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Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880–1930

James R. Barrett

The scene is the athletic field at the Ford Motor Company's famous Model T assembly plant at Highland Park, Michigan, on the Fourth of July in the midst of World War I. The occasion is a graduation ceremony for the Ford English School, a language and civics program for the company's immigrant workers, part of Ford's ambitious Five Dollar Day corporate welfare program. The pageant incorporates a symbol that has acquired peculiar importance in Americans' self-image. While the ritual is heavy-handed and perhaps in rather bad taste, its importance lies in the meaning it holds for both the immigrant workers and their corporate sponsors. Ford's director of Americanization describes the scene.

All the men descend from a boat scene representing the vessel on which they came over; down the gangway representing the distance from the port at which they landed to the school, into a pot 15 feet in diameter and 7½ feet high, which represents the Ford English School. Six teachers, three on either side, stir the pot with ten foot ladles representing nine months of teaching in the school. Into the pot 52 nationalities with their foreign clothes and baggage go and out of the pot after vigorous stirring by the teachers comes one nationality, viz, American.

Lest anyone miss the point, each of the workers emerges from the pot dressed in an identical suit and carrying a miniature American flag.¹

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¹ Clinton C. Dewitt, "Industrial Teachers," in U. S. Bureau of Education, *Proceedings, Americanization Conference, 1919* (Washington, 1919), 119. See also Howard Hill, "The Americanization Movement," *American Journal of Sociology*, 24 (May 1919), 633–34; and Stephen Meyer, "Adapting the Immigrant to the Line: Americanization in the Ford Factory, 1914–1921," *Journal of Social History*, 14 (1980), 67–82. On the symbol of the melting pot, see Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York, 1986), 76–101.

Scenes like this one, perhaps without its contrived drama, were occurring in factories, public school rooms, and settlement houses throughout the United States in the early twentieth century. Between 1880 and 1924, the year immigration was severely restricted, more than twenty-five million immigrants poured into the country; they transformed the face of America's laboring population. From the late nineteenth century on, in a movement that gathered momentum after the turn of the century, teachers, settlement house workers, and professional patriots aimed to "Americanize" these immigrants, to guide and hasten the process of acculturation by which they might embrace the values and behavior of mainstream America. During and immediately after World War I, the movement became a kind of crusade as employers, nationalist groups, and various state and federal agencies sought to remold the values and behavior of immigrant workers and their families.²

But what did it mean to be Americanized and who was fittest and best placed to do the Americanizing? Typically, the term *Americanization* has had conservative connotations. It conveys a unified notion of what it meant to be American and more than a hint of nativism. It was something the native middle class did to immigrants, a coercive process by which elites pressed WASP values on immigrant workers, a form of social control. That side of Americanization was very real, particularly during the era of World War I and the Red Scare. But it is a rather narrow understanding of Americanization. I employ the term critically, to suggest the broader acculturation of immigrants, the day-to-day process by which they came to understand their new situation and to find or invent ways of coping with it. Americanism was, in fact, a contested ideal. There were numerous understandings of what it meant to be an American, divergent values associated with the concept, and so, many ways that an immigrant might "discover" America.

Ethnic culture certainly persisted in the New World, and immigrants employed older cultural values and behavior in facing the problems of urban industrial society. Immigration historians have emphasized the striking diversity and complexity of American society, demonstrating that there is not one American story, but many of them that must be told in relation to one another. But if we wish to understand how working-class formation took place in the midst of great ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity and change, then we must study the widespread contacts and interaction between workers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, the gradual acculturation of new immigrants, and the transformation of immigrant worker consciousness.

We need an analytical framework that acknowledges the very uneven and continual quality of American working-class formation, shaped by constant migration,

² John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1859-1925* (New York, 1971), 234-63; John F. McClymer, "The Americanization Movement and the Education of the Foreign-Born Adult, 1914-1925," in *American Education and the European Immigrant, 1840-1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (Urbana, 1982), 96-116; John F. McClymer, *War and Welfare: Social Engineering in America, 1890-1925* (Westport, 1980), 105-52; Rivka Shpak Lissak, *Pluralism and Progressives: Hull House and the New Immigrants, 1890-1919* (Chicago, 1989), 3-4, 74-81; Ruth Hutchinson Crocker, *Social Work and Social Order: The Settlement Movement in Two Industrial Cities, 1889-1930* (Urbana, 1992), 213-14; and Edward G. Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York, 1948).

and allows us to do more than simply describe instances of interethnic class cooperation, one that also enables us to explain how and why they occurred. Such an analysis would incorporate the sequential character of the process and the element of cultural continuity noted by immigration historians but would also assess the impact on the newcomers of existing working-class culture and organizations. The arrival of these immigrants and the prospect of integrating them into existing communities and institutions represented as much of a challenge to the maturing working class as it did to employers and the state. Through formal and informal efforts, working-class people, themselves from quite diverse backgrounds, introduced and explained American society to the immigrants.

This process undoubtedly occurred in many ways and in many settings for various age, gender, and occupational groups in immigrant communities—at the dancehall or on the street corner, at a club meeting, in a city park, in a movie theater, or in a saloon.³ Labor organizations were not necessarily involved. For my purposes here, however, “bottom” refers to wage-earning people, and by “Americanization from the bottom up,” I mean the gradual acculturation of immigrants and their socialization in working-class environments and contexts—the shop floor, the union, the radical political party. These settings provided immigrants with alternatives to the world view and the values advocated in programs sponsored by employers and the government. They absorbed alternative views from their own ethnic communities, from cosmopolitans of various sorts, and from an earlier generation of older immigrant and native-born workers. Immigrant workers constructed their own identities, embracing those perspectives and ideas that made sense to them, rejecting those that seemed to be at odds with what they recognized as reality. Conceptualizing the “remaking” of the working class in the early twentieth century as the interaction between two historical generations and class formation itself as an Americanization from the bottom up provides a new perspective on both working-class and immigration history.

The notion of historical generations illuminates this relationship between workers either native-born or long resident in the United States and recent immigrants who were still constructing new identities and coming to terms with life in the United States. Used in this way, the term *generation* refers to a cohort with comparable historical experiences, rather than the biological generations in any particular immigrant community.⁴

³ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986), 11–33; Susan Glenn, *Daughters of the Shovel: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca, 1990), 159–60; David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and Play* (Garden City, 1985), 68–73; and Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870–1920* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 148–50.

⁴ Karl Mannheim, “The Problem of Generations,” in *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York, 1952), 276–322; Alan Spitzer, “The Historical Problem of Generations,” *American Historical Review*, 78 (Dec. 1973), 1353–85; David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, 1979), 9–10; and John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, 1985), 85–93.

Two fairly distinct generations of workers lived in many American industrial communities between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1920s. The first consisted of native-born and “old” immigrant workers and their children—British, Germans, and Irish, with smaller numbers of Scandinavians, English-speaking Canadians, and others. By the late nineteenth century, these workers had not only had years of industrial and urban experience, they had also created institutions and developed and popularized ideas that they used to cope with the rigors of wage labor. They had organized and now led trade unions, Knights of Labor assemblies, co-ops, and labor parties. To use E. J. Hobsbawm’s famous phrase, they had learned “the rules of the game.”⁵ They might be steeped in their own ethnic cultures, as were the Irish and Germans as late as the early twentieth century. But they also had experience in dealing with other ethnic groups, and though some retained a measure of prejudice, they often recognized the value of interethnic cooperation.

By the turn of the century, a new generation of workers, drawn to the United States largely from eastern and southeastern Europe, shared the cities and industrial towns with these older, more experienced groups and their American-born children. By the end of World War I, these “new immigrants” were joined by black and Mexican migrants to create a new working-class population. Few of these newcomers were ignorant peasants recently uprooted from the land and casting about in the city, disoriented and demoralized, but all of them faced major adjustments if they were to cope with life in large factories and in city neighborhoods.⁶ To some degree, they relied on the material and cultural resources of their own ethnic communities, but for good or ill, they had also to contend with the structures already in place, those created by the earlier generation of industrial workers, who played major roles in acculturating and socializing the newcomers.

