicians of any party who favor prolabor legislation.

Gompers' strategy proved successful — in many ways it was programmed to be — and with each victory for AFL men, Gompers could upbraid his many detractors in the labor movement and point to the wisdom of his stance.

The history of Samuel Gompers and the AFL in the late nineteenth century, like that of the Knights of Labor, is not without its inconsistencies. Gompers developed his strategy over time and with experience, not presciently or at once. He fashioned his approach to trade unionism after his experiences with the Knights, through watching corporate capital become entrenched and powerful, after disastrous defeats for labor at Homestead and Pullman, in light of increasing judicial assaults on trade union activity and conservative court rulings against the government regulation of working conditions, after turning back significant challenges to his leadership by militants from within the AFL, and after seeing the efficacy of ingratiating himself to business leaders (as he warned, if they did not deal with him and the skilled workers he represented, they would have to deal with more radical groups within the laboring community). Gompers also asserted himself as a visible spokesman, but he insisted that the AFL be as decentralized as possible and that constituent unions be afforded maximum autonomy (the example of Powderly glared in his mind). Gompers also upheld the principle of craft unionism, yet the AFL included so-called federal unions, such as the United Mine Workers, which organized workers across skill levels. While in practice the AFL rendered little assistance to women and African American workers who struggled to form unions, Gompers himself spoke against racial and sexual prejudice, opposed segregated unions, and warned that without outreach, strikes would be lost through the employment of strikebreakers who remained antagonistic to the exclusive craft unions. Gompers similarly argued for labor to be nonpartisan and nonreliant on politicians (he espoused “voluntarism”), yet he would ultimately hitch the fortunes of the AFL to the Democratic Party. Finally, Gompers placed a definite conservative stamp on the American trade union movement, yet as noted, he constantly faced challenges from groups within the AFL who mobilized to see the federation adopt a much more militant, socialistic, and inclusive posture.

There are a number of great ironies in the story of the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor, and other labor campaigns in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Samuel Gompers, schooled in

Marxism, became a force for moderation and acceptance of the powers that be. Eugene Victor Debs, on the other hand, born in small-town America, steeped in American republican traditions, would emerge a socialist after defeat at the hands of the powerful Pullman Company and the U.S. government. In launching effective strikes Gompers and his associates challenged capital head on, but not the capitalist system. The Knights, conversely, in raising on high the notion of a cooperative commonwealth and in their spontaneous protests, challenged the capitalist order but not, effectively, capital.

Edging on labor revolt during the late nineteenth century were also a host of socialists, anarchists, and other radicals, operating in such organizations as the Socialist Labor Party. During the great railroad strikes of July 1877, for example, leaders of the socialist Workingmen's Party assumed a key role in mobilizing protest in the city of St. Louis, one of the only instances during the nationwide stoppage where there is clear evidence of leadership and organization. Individuals and groups — whether craft unionists, Knights, or radicals — thus contributed to the labor upheavals of the period. Ultimately, however, a lesser role has to be assigned to all of them, for the unrest is only partially explicable in terms of formal organization and agitation. General resentment among working people and often among their middle-class neighbors against the emerging power of the corporation played a larger role. So, too, did anger about economic hard times.