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Nineteenth-Century Labor Radicalism

The Christian Labor Union and the Knights of Labor

The U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter "Economic Justice for All" renewed the public debate about economic justice. Central to the bishops' letter, as David Hollenbach points out, is the idea that justice requires that all people be able not only to satisfy their basic economic and social needs but to participate fully in the life of the community. The bishops, drawing on a biblical tradition that speaks on behalf of the poor and marginalized, ask us to re-think our economic priorities as a people and come to terms with an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, both at home and abroad. While one can rightly point to the economic policies of the Reagan administration and its legacy of a staggering deficit, misplaced military priorities, and rapid increase in the rate of deindustrialization, the basic realities of inequality are not new to the American historical experience. Samuel P. Hays stresses that inequality is in fact fundamental to an understanding of American history. Irrespective of steady, if uneven, economic growth, periodic movements for reform, creation of new institutions aimed at easing the maldistribution of wealth and power, and changes in the governing political party and political rhetoric, inequality has persisted. Unfortunately, we have not shown equal persistence in addressing its sources and meaning.¹

This chapter focuses on issues of inequality and economic injustice as analyzed by late nineteenth-century workers, particularly through the Christian Labor Union and the Knights of Labor. Working-class people recognized that inequality was not limited to income distribution but had to do with the very structure of industrial capitalism. The new industrial capitalist order, as they saw it, deprived people of control over the conditions that shaped their lives, debased the meaning of community, and reduced human beings to interchangeable parts of the industrial machine. Combining the insights of Christian faith with an earlier republican tradition, workers demanded freedom and equality, not only in the political arena but in the marketplace, since they believed they had economic and social rights that were as inalienable as those proclaimed by the founders of the American Republic.

Workers' critiques of American capitalism, their differing visions of how society should be reorganized, and their theological and ethical assessments of the emerging industrial order have been overlooked. Historians, ethicists, and other scholars have studied the gospel of wealth, the social gospel, and the beginnings of Catholic social teaching. Of course radicalized social gospel proponents and progressive members of the Catholic hierarchy did attempt to speak on behalf of working class people, but the fact remains that when oppressed people speak *for themselves*, name *their own reality*, and give voice to *their own experience*, their discourse is not only qualitatively different but disquieting. We must listen to this discourse if we are to rediscover what makes authentic economic justice possible, especially a justice that, as the bishops insist, requires not only equity but full participation by all persons.

The point deserves careful consideration because it is central to the argument of this book. Otto Maduro, Venezuelan theologian and sociologist, writes that "exploited classes frequently find themselves related to a particular religion in such a way that, instead of finding it an obstacle to their emancipation, they find original, unexpected and fruitful perspectives in it for their revolutionary struggle." Although the situation facing late nineteenth-century workers was not necessarily revolutionary, many workers found in the Christian tradition symbols and stories that affirmed their effort to resist the dominant social order and legitimated their struggle for an alternative. In doing so, they risked becoming rebels, outsiders, in the church as well as in society. Capitalism, after all, was and is maintained not only by economic and political means but by ideological means as well. Karl Marx insisted that "the ideas of the ruling class in every epoch are the ruling ideas, and the reason for this is that every class which is the ruling material force in society is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force."²

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci exposed the subtleties of this ideological dominance. According to Gramsci, the ideology of the capitalist class not only justifies its power but gains the active consent of the oppressed in their own oppression. In other words, the ruling class establishes its hegemony, summarized succinctly by Gwynn Williams as "an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations." John Cammett quotes this definition in his study of Gramsci and points out that hegemony is obtained by consent rather than force and "in a general sense refers to the 'spontaneous' loyalty that any dominant social group obtains from the masses by virtue of its social and intellectual prestige and its supposedly superior function in the world of production."³

For our purposes, what is at issue is the religious legitimation of industrial capitalism and how *so* many came to accept its social values and goals

as their own. In that context it is important to explore how a working-class understanding of Christianity challenged the hegemonic function of the religion of the Gilded Age, how at least some workers created alternative ways of understanding themselves, their religion, and their world. In addition, given the manner in which the churches were enlisted, directly or indirectly, to sanction the new industrial order, the religious dimension of workers' experience could not be limited to organizations that used Christian labels or to utterances clearly discernible as explicitly religious. Religion was a part of daily experience, manifested in alternative visions and in expressions of human solidarity and the burning aspirations of the human spirit. If Christian faith has to do with the wholeness of human life, if it sustains the striving for community, if it gives concrete shape to love and justice and makes irreducible the worth of the human person, then religious and Christian experience cannot be confined to "official" Christian organizations or "orthodox" religious symbols and language.