Various forms of old-country radicalism and social mobilization shaped the development of labor radicalism in the United States. The precise content of such cultural and ideological continuity varied in important ways from one ethnic group to another, but we might think about such continuity as part of what might be termed either *ethnocultural* or *segmented* class formation. I use the phrase ethnocultural class formation to underscore the fact that some immigrant workers did indeed create viable working-class cultures with distinct institutions, political ideas, forms of socialization, organizations, and strategies. But they tended to do this *within* their own ethnic communities, often developing such cultures partly on

⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1968), 344–45.

⁶ Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Lifeworlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890–1940* (New York, 1985), 22–62; Caroline Golab, *Immigrant Destinations* (Philadelphia, 1977), 75–100; Victor Greene, *The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite* (South Bend, 1968), 13–32; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 1–7; Peter Gottlieb, *Making Their Own Way: Southern Blacks' Migration to Pittsburgh, 1916–1930* (Urbana, 1987), 1–62; John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1960* (Urbana, 1982), 29–54; and James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and Migration, 1916–1930* (Chicago, 1989). Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, emphasizes the transformation of immigrant culture and everyday life over cultural continuity. See James R. Barrett, “The Transplanted: Workers, Class, and Labor,” *Social Science History*, 12 (Fall 1988), 221–31.

the basis of Old World experiences and then adapting them to the conditions of the New.

The phrase segmented class formation suggests a different vantage point on the same process. Class formation in the United States was segmented in the sense that it took place simultaneously in various ethnic communities. But describing workers' cultures within each ethnic community is not enough, especially since ethnic socialization often had exclusivist strains that inhibited broader working-class solidarity. Especially by the early twentieth century, *American* working-class formation was of necessity interethnic, emerging from the mixture of people from diverse backgrounds and depending on contact across ethnic boundaries. We should be looking rather carefully at the relations *between* the generations of immigrant workers and the various ethnic working-class communities, not simply telling the story of each group of ethnic workers.

In industrial communities throughout the country during the late nineteenth century, skilled German, British, Irish, and native-born male workers built strong craft unions and settled into comfortable communities. The cultures they built, based on associational life and home ownership, were imbued with notions of class, but they were largely defensive in nature. New immigrants might be viewed with as much suspicion as bosses. Where they were organized, these skilled workers used their leverage to protect their standards and prerogatives, but even with no union organization at all, they might achieve some of the same security by employing ethnic and kinship connections to secure work and to retain their hold on the better jobs. Through their craft unions, churches, fraternal organizations, and other institutions, they created their own cultural worlds, ones that often left little room for newcomers.⁷

These older native-born and immigrant workers often embraced a "social republicanism" that fused notions of economic and social reform with democratic nationalist ideals. Indeed, the concept of a distinctive working-class republicanism has even been advanced as a kind of synthesis for labor history. But there are several problems with employing republicanism to reintegrate the story of American workers in the wake of the massive immigration at the turn of the century. It is questionable whether even the earlier generation of immigrants all understood republicanism in the same sense as native-born workers. The traditions with which many of the earlier immigrants identified were those of 1848, not those of 1776; both those traditions had more to do with nationalism than with internationalism and

⁷ Linda Schneider, "The Citizen Striker: Workers' Ideology in the Homestead Strike of 1892," *Labor History*, 23 (Winter 1982), 47-66; Linda Schneider, "Republicanism Reinterpreted: American Ironworkers, 1860-1892," in *A l'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté: Immigrants et ouvriers dans la République Américaine, 1880-1920*, ed. Marianne Debouzy (Saint-Denis, 1988), 211; Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 65-90; Richard J. Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* (Urbana, 1986), 30-67, 172-214; David Emmons, *The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 1875-1925* (Urbana, 1989); and James R. Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle: Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1894-1922* (Urbana, 1987), 38-44, 119-31.

class solidarity. Finally, whatever the republican consensus that may have obtained among earlier immigrants, it had clearly fragmented by the turn of the century.⁸

Nor was such ideology always progressive in content. The same defensive mindset that might impart great cohesion and solidarity for resistance against employers and state authorities could also manifest itself in exclusionary impulses that shaped responses to new immigrant workers. A common reaction to labor's decline in status during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, was the demand for immigration restriction that enjoyed great popularity among not only the native-born but also many Irish and British and some German labor activists. Even as an instrumental approach to problems of unemployment or low wages, the demand for restriction revealed an exclusionary quality to workers' thinking, and it sometimes betrayed a narrow, nativist conception of "labor" shared not only by American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unionists but also by Knights of Labor activists and even socialist militants.⁹

In its extreme form, that perspective infused the anti-Chinese movement that swept the West and other parts of the country in the late nineteenth century. Here the element of race added an enduring and explosive quality to the mixture of defensive sentiments characterizing conservative and even some radical workers. Some Socialist party leaders, for example, held profoundly racist attitudes toward Asian, black, and many immigrant workers and strongly supported immigration restriction.¹⁰

Immigrant socialization in working-class settings could perpetuate this negative strain of thought and feeling: Older immigrants and natives passed their own prejudices on to the newcomers. Irish immigrants, who had been in job competition with Asians and blacks for more than a generation before eastern European immigrants arrived and who had themselves suffered discrimination and violence at the hands of nativists, often developed racist attitudes and repertoires of behavior. Inside the labor movement, the Catholic church, and the political organizations of

⁸ Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, 1983); Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish-America," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (Summer 1978), 6–55; Richard Schneirov, "Political Cultures and the Role of the State in Labor's Republic: The View from Chicago, 1848–1877," *Labor History*, 32 (Summer 1991), 376–400; David Brundage, "Irish Land and American Workers: Class and Ethnicity in Denver, Colorado," in "*Struggle a Hard Battle*": *Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (DeKalb, 1986), 46–67; Sean Wilentz, "Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement, 1790–1920," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 26 (Fall 1984), 1–24; David Montgomery, "Labor and the Republic in Industrial America: 1860–1920," *Le Mouvement Sociale*, 110 (1980), 211–15.

⁹ Nick Salvatore, "Some Thoughts on Class and Citizenship," in *L'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté*, ed. Debouzy, 215–30; Catherine Collomp, "Les organisations ouvrières et la restriction de l'immigration aux Etats-Unis à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle," *ibid.*, 231–46; Catherine Collomp, "Unions, Civics, and National Identity: Organized Reaction to Immigration, 1881–1897," *Labor History*, 29 (Fall 1988), 471–74; and A. T. Lane, "American Unions, Mass Immigration, and the Literacy Test: 1900–1917," *Labor History*, 25 (Winter 1984), 5–25.

¹⁰ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, 1991), 71–112, 179–80; Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875–1920* (Ithaca, 1986), 228–35; Collomp, "Unions, Civics, and National Identity," 463–64; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, 1971); Lawrence Glickman, "Inventing the 'American Standard of Living': Gender, Race and Working-Class Identity, 1880–1925," paper, 1991 (in James R. Barrett's possession). My thanks to Lawrence Glickman for allowing me to cite his unpublished work.

many working-class communities, the Irish occupied vital positions as Americanizers of later groups.¹¹ Racism was a learned value, deeply ingrained in the world views of many workers by the end of the nineteenth century; it was passed on to immigrants along with values enhancing class solidarity.

The AFL's craft unionism was, of course, exclusionary by definition; keeping non-members out of the labor market through control of hiring was its *raison d'être*. In the context of mass immigration, craft organization reinforced any nativist tendencies derived from other sources. The contempt some craft unionists had for new immigrants and women was often based more on their cultural, gender, ethnic, or racial "otherness" than on any threat they posed to the livelihood and living conditions of skilled workers and their families. But these two aspects of the newcomers' image—otherness and lack of skill—fused. When they did, exclusion from a trade might be based not simply on the question of skill but either implicitly or explicitly on race, ethnicity, or gender. To overdraw the point, it was possible to be a "good union man" and at the same time a racist, a nativist, and a chauvinist.

The earlier generation, then, sometimes reacted to new immigrants defensively, seeking to exclude them from the labor market and from the broader working-class community. Yet the older, entrenched generation often could not afford to shut out the newcomers. Relations between the two generations occurred in a context of massive technical and economic upheaval, something like a second industrial revolution. The American working-class population was transformed in the course of the early twentieth century precisely because the economy and the nature of work itself were also being transformed. In some sectors of the economy, for instance, the building trades, where skills were still required and complex work rules hung on, craft unions might retain control over the labor market. In many industries, however, such unions faced a sustained crisis throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The desperation of their struggle to retain some control over the work process and jobs varied considerably from one trade to another, but most skilled workers felt the pressure. Most of the literature about this problem has focused on the control struggles of the skilled, yet many old-line AFL unions did reach out to unskilled immigrants in these years, if only because the transformation of the labor process and the labor market left them little choice.¹²

The ongoing social transformation and the related technological revolution in industry presented the labor movement with an enormous challenge, one with both social and organizational dimensions. The integration of the newcomers into the labor movement called not only for new forms of organization, new organizing strategies, and new strike tactics, but also for a new means of socializing and acculturating the new people, a "remaking" of the working class between the turn of the century and the Great Depression. That involved the organized efforts of unions

¹¹ Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 133–63; Kerby A. Miller, "Green over Black: The Origins of Irish-American Racism," paper, 1969 (in Barrett's possession). My thanks to Professor Miller for allowing me to cite this fine work.

¹² Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*. On the countervailing pressures of skill dilution and nativism and the consequent efforts of American Federation of Labor (AFL) craft unions to integrate less skilled immigrants, see Robert Asher, "Union Nativism and the Immigrant Response," *Labor History*, 23 (1982), 325–48.

and other labor organizations, myriad informal contacts between workers in various settings, and a long struggle with management for the loyalty of the immigrant worker.

We know most about the impulse for immigrant acculturation that came from the native middle class in public school classrooms, settlement houses, and factories. Because most of the new immigrant's waking hours were spent at the workplace, much of his or her learning about what it meant to be an American occurred there. Certainly employers had their own lessons to teach. They experimented with English instruction and citizenship classes during the early years of this century and took a special interest in the movement during the labor shortage and unionization of the World War I era.¹³

Henry Ford launched the most ambitious of these plans at his Highland Park Model T plant as part of the Five Dollar Day plan, which, beginning in 1914, combined assembly-line technology with a shorter work day, incentive pay, and an elaborate personnel management system. Accepting prevailing Progressive notions that environment shaped one's behavior and attitudes, Ford engineers established a Sociology Department to remake the lives of their immigrant workers and win them over to thrift, efficiency, and company loyalty. Case workers fanned out into Detroit's working-class neighborhoods, ready to fight for the hearts and minds of the immigrant auto workers. They investigated each worker's home life as well as his work record, and one could qualify for the Five Dollar Day incentive pay only after demonstrating the proper home environment and related middle-class values. Thus the company sought to show workers not only the "right way to work" but also the "right way to live." In describing the work of his Sociology Department, Ford argued that "these men of many nations must be taught American ways, the English language, and the right way to live." (And he meant business. When about nine hundred workers of Greek or Russian extraction missed work to celebrate Orthodox Christmas—on the Julian calendar, hence thirteen days after Christmas on the Gregorian calendar—he summarily fired them all. "If these men are to make their home in America," he argued, "they should observe American holidays.") Other companies established similar plans: meat packers, steel mills, farm implement manufacturers, textile plants, and others. By the spring of 1919, there were at least eight hundred industrial plants sponsoring their own classes or working in conjunction with the YMCA and other agencies to put on evening or plant classes.¹⁴

¹³ Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976), 7–9, 22–25; and Hartmann, *Movement to Americanize the Immigrant*, 165–73.

¹⁴ W. M. Roberts, "Promotion of Education in Industry," in U.S. Bureau of Education, *Proceedings, Americanization Conference*, 145; Stephen Meyer, "Adapting the Immigrant to the Line," 67–82; and Stephen Meyer, *The Five Dollar Day: Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908–1921* (Albany, 1981), 123–64, esp. 151, 156. For other company programs, see David Brody, *Steelworkers in America: The Nonunion Era* (New York, 1969), 190–97; Gerd Korman, "Americanization at the Factory Gate," *Labor and Industrial Relations Review*, 18 (1965), 396–419; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), 163, 165; and, for a more general discussion, Stuart Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880–1940* (Chicago, 1976), 58–60, 78–79, 116–17; and Daniel Nelson, *Managers and Workers: Origins of the New Factory System in the United States, 1880–1920* (Madison, 1975), 144–45.

Of course, learning also went on at work outside the structured programs. The workplace was by its nature an authoritarian environment, and foremen and other supervisors were always “teaching” immigrants—to do what they were told, to act promptly, to keep working. There was one phrase “every foreman had to learn in English, Polish, and Italian,” recalled William Klann, a Ford Motor assembly foreman: “‘Hurry up.’” The verbal abuse of immigrant workers for which steel mills and some other factories were notorious derived in part from the heartfelt prejudices of lower-level management, but it was also a crude effort to teach the immigrant “who was boss.” Blast furnaces, rolling mills, slaughterhouses, and freight yards were brutal places where the foreman or straw boss undoubtedly felt obliged to assert his authority with whatever force seemed justified. He too had a lesson to teach the immigrant, in this case a lesson about power in the workplace.¹⁵

But there were other teachers—older, more experienced, sometimes politicized workers, who conveyed different notions of what was right or wrong in the workshop and in the United States as a society. Immigrants learned restriction of output and other aspects of a new work culture from their workmates and, according to David Montgomery, “exchanged portions of their traditional culture, not for the values and habits welfare plans sought to inculcate, but for working-class mores.”¹⁶ Immigrant strikers’ frequent demands for humane treatment and for the discharge of abusive foremen suggest the importance of such socialization. Clearly, immigrants themselves were constructing identities and embracing values that reflected situations they faced in the workplace.

Not all workplace conversations were concerned with work itself. Nor did all one’s lessons come from earlier immigrants. Some had broader implications that might be conveyed by more experienced and sophisticated workers from within one’s own community. Something like the ethnocultural class formation that characterized the “old immigrant” communities in the late nineteenth century was occurring in “new immigrant” communities in the early twentieth. Here too workers developed the ideas, organization, institutions, and movements commonly associated with the phrase “working-class culture.” Once again such cultures were built in part on Old World experiences and values, but they were soon tailored to American industrial settings. Sicilian peasants and artisans who created Italy’s “red towns” and then carried a radical oral tradition to Tampa, Chicago, and New York are examples of this phenomenon, as are the Jewish socialists of the ghettos of eastern Europe and America or the Finnish leftists of the Mesabi Range. Comparable radical minorities

¹⁵ Meyer, *Five Dollar Day*, 56; Nelson, *Managers and Workers*, 81; “Family Records” [1919], 23, box 120, Mary Heaton Vorse Papers (Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit); Andrea Graziosi, “Common Laborers, Unskilled Workers, 1890–1915,” *Labor History*, 22 (Fall 1981), 512–44; Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1979), 30–34, 63–65; David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism* (New York, 1987), 92–93; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 167–68; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, 28; Gerd Korman, *Industrialization, Immigrants, and Americanizers: The View from Milwaukee, 1866–1921* (Madison, 1967), 62–63.

¹⁶ Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America*, 43; Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 89–91; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 154–60.

flourished throughout America's eastern European ethnic communities and in workplaces around the country.¹⁷

John Wasko of United States Steel's Homestead Works might have been one of these people. By 1919 he had been in the country only seven years, but he was already married with two children and a home. He had taken out his first papers and spoke English fluently. He learned the language and a number of other things down in the anthracite mines. There he had seen the United Mine Workers of America handle all the common complaints he encountered in the mill — arbitrary and abusive foremen, unpaid overtime, and phony pay scales — and it was a lesson learned well. Wasko read several Slavic-language papers and New York City's socialist *Call* every day. When the organizing started in the mill, he knew what to do, and he "spread the principles of trade unionism among his fellow countrymen."¹⁸

Stjepan Mesaroš, a twenty-year-old Croatian immigrant, met a man like Wasko when he arrived for his first day on the job at Berk's slaughterhouse in Philadelphia. He was overwhelmed by what he found there and in the streets of his neighborhood. Among the many mysteries was the verbal abuse meted out to a young black man with whom Stjepan shared his duties. Noticing a Serbian laborer who seemed to spend every free moment reading Serbo-Croatian pamphlets and newspapers, Stjepan took a chance and asked him about it. Almost sixty years later, he recalled the conversation which took place amidst the blood of the slaughterhouse and changed the course of his life. "The Serb sat down next to me and explained that both bosses and workers were prejudiced against black people. 'You'll soon learn something about this country,' he said. 'Negroes never get a fair chance.'" The next day the Serb brought a newspaper clipping in to work.