Herbert Gutman's "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age" was one of the first attempts to probe the significance of working-class interpretations of Christianity. It is particularly striking how greatly Protestant workers' understanding of a prophetic Christianity differed from the dominant religious ethos of the period and from the social gospel of middle-class Protestants. In place of a Christ who comforted the rich (the gospel of wealth) and a Christ who asked only that people be kind to one another (the social gospel), workers found a Christ who was, in the words of *Railway Times*, "an agitator such as the world has never seen before nor since . . . despised and finally murdered to appease the wrath of the ruling class of His time." In this reading, common among members of the Knights of Labor and the Christian Labor Union, Moses and Aaron became union organizers, and Peter, James, and John were three common sailors. The lot of working-class people was thought to be analogous to the captivity of Hebrew slaves, and their struggle for freedom, another Exodus. Andrew Carnegie and especially Henry Clay Frick were seen as modern-day pharaohs. Such readings of Scripture, such renderings of the tradition, even if confined to a minority, are important. C. Vann Woodward once insisted that the system of racial segregation "didn't just happen; it was consciously constructed. There could have been other choices and other people made other choices. Not all of those who were subject to the dominant system were in accord with it; that is, they dissented from it." The same could be said of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism.⁴

For those who believe that the system needs change, it is extremely important to know that they have predecessors, even a tradition, with which they can identify as Christians and as Americans. To better understand the choices workers made and their contribution to the struggle for economic justice, we need to examine the socioeconomic context in which industrial expansion took place and the Catholic and Protestant assessments of that system in the setting of conflicts between labor and capital.

Workers and Industrial America

The United States, unlike Europe, did not undergo a long period of transition from feudalism to capitalism; private property and relatively open markets in land and capital were well established during the colonial era. At the end of the American Revolution, about four-fifths of the nonslave adult men were independent property owners or professionals. A century later, by contrast, only one-third of the adult working men operated independent enterprises. By then control over the instruments of production had passed to nonworkers, as the workshops of independent craftsmen were replaced by factories that depended on an adequate supply of cheap labor. The sources were the surplus population of rural areas, displaced craftsmen, and most important, European immigrants. The U.S. population rose from 31.5 million in 1860 to 63 million in 1890 to 106.4 million in 1920; during that period 29 million immigrants came to the United States. Most were members of the working class, and they concentrated in the urban industrial centers of the North and West. During the period 1870-1920, 40 percent of the working class was foreign-born. A working class of immigrants and a Catholic church of immigrants faced managers and owners who were disproportionately native-born and Protestant.⁵

Mark Twain labeled the late nineteenth century “the Gilded Age,” when material success measured one’s humanity. A Norwegian observer, Knut Hamsun, wrote in the late 1880s: “A way of life has evolved in America that turns exclusively upon . . . acquiring material goods, a fortune. Americans are so absorbed in the scramble for profit that all their faculties are devoted to it; all their interests revolve around it.” Hamsun concluded that “America’s morality is money.” The scramble seemed to pay off. By the end of the century the United States led the world in production of consumer and capital goods, thanks to government support, availability of foreign and domestic capital, technological advances in manufacturing, communications, transportation, mining, agriculture, and the apparently limitless supply of cheap labor. Andrew Carnegie summed up the triumph of this material progress: “We may safely say that no nation has ever enjoyed such universal prosperity. . . . It is probable that in many future decades the citizen is to look back upon this as the golden age of the Republic and long for a return to its conditions.”⁶

Capital’s golden age was perceived quite differently by members of the working class. In their view entrepreneurs like Carnegie had destroyed established trade unions, gained control over the production process, and reduced skilled workers to dependent wage earners. In doing so, they had also severed the relationship between work and human meaning, for the sense of dignity and self-worth of American working people had always been related to control of the productive enterprise. Farmers, independent craftsmen, and mechanics had long believed, with such American heroes as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, that wealth derived from labor; when people lost control of

their labor, the wealth created by work was easily transferred into other hands. By 1880 this principle sounded radical in the extreme. Robert Bennett, master workman of the Illinois State Assembly of the Knights of Labor, contended that what was happening to workers was the submission of labor to capital. Entrepreneurs were taking “from the toiling millions an unjust share of wealth they create, by way of watered stock on railroads, our financial system, truck stores . . . [and] the result of improved machinery, the enactment of laws (State and National) in favor of corporations, and laying burdens grievous to be borne by the industrial people.”⁷

To justify this transfer of wealth, Carnegie and other celebrants of progress had to overcome the labor theory of value. They also had to ignore the economic depressions of 1873-1878, 1883-1885, and 1893-1897 and overlook the living and working conditions of American workers. Because of long hours and the structure of the workplace, the United States had one of the world’s highest industrial accident rates. Between 1880 and 1900 over 35,000 workers were killed annually; an additional 536,000 were injured in the same period. Statistics compiled by state bureaus of labor regularly pointed to unhealthy housing, inadequate diet, and dangerous work environments. In 1884, for example, an Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics report described the living conditions of a Polish upholsterer and his family, living in Chicago, whose total income for the year was \$360:

Family numbers 4—parents and two children, two boys, aged five and nine years, and one of them attends school. They rent a house containing 3 rooms for \$5 per month, which is dirty and in an unhealthy location, and consequently had considerable sickness during the past year. The children pick up coal on railway track, and while doing so, one of them was run over by the cars, thereby losing a leg. He now blacks boots and sells newspapers, but his earnings are not taken into consideration. Father carries no life insurance, and does not belong to a trade union.