The picture showed the Berk family on its way to vacation in Florida for the winter. The picture showed the young men in white pants and shoes and the young ladies in white summer dresses. The whole family was boarding a Pullman parlor car. The explanation proceeded in Serbo-Croatian.

"What's Florida?" I asked.

"That's a place that's warm in the winter. . . ."

"Who goes there?"

"You can see who goes, only bosses."

¹⁷ Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society*, 3–76; Donna Gabaccia, *Militants and Migrants: Rural Sicilians Become American Workers* (New Brunswick, 1988); Bruno Cartosio, "Sicilians in Two Worlds," in *A l'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté*, ed. Debouzy, 127–38; Gary Mormino and George Pozetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa* (Urbana, 1987); Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Made* (New York, 1976), 287–304; Steven Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (New York, 1991); Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (New York, 1970), 162–68; Michael G. Karni, "Finnish Immigrant Leftists in America: The Golden Years, 1900–1918," in *Struggle a Hard Battle*, ed. Hoerder, 199–266; "Interview with Leo Laukki, Chicago, July 10, 1919," folder 15, box 21, David J. Sapos Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison); Mary Cygan, "Political and Cultural Leadership in an Immigrant Community: Polish-American Socialism, 1880–1950" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1989); and Joseph Stipanovich, "Immigrant Workers and Immigrant Intellectuals in Progressive America: A History of the Yugoslavian Socialist Federation, 1900–1918" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1977).

¹⁸ "Interview with John S. Wasko, Homestead," folder 8, box 26, Sapos Papers.

"But the boss [the foreman, as I understood the setup] is still here."
 "The Berks just hire him to run the factory. They get all the money."¹⁹

The Serb described the sort of life that came with the requisite amount of money, and the young Croatian was astounded by the wealth he heard described. Did Stjepan wish to know how this was all possible? The Serb handed him some Socialist Labor party pamphlets and soon after gave him other reading matter of the sort favored by self-educated worker radicals around the world — not just on politics but on popular science, temperance, health foods, atheism. Such literature conveyed more than a formal political ideology — socialism — it also incorporated a new world view. This too was Americanization, but not the sort that employers or most adult educators had in mind when they used the term. Stjepan had discovered America.

Stjepan Mesaroš's slaughterhouse conversation raises the important question of how other immigrant workers discovered the significance of race in American life. The black migrants arriving from the Deep South in the war years and the 1920s were part of the same generation as the new immigrants, and the two groups had a great deal in common. Yet we know very little about the relations between them or for that matter about the more general problem of the evolution of racism among white workers. It seems likely, however, that racial attitudes were part of the legacy that older, more Americanized workers passed on to newcomers. In some cases, these might have included the sort of enlightened perspective displayed by Stjepan's Serbian friend. The anarchist Luigi Galleani often wrote in the Italian-language press about the problem of white racism and concluded that in America the proletariat's motto should be "Not race struggle but class struggle." Surely there were others like these men. More often, however, recent immigrants encountered the hostile attitudes toward blacks that had developed among the Irish and other older groups in the late nineteenth century, exacerbated by the competition for jobs and resources in the early twentieth. The fact that newer immigrants played little part in the race riots of the World War I era suggests that it took some time for them and their children to make these prejudices their own, but their prominent presence in post-World War II racial conflicts demonstrates that many learned their lessons only too well.²⁰

The results of Stjepan's friendship with the Serb and his later career also suggest another context for Americanization — radical working-class politics. Stjepan joined a South Slav branch of the Socialist Labor party and later the Communist party. He changed his name to Steve Nelson, learned to read the party press in English, with the help of a young German-American radical, and studied public speaking, organizing methods, economics, Marxist philosophy, and labor history at party

¹⁹ Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson, American Radical* (Pittsburgh, 1981), 16.

²⁰ Rudolph J. Vecoli, "'Free Country': The American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left, 1880–1920," in *A l'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté*, ed. Debouzy, 75–76; Miller, "Green over Black"; Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 133–63; Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 202–24; Dominic Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880–1922* (Columbus, 1991), 212–27; Arnold Hirsch, "Race and Housing: Violence and Communal Protest in Chicago, 1940–1960," in *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest*, ed. Peter D'A. Jones and Melvin Holli (Grand Rapids, 1977), 350–55.

schools in New York and Moscow. He became a union organizer and later an organizer of the unemployed. He worked in Detroit, Chicago, and the anthracite coal fields of eastern Pennsylvania. During the Spanish civil war he served as commissar of the American Abraham Lincoln Battalion, fighting for his own notion of democracy. Jailed for his political activities during the McCarthy era, he left the Communist party in 1957 but remained a committed socialist.

The Communist party gave Nelson more than language and speaking skills. It brought him into contact with educated and politically committed young people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, provided him with a key to understanding the world around him, and gave him a vision of a new and better world. Ironically, Steve Nelson's Americanization came in the context of a revolutionary party, a path he trod with a small but important group of immigrant radicals.

The early Socialist party was ethnically segmented through a system of foreign-language federations and socialist culture was often ethnic culture, but immigrant socialists were not isolated either from one another or from their native-born counterparts. Many recognized that the party's long-term viability rested on links between foreign and native-born radicals, on creating an American mass movement. In each ethnic community, whether it was preponderantly new immigrants or old, small groups of radicals assumed a disproportionate significance in the acculturation of immigrant workers. Already sympathetic to the goals of the movement, perhaps a bit more articulate or cosmopolitan than their workmates, they provided labor activists with invaluable links to the immigrant communities. As newspaper editors, street-corner speakers, and organizers, they carried the socialist message into their communities in a language workers could understand, and in the process they provided a framework within which the individual immigrant could comprehend the American political and economic system and her or his place in it.²¹

The Communist party in the 1920s was a bit different from earlier socialist organizations. In the mid-twenties, the Communists made a conscious decision to "Americanize" the party (their term). They dissolved language federations, shifted immigrant activists into neighborhood branches, shop nuclei, and other ethnically mixed mass organizations, and even asked foreign-born comrades to change their names. During the Popular Front of the late 1930s, Americanization was even more elaborate. Proclaiming that "Communism Is Twentieth Century Americanism," Earl Browder and other party leaders consciously cultivated an American image, using patriotic symbols and language to convey their message. The new line came easily to second-generation immigrants who eagerly identified themselves as American radicals. A veteran of this movement later recalled beginning to feel "like we were really part of the American Scene. We were looking for some kind of legitimation

²¹ Julianna Puskás, "Hungarian Immigration and Socialism," in *A l'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté*, ed. Debouzy, 145–50; Mary Cygan, "Political and Cultural Leadership"; Mary Cygan, "Polish American Socialism as an Americanizing Force," paper presented at the American Historical Association convention, Cincinnati, December 1988 (in Barrett's possession); Robert Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (New York, 1922), 107–9; Timothy L. Smith, "Introduction," in Ivan Molek, *Slovene Immigrant History, 1900–1950: Autobiographical Sketches* (Dover, 1979), xix–xx; and David Shannon, *The Socialist Party* (Chicago, 1967), 43–48.



John Fitzpatrick, Chicago Federation of Labor president, addresses a large crowd of packinghouse workers on Chicago's south side during the World War I organizing drives. *Courtesy Chicago Historical Society, ICHi-10294.*

of our feeling about becoming even more American. Browder came along and sort of articulated this."²²

Labor organizations striving to organize in the era of mass immigration also became contexts for acculturation. Indeed, when organizers reached out to the newcomers—and this happened rather more often than we have realized during the early twentieth century—they had little choice but to engage the immigrants in a dialogue about unionization. Too often union drives are thought of in purely institutional terms—as attempts to build up organizations. Surely, this was the goal and sometimes the end result. But each of these efforts was a process of socialization as well, an effort to convey to the immigrants basic values as well as the structure and function of unions and other working-class organizations. To some degree, this was simply a matter of “selling the union,” and this effort itself was important. In coal mining, steel production, clothing manufacturing, slaughtering and meat

²² On the “Americanization” of the Communist party in the mid-1920s, see Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York, 1960), 272–75; and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919–1957* (Boston, 1957). On the Americanism of the Popular Front, see Fraser Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, 1991), 83–105; Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York, 1984), 167–206; Maurice Isserman, “The 1956 Generation: An Alternative Approach to the History of American Communism,” *Radical America*, 14 (March–April 1980), 43–51; George Watt interview by Maurice Isserman, Jan. 7, 1978, in Maurice Isserman’s possession, quoted in Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party during the Second World War* (Middletown, 1982), 9–14.

packing, and other industries, organizers, business agents, and shop stewards had to convey to the immigrants the specific goals, strategies, and structures of the labor movement. But they also conveyed the values and ideas that gave the movement its rationale, its soul. What in the union's appeal attracted immigrants more than official programs? Why were they willing to make the sorts of sacrifices that were clearly necessary to sustain organization in the face of staggering odds? Such questions might help us begin to sketch out some of the characteristics of immigrant workers' mentalities in the early twentieth century.

There were several elements to labor's version of Americanism. Not surprisingly, activists frequently emphasized basic civil liberties, particularly free speech, and encouraged immigrants to speak up and defend their rights. Nor were these ideals abstract. In coal company and steel mill towns and in many other industrial communities, labor's ability to organize depended on the maintenance of such rights, and immigrants frequently learned the values of these freedoms in the midst of organizing activities, strikes, and demonstrations. Workers' notions of these rights, moreover, were often much broader than the law itself. They tended to reflect rights that were more idealized than real. "It is time that some people learned," wrote a West Virginia miner in the midst of the 1921 coal strike, "that working men have some rights under the Constitution, among them the right to organize for mutual protection, the right of collective bargaining and the right to quit work when conditions surrounding their employment become unbearable. And these rights we are going to maintain at any cost." Another miner wrote to President Warren Harding the same year to complain that "the coal operators are depriving the coal miners of the right to belong to the labor organization which is their inherent right given to all citizens of the United States." A steelworker who termed his forty-one years in the mill "slavery and persecution" claimed that the long work day and poor conditions were "against the Constitution."²³

Organizers frequently invested their material demands with the power of democratic rhetoric and patriotism by speaking of an American standard of living, by which they meant higher wages, shorter working hours, and decent working conditions. Reference to the "American" standard could be and sometimes was used to exclude newcomers, as in the case of the working-class agitation against Chinese immigrants. But it could also be the basis for integrating newcomers and imparting the basic values of the movement, while establishing a legitimacy in the eyes of the public at large. During World War I, the "American standard of living" provided the unions with a patriotic image and immigrant workers with the prospect of an ideal American life for themselves and their children. "We cannot bring up our children as Americans on 15 and a half cents an hour," a Polish stockyards worker argued, "We cannot live decently. Our wives, our children, our homes demand better wages."²⁴

²³ John Hutchinson to Editor, *United Mine Workers Journal*, June 15, 1921, p. 21; David Allan Corbin, *Life, Work, and Rebellion in the Coal Fields: The Southern West Virginia Miners, 1880–1922* (Urbana, 1981), 242; "Interview with Mike Connolly, Pittsburgh" [1919], folder 9, box 26, Saposs Papers.

²⁴ Glickman, "Inventing 'The American Standard of Living'"; Peter Shergold, *Working-Class Life: The Amer-*

Finally, many labor activists embraced the concept of cultural pluralism, if only in the interests of labor solidarity, and tried to impart this value to immigrants. What this might have looked like at the level of the local union is suggested by the scene at a meeting of Local 183, which included all women working in the Chicago stockyards, regardless of race, nationality, or trade. When the young Irish chairwoman called for a discussion of grievances, a young black woman complained that a Polish member had insulted her. The chairwoman asked both to come forward.

“Now what did yez call each other?”

“She called me a Nigger.”

“She called me a Pollock first.”

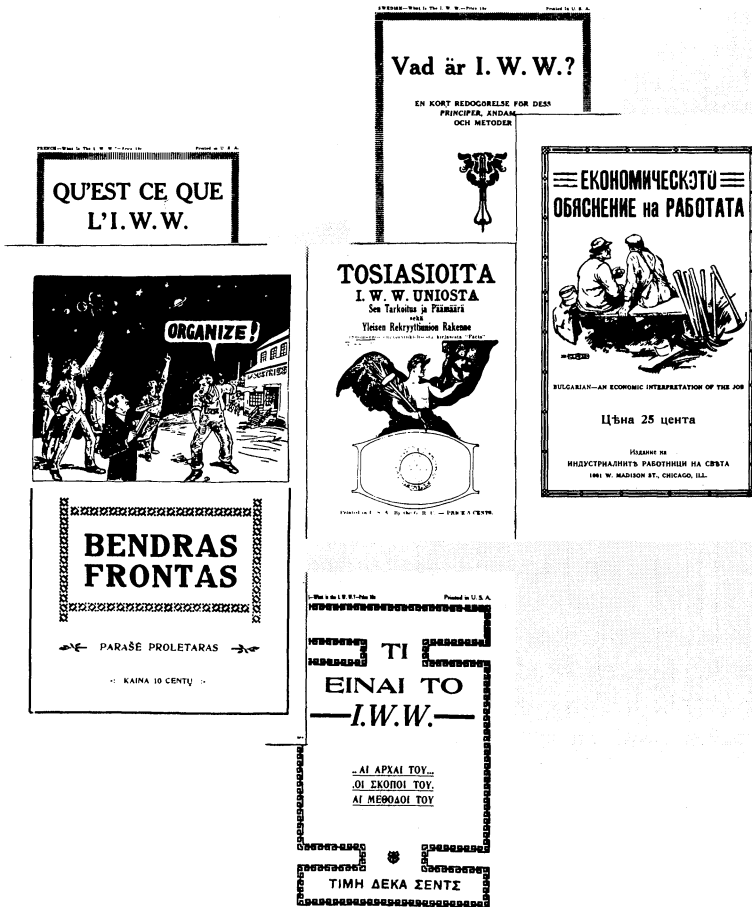
“Both of yez oughta be ashamed of yourselves. You’re both to blame. But don’t you know that this question in our ritual don’t mean that kind of griev-e-ances, but griev-e-ances of the whole bunch of us?”²⁵

Ethelbert Stewart, the United States commissioner of labor, observed labor’s version of Americanization as it unfolded in Chicago’s slaughterhouses and meat packing plants during the early years of this century. Here ethnic hostilities had been rife, and ethnic communities tended to be dominated by charismatic “clan leaders” who fought the unions for influence over the immigrants. Since the workers’ worlds were organized largely on the basis of nationality, the union “represented the first, and for a time the only, point at which [the immigrant] touches any influence outside of his clan. . . . The Slav mixes with the Lithuanian, the German, and the Irishman—and this is the only place they do mix until, by virtue of this intercourse and this mixing, clannishness is to a degree destroyed, and a social mixing along other lines comes into play.” In the anthracite coal fields, labor economist John R. Commons noted, “foreigners were given over to the most bitter and often murderous feuds among the ten or fifteen nationalities and the two or three factions within each nationality. . . . When the union was organized all antagonisms of race, religion and faction were eliminated. The immigrants came down to an economic basis and turned their forces against the bosses.” “The only effective Americanizing force for the southeastern European,” Commons concluded, “is the labor union.”²⁶ Later conflicts suggest that Commons was too optimistic, but there was no question that the union’s focus on common grievances helped to break down ethnic barriers. Why? Immigrants themselves were the critical element in this process. They responded better to unions than to official programs because the unions stressed issues that were vital to the welfare of ethnic communities but simply could

ican Standard in Comparative Perspective, 1899–1913 (Pittsburgh, 1982); Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 142–46; Mary McDowell, “The Struggle for an American Standard of Living,” in *Mary McDowell and Municipal Housekeeping*, ed. Caroline Hill (Chicago, 1938), 62–66, esp. 66.

²⁵ Howard Wilson, *Mary McDowell, Neighbor* (Chicago, 1928), 100; Alice Henry, *The Trade Union Woman* (New York, 1905), 56; Alan Dawley, *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 257–60.

²⁶ For Ethelbert Stewart’s 1905 statement, see Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 139; Winthrop Talbot, ed., *Americanization* (New York, 1917), 307, 305, 177–78; Peter Roberts, *The New Immigration* (New York, 1912), 195.



The radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) conveyed their own analysis of American society to immigrant workers in numerous languages. *Courtesy Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., Chicago.*

not be resolved without looking beyond their boundaries to class-based organization.

Besides teaching immigrants interethnic solidarity, unions did more than any civics lesson to impart the principles and methods of democratic government by relating them to practical matters: wages, hours, and working conditions. For most immigrants, introduction to the American political and economic system came not through night-school classes but through discussion and debate at union meetings (with interpreters), informal conversations with fellow workers, and labor movement publications (often printed in various languages). And the union's version of

Americanism was likely to be different from the one conveyed in employer programs, emphasizing the free expression of one's opinions and the importance of standing up with fellow workers to demand one's rights.²⁷

This kind of socialization took great effort but could yield impressive results. After they had hired Polish, Slovak, and Hungarian organizers and made contacts in the various ethnic communities around the turn of the century, the United Mine Workers of America quickly gained a loyal following among recent immigrants. During World War I, one laborers' local of the Stockyards Labor Council recruited more than ten thousand Polish and Lithuanian butcher workmen inside a month's time. Council organizers found that once the immigrants understood the unions' goals, they were easier to organize than the native-born and the more skilled and generally made better union members. William Z. Foster drew similar conclusions from his experiences in steel. At the end of World War I, the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers swept through the thoroughly open-shop steel mill towns, penetrating deep into the immigrant communities and conveying the union message to workers in their own languages.²⁸

The huge numbers can easily overshadow the vital element here—the human agency of the immigrants themselves. They fashioned their identities out of their own experiences, the language and ideas they brought with them, and those they confronted in such union campaigns.

Americanization, whether official or labor, was also fundamentally shaped by issues of gender. Concentrated in precisely those professions—teaching, settlement house work, public health—that brought them into close contact with immigrant families, women assumed major roles at the highest reaches of the corporate and government bureaucracies that provided the Americanization movement with its structure, ideas, and legitimacy. Thousands of them taught English and civics in evening school, settlement house, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and factory programs, conveying the Americanization message. But the message itself encoded notions of domestic orthodoxy and other gender values in English primers, loyalty parades, and citizenship plays. In its early stages, when it chiefly emphasized naturalization and the right to vote, the movement focused almost entirely on men. When Americanizers did begin to address women, it was because of their key role in child rearing and for fear of the dangers posed by the “un-Americanized mother.” Long after woman suffrage, Americanizers placed far more emphasis on the im-

²⁷ Wilson, *Mary McDowell*, 99; William M. Leiserson, *Adjusting Immigrant and Industry* (New York, 1924), 234–45; Neil Betten, “Polish-American Steelworkers: Americanization through Industry and Labor,” *Polish American Studies*, 33 (Autumn 1976), 31–42; David J. Saposs, “The Problem of Making Permanent Trade Unionists Out of the Recently Organized Immigrant Workers,” 1919, folder 5, box 21, Saposs Papers; Talbot, ed., *Americanization*, 112–13.

²⁸ Greene, *Slavic Community on Strike*, 157–58; Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 195–96; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, 214–62. The contention that immigrants were easier to organize and more loyal in strikes recurred often in David Saposs's interviews with union officials in the period immediately after World War I. See “Digest of Interviews with Trade Union Officials” [1919], 3–4, folder 15, box 21, Saposs Papers; “Interview with Dennis Lane, president, Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen of North America,” folder 2, box 26, Saposs Papers; and other interviews in boxes 21 and 22, Saposs Papers.

migrant mother's role in the home than on her duties as a citizen. She was urged to maintain the new American standard of living in diet, hygiene, and infant and child care and to be mindful of her crucial role in producing a second generation of "true Americans."²⁹

Working-class Americanizers made their own approaches to immigrant women. Organizing them presented special problems, some created by the changing occupational structure of women's work in the early twentieth century, others by the patriarchal values of the immigrant household and the labor movement itself. Yet the proportion of the female labor force in unions doubled during the first two decades of the twentieth century, and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL), a coalition of working women and middle-class reformers, played a particularly important role in socializing immigrant women. In organizing garment workers, the league employed activists from the communities involved and printed leaflets in various languages. During and after the garment strikes of 1909 and 1910, Jewish and Italian organizers visited women in their homes to explain the issues involved in the strikes and the importance of unions. The Chicago WTUL set up neighborhood committees to organize social and educational events, a tactic that was later used in immigrant neighborhoods in New York. Chicago teachers' union volunteers assumed a function comparable to that of "home teachers" in the official Americanization movement, bringing English to immigrant women in their own homes. The New York league produced a labor-oriented English primer, *New World Lessons for Old World Peoples*, in Lithuanian, Italian, Yiddish, Bohemian, and English. It contained illustrated stories "designed to provoke lively discussion and to stimulate students to think out their own answers to the various questions surrounding unionization." Most of the characters were women living in immigrant neighborhoods and facing situations that the students themselves might encounter. The texts emphasized women activists and their accomplishments and in this way provided realistic role models. These immigrant women learned English in a way that developed important values of class solidarity and personal relationships that they relied upon in later organizing and strikes. "For the WTUL," Colette Hyman concludes, "teaching English was a point of entry into these women's lives through which lessons of unionism could be taught. It was the first step in female institution-building among immigrant women."³⁰

²⁹ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 239–42; John McClymer, "Gender and 'the American Way of Life': Women in the Americanization Movement," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 10 (Spring 1991), 5–6; U.S. Labor Department, Naturalization Bureau, *Suggestions for Americanization Work among Foreign-Born Women* (Washington, 1921); McClymer, "Gender and 'the American Way of Life'"; Harriet P. Dow, "Home Classes for Foreign-Born Women," in *Proceedings, Americanization Conference*, 128–35; and George J. Sanchez, "'Go after the Women': Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant Woman, 1915–1929," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York, 1990), 257.

³⁰ Colette Hyman, "Labor Organizing and Female Institution Building: The Chicago Women's Trade Union League," in *Women's Work and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston, 1985), 35–36; Agnes Aitkin, "Teaching English to Our Foreign Friends, Part II: Among the Italians," *Life and Labor*, 1 (Oct. 1911), 309; Violet Pike, "New World Lessons for Old World Peoples, Lesson VI: Joining the Union," *ibid.*, 2 (March 1912), 90; Nancy Schrom-Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the*

World War I and the years immediately following represented a watershed in the Americanization process. Labor's own notions about Americanism stood out in bold relief against the war's backdrop. The massive immigration of the preceding decade had produced a remarkably diverse population who might come to see their chances for a decent life in America embodied in labor's efforts. In this context, interethnic and often interracial organizing was vital to union efforts. The economic effects of the war—increased demand, labor shortages, and steep inflation—sharply raised the issue of living standards and mutual sacrifice for the good of the war effort. In the process the war greatly strengthened unions' bargaining position and ability to organize and raised questions of democratic ideology, providing union organizers and immigrant workers with a vocabulary with which to express their grievances and aspirations.

Because of large war orders and labor shortages, both employers and the government sought to co-opt the labor movement into the war effort and avoid strikes, while inflation provided workers with incentive to organize. An ideological dimension was less tangible but probably just as important. In the interests of stimulating sacrifice and hard work on the part of immigrant workers, employers and government agencies couched their propaganda in a democratic idiom. For their part, labor activists sought to appropriate such democratic rhetoric and symbols in the name of labor. More than ever before, the plight of the immigrants, their status as workers, and their vision of the labor movement became part of a discourse on Americanism. The concept was hotly contested, and the immigrants were very much at the center of this symbolic struggle.³¹

For their part, the unions, seizing on the war situation to launch ambitious organizing drives in non-union basic industry where most of the immigrants were employed, framed their appeals in patriotic terms. The March 17, 1918, issue of the *United Mine Workers Journal* put the issue forcefully:

If this war is waged for the destruction of political autocracy, we demand . . . the elimination of industrial autocracy in this country. The workers demand a voice in the conditions of their service, in all sections of the country; thus shall they be assured that this is indeed their war.

The National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers geared its campaign around this theme and drove it home repeatedly at mass meetings and in publications produced in various languages. Ironically, it was the recent immigrant rather than the native-born worker who was most receptive to the democratic rhetoric. The committee's large red, white, and blue campaign badges were favorites in

Women's Trade Union League of New York (Columbia, Mo., 1980); Elizabeth A. Payne, *Reform, Labor, and Feminism: Margaret Dreier Robb and the Women's Trade Union League* (Urbana, 1988), 85–86; Leiserson, *Adjusting Immigrant and Industry*, 297–331; and James R. Barrett, "Women's Work, Family Economy, and Labor Militancy: The Case of Chicago's Packinghouse Workers, 1900–1922," in *Labor Divided: Race and Ethnicity in United States Labor Struggles, 1835–1960*, ed. Robert Asher and Charles Stephenson (Albany, 1990), 260–62.

³¹ See David Montgomery, "Nationalism, American Patriotism, and Class Consciousness among Immigrant Workers in the United States in the Epoch of World War I," in *"Struggle a Hard Battle,"* ed. Hoerder, 327–51.

the immigrant neighborhoods. Far from being abstract, David Brody concludes, "The democratic theme made unionism comprehensible." A Polish steelworker made the connection between trade unionism and democratic war aims in rather more eloquent terms: "just like a horse and wagon, work all day. . . . For why this war? For why we buy Liberty Bonds? For the mills? No, for freedom and America—for everybody. No more horse and wagon. For eight-hour day."³²

Similar scenarios unfolded in many industries throughout the country. During a 1919 conflict at Scovill Manufacturing in Waterbury, Connecticut, a strike leaflet framed the issue in patriotic terms. "Where is the democracy our boys gave their lives for? Wake up American workers; can't you see that we have another kaiser, another von Hindenburg, another czar who is conspirating to destroy humanity?" The workers, most of them of Italian or eastern European parentage, demanded a decent "American wage" and frequently used democratic and patriotic language in expressing their grievances.³³

In steel, coal, and metal mining, in meat packing, in textile and garment manufacturing—across the whole spectrum of American industry—unions or loose federations of unions launched large organizing drives designed to integrate the new, unskilled immigrants. In the short run, the efforts were remarkably successful and union membership doubled between 1917 and 1920. In steel, the strongest bastion of the open shop, earlier organizational efforts had failed repeatedly, though the new immigrants were certainly active in several of those efforts. During World War I, the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers launched an ambitious organizing drive and had garnered more than 100,000 workers, most of them recent immigrants, by the spring of 1919. In textiles and clothing and in many other industries, the emergence of the so-called "new unions" represented efforts on the part of an earlier generation of activists or of radicals *within* the various "new immigrant" communities to integrate the second generation of immigrant workers into the movement by creating new sorts of unions with new organizing and strike strategies. A massive strike wave, the largest in American history to that point, involving more than a million strikers per year for several years, accompanied this organizing, and many of the activists who led the strikes emerged from radical subcultures in the various ethnic communities.³⁴

Union locals, national unions, and city labor federations across the country launched educational programs for new immigrant members. These incorporated

³² David Brody, *Labor in Crisis: The Steel Strike of 1919* (Philadelphia, 1965), 73; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, 221, 223; Betten, "Polish-American Steelworkers," 36–38; Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 384–85.

³³ Fernando Fasce, "Freedom in the Workplace? Immigrants at the Scovill Manufacturing Company, 1915–1921," in *A l'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté*, ed. Debouzy, 107–21, esp. 116.

³⁴ Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, 214–30; Frank Serene, "Immigrant Steelworkers in the Monongahela Valley: Their Communities and the Development of a Labor Consciousness" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1979); Emmons, *Butte Irish*, 255–91, 340–97; Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 188–239; David J. Goldberg, *A Tale of Three Cities: Labor Organization and Protest in Patterson, Passaic, and Lawrence, 1916–1921* (New Brunswick, 1989); Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America*, 93–101; David Montgomery, "Immigrants, Industrial Unions, and Social Reconstruction in the United States, 1916–1923," *Labour/Le Travail*, 13 (Spring 1984), 104–9.



A class analysis of war from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the *Industrial Pioneer*, June 1925. Courtesy Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., Chicago.

not only English and civics instruction but also courses in economics, political economy, history, and literature taught by lawyers and college professors as well as labor activists and socialist elected officials. Sam Levin, business agent of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Chicago Council, explained why it was essential to teach such classes from labor's perspective:

it is not sufficient to tell the workers that they are entitled to all profit since they create all wealth. They know this, but it is important to tell them how each individual institution of our political and economic system is composed, how it

works, and how it is possible to improve upon it, and whether it is possible or necessary to abolish it.³⁵

The successful wartime organizing among very recent immigrants and the related strike wave raise two crucial questions that deserve a great deal more research. The first has to do with the immigrants themselves: What do these phenomena suggest about their thinking? The second is equally vital: What happened to this impressive movement?

One might begin to think of the consciousness characterizing many of the new immigrants of the early twentieth century as a sort of transitional mentality, an amalgam of Old World traditions, values, and behaviors with new working-class ideas, forms of organization, and strategies. Whatever the content of the transition, it was neither linear nor inevitable. Perhaps it was a sort of conversation in the immigrants' own minds and between older voices and newer ones, which were still not quite clear. There was undoubtedly an infinite variation to such thinking, beginning with differences between various ethnic groups and ranging down to the personality of each individual immigrant. Each person embraced multiple identities shaped by her or his experiences as a woman or man, an Italian or Pole living in a particular type of community in the United States, working in a particular industry. But conceptualizing consciousness as transitional lends the analysis a dynamic and fluid dimension and suggests that such identities were not entirely idiosyncratic, that they were created within a specific historical context that is vital to explaining them. It also directs our attention away from particular ethnic communities and toward the relationship between ethnicity and class identity.

The transitional quality of the unskilled immigrants' world views is suggested in part by the words and the symbols they chose. Employers were described as "czars" or "Kaisers"—unjust rulers without the support of their subjects—and the police as "Cossacks," a particularly apt word for the mounted officers mobilized in steel mill towns and ethnic working-class city neighborhoods in the World War I era. The strong support for the Polish army in immigrant neighborhoods and the centrality of nationalism in the political discourse of eastern European immigrants both suggest continuing ideological links with the Old World. Many immigrants lacked what might be termed an "industrial lexicon" and found it difficult to even describe their work to folks back home without resorting to Old World metaphors and analogies. Yet these same immigrant workers often led their parades and picket lines with the American flag, marched in their own American military uniforms, and employed patriotic rhetoric to attack their employers and express their grievances, especially during World War I. Increasingly integrated into the working-class movement, they were becoming proletarians by the war years.³⁶

³⁵ *Report of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor, Atlantic City, New Jersey, June 9–23, 1919* (Washington, 1919), 135–44; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 4–5, 218–22; J. M. Budish to David J. Saposs, Nov. 16, 1918, folder 7, box 1, Saposs Papers; Sam Levin interview by David J. Saposs, Dec. 26, 1918, folder 15, box 21, Saposs Papers.

³⁶ James R. Barrett, "Comment: Polish Immigrants and the Mentality of the Unskilled Immigrant Worker,

But if there was a gradual transformation in the consciousness of unskilled recent immigrants, reflected in the changing strategies and social composition of the labor movement, then what happened to the new movement that was emerging in these years? Labor history, like other fields of social history over the past two decades, has tended to steer away from the analysis of particular events and toward the delineation of processes and trends. Yet specific events are often crucial to explaining historical change. Working-class fragmentation, for example, is too often thought of as an eventuality rather than a problem to be explained with reference to a particular historical situation that shaped the process. In this case, the war, which had first brought dramatic breakthroughs in the integration of recent immigrants into the labor movement, also set the stage for the political reaction to follow. Several short-term factors in the postwar years devastated the immigrant-based movement that had provided a context for Americanization from the bottom up, fragmenting the impressive wartime movement along ethnic, racial, and political lines.³⁷

In the midst of a serious depression, which had a particularly disastrous effect on the new unions of unskilled immigrants, employers attacked in one industry after another between late 1919 and early 1922. Among the strikebreakers in many of these conflicts were the most recent migrants to join the labor force, southern blacks and Mexicans. Race emerged as the decisive division within many working-class communities, and employers clearly manipulated this development to deepen racial tensions. Race riots broke out in two dozen American cities and towns in 1919, leaving any dream of an interracial labor movement in tatters.

In the wake of war, the Americanization campaign took on a distinctly nativist cast and a patriotic frenzy. Ritual and symbolism had a peculiar importance to both government and corporate Americanizers. As nationalism and the fear of subversion grew, the government and employers put more effort and resources into the crusade to turn foreign-born workers into citizen patriots: On July 4, 1918, in cities across the country, federal agencies and voluntary organizations staged giant patriotic celebrations featuring dozens of ethnic groups demonstrating the gifts they had brought with them to the New World and affirming their loyalty to the government. The Flag Day Program at Wilson and Company's Chicago meat packing plant was typical of the events staged in industrial establishments. The drive for one-hundred-percent Americanism began with a brass band, a parade, and patriotic songs; thousands of loyalty leaflets were distributed. But the corporate programs were not notably successful. At Wilson's plant disappointed organizers noted that few of the

1900–1922." *Polish American Studies*, 46 (Spring 1989), 100–107; Adam Walaszek, "Was the Polish Worker Asleep? Immigrants, Unions, and Workers' Control in America, 1900–1922," *ibid.*, 74–79; Adam Walaszek, "'For in America Poles Are Like Cattle': Polish Peasant Immigrants and Work in America, 1890–91," in *A l'ombre de la Statue de la Liberté*, ed. Debouzy, 95–105; Montgomery, "Nationalism, Patriotism, and Class Consciousness"; Fasce, "Freedom in the Workplace?" 116–18.

³⁷ James R. Barrett, "Defeat and Decline: Long-Term Factors and Historical Conjunctures in the Decline of a Local Labor Movement, Chicago, 1900–1922," paper presented at the Perspectives on Labor History Conference, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, March 9, 1990 (in Barrett's possession); Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 235–36.

immigrants joined in the songs, presumably because they did not know the words, and the leaflets, all of them in English, went unread. By 1919 Ford had traded its melting pot and elaborate welfare program for an extensive network of spies and a practice of firing workers for disloyalty to the nation or the corporation. Employers saw these programs as part of a broad effort to inoculate immigrant workers against the dangers of bolshevism and other forms of radicalism. They called their new offensive, which mixed lockouts, industrial espionage, and private armies and police forces with welfare plans and company unions, the "American Plan."³⁸

State and local governments' own version of one-hundred-percent Americanism involved the widespread use of injunctions and mounted police to quell strikes. Workers usually lost these struggles, and the new organizations that had provided the context for integrating the new immigrants were demolished. During the Red Scare, federal and local authorities raided meeting places, closed down presses, seized organizational records, and jailed or simply deported immigrant activists, decimating the ranks of radical labor in immigrant communities. Never more than a tiny minority in any immigrant community, the radicals had played key roles in organizing and leading the mass strikes of recent unskilled workers, and they linked immigrant communities to trade unions, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Socialist and Communist parties, and other organizations that provided alternative forms of socialization for people who were still trying to understand the society in which they found themselves.³⁹ The Red Scare amounted to a kind of enforced Americanization.

Again labor radicals contested the term's meaning. The Farmer-Labor party's 1920 platform demanded democratic control of industry, abolition of imperialism, public ownership and operation of railroads and mines, the legal right to collective bargaining, the eight-hour day, unemployment compensation, and government old-age pensions. The document also called for its version of one-hundred-percent Americanism:

Restoration of civil liberties . . . including free speech, free assemblage, right of asylum, equal opportunity, and trial by jury . . . amnesty for all persons imprisoned because of their patriotic insistence upon their constitutional guarantees, industrial activities or religious beliefs. . . . As Americanism means democracy, suffrage should be universal. We demand full, unrestricted political rights for all citizens regardless of sex, race, color, or creed.⁴⁰

³⁸ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 234–63; Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914–1960* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 43–46; Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 257–60; Brody, *Steelworkers in America*, 190–98; *National Provisioner*, Sept. 25, 1920, pp. 18–20, 25–26, 42–43; Barrett, *Work and Community in the Jungle*, 243–63; Meyer, *Five Dollar Day*, 169–89; Goldberg, *Tale of Three Cities*, 148–62; Korman, *Industrialization, Immigrants, and Americanizers*, 148–66; Ronald Edsforth, *Class Conflict and Cultural Consensus: The Making of a Consumer Society in Flint, Michigan* (New Brunswick, 1987); Montgomery, "Nationalism, Patriotism, and Class Consciousness," 334–35; Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, 438–39, 454–57.

³⁹ William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903–1933* (New York, 1963), 88–117, 208–37; Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria* (New York, 1964); and Dawley, *Struggles for Justice*, 243–51.

⁴⁰ *American Labor Year Book, 1923–24* (New York, 1924), 143. For comparable rhetoric, see "Labor's Fourteen

But the Red Scare undeniably enhanced the more general development of nativism and other forms of intolerance that split the working class and the labor movement in the early 1920s. Already on the defensive, unions made fewer efforts to reach new immigrant and black migrant workers as nationality, race, and patriotism once again became sources of identification for many native-born and old immigrant workers. Indeed, the resulting fragmentation represented the social basis for labor's organizational decline in the course of the 1920s.

It might be tempting to think of the 1920s as a period of triumph for more conservative notions of Americanism, as a time when ethnic workers were culturally and institutionally integrated through the rise of a mass consumer culture and corporate welfare programs, but the reality was much more complex. Certainly elements of the new mass culture penetrated blue-collar ethnic communities and the burgeoning ghettos of northern cities, but often what emerged was a fusion of new and old. Likewise, corporate programs and the daily routine of work in giant mass-production factories spawned a new workplace culture and collective identity, especially among second-generation immigrants, but the values actually created were seldom those promoted by the companies involved. When the corporate welfare system collapsed and jobs disappeared in the Great Depression, traditional sources of support in immigrant communities were overwhelmed, and workers turned increasingly toward government programs, self-organization, and protest, first through unemployed councils and later through the industrial union movement that ultimately produced the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

This rhetorical and symbolic Americanization was also very real for workers who experienced the bloody union struggles and the fight to maintain democracy from the late thirties through World War II. The second generation in immigrant communities came of age during those struggles, and there was never any question that they thought of themselves as American workers. Political discourse was once again dominated by a democratic idiom, a working-class Americanism.⁴¹

Points," *Survey*, Nov. 30, 1918, p. 265; *New Majority*, Jan. 18, 1919, pp. 8–9; Illinois Federation of Labor, *Proceedings of the Convention, 1918* (Springfield, 1919), 134–59.

⁴¹ Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; and Thomas Gobel, "Becoming American: Ethnic Workers and the Rise of the CIO," *Labor History*, 29 (Spring 1988), 173–98. See also the story of Dobie Dobrejcek in Thomas Bell's novel *Out of This Furnace* (Pittsburgh, 1976), 259–413.