In the 1880s almost 40 percent of working-class families lived in poverty, earning less than the five hundred dollars a year necessary to provide a family of five with such basic necessities as food and housing. One out of four of these poor families lived in utter destitution, often surviving by scavenging, begging, and stealing. About 45 percent of the working class lived just above the poverty line, ever fearful of sickness, accidents, unemployment, and death. Only about 15 percent of the American working class enjoyed relative security, and even this group faced the constant threat of downward mobility.⁸

Whatever Carnegie may have believed, American workers, immigrant or native-born, did not think that the contrast between poverty and progress was inevitable or just; they agreed with Knights of Labor leaders such as Robert Bennett that owners were robbing workers of the fruits of their labor. The re-

sponse of workers took a variety of forms ranging from political protest through the organization of local and national unions to protracted and often bitter strikes. The list of major strikes for the period extends from the Great Railroad Strikes of 1877 to the Homestead, Pullman, and Coeur d'Alene strikes of the 1890s. Against these actions employers used strikebreakers, private armies (which labor editor John Swinton described as "kept for the service of such corporations or capitalists as may hire [them] . . . for the suppression of such strikes as may be stirred by the turning of monopoly screws"), state militias, and a court system that had, in Gerald Eggert's words, a "predilection for the corporate side."⁹

By the turn of the twentieth century mass production had become the norm in manufacturing, and entrepreneurs like Carnegie had given way to the more impersonal corporations. By 1929 consolidation made the corporation the single most characteristic feature of the American economy. The end result was the creation of a corporate state, which integrated the corporation and the government in a working alliance. Cultural institutions provided the necessary legitimation to blunt challenges from the Left, especially socialism, through modest reforms aimed at easing discontent without changing the distribution of wealth and power. In addition, the growth of the corporate state served the major function of assuring market and financial stability by government intervention.¹⁰

Religion in the Gilded Age

In the Gilded Age religion, Protestant or Catholic, was a powerful force in American life, shaping fundamental individual and social values, judgments about right and wrong, and perceptions of industrial America. The religious press, pulpits, and self-proclaimed friends and foes of labor conveyed mixed signals to working-class people about the role religion should play in daily life. Legitimizers of the status quo assumed that religious institutions and their representatives believed in the benefits of material progress as God-given as the gulf that divided owners from workers. Others, more sympathetic to the plight of working-class people, attempted to come to terms with the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and rapid social change by urging Christians to be charitable and responsible. Neither group had much to offer angry spokespersons for laborers, who had their doubts about religious proposals and pious platitudes. Most labor leaders thought the Protestant churches ignored the needs of the working class. Joseph Buchanan, Socialist, labor editor, and leader in the Knights of Labor strike against Jay Gould's railroad system during the 1880s, contended that "with few exceptions the pulpit took no interest in the labor movement except to lecture it and abuse it." Buchanan's observation was supported by workers' answers to questionnaires collected by the Mas-

sachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor. A late nineteenth-century study by H. Francis Power for the *American Journal of Sociology* concluded that Protestant ministers and the churches in general had little interest in the problems facing working people. One anonymous worker commented to Power: “The Church has, as an organized body, no sympathy with the masses. It is a sort of fashionable club where the rich are entertained and amused, and where most of the ministers are muzzled by their masters and dare not preach the gospel of the carpenter of Nazareth. The unjust and inequitable manner in which the commercial class, which sustains and maintains the churches for its own selfish purposes, has treated them, causes the laboring men to have nothing to do with the churches.”¹¹

What workers observed was the easy identification religious leaders too often made between Christianity and the status quo. Protestants, in particular, celebrated laissez-faire capitalism as the natural order ordained by God; many gave a theological coating to Social Darwinism as the unfolding of God’s grace in the world. The result was the sanctification of private property and belief in the inevitability of competition and, says Yehoshua Arieli, in the “fixed relation between godliness . . . and successes and between vice and poverty.” The bishops of the Methodist Episcopal church, the largest and wealthiest Protestant denomination in the country, preached responsibility to the rich and patience to the poor. Protestant luminaries such as Henry Ward Beecher assessed America’s progress as a nation in terms of its material prosperity; he tied progress to riches and took the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God’s favor and as a positive influence that made “the community more refined, and the whole land more civilized.” Russell Conwell, Baptist minister, popular lecturer, and founder of the Philadelphia Temple, later Temple University, blatantly championed the connection between wealth and Christianity in “Acres of Diamonds,” a lecture he delivered over six thousand times. Conwell told his audience it was their “duty to get rich,” indeed, “your Christian and godly duty to do so.” Protestant leaders gave their blessings to other movements that accompanied material progress, from modern science and technology to the belief that the market was the measure by which justice was to be achieved in social relations. Many Protestants, in their role as legitimators of industrial capitalism, simply overlooked what Jackson Lears calls the “darker side” of modernity, excusing or evading the pain, conflict, violence, and social dislocation of industrial America.¹²

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, new advocates of a public Protestantism appeared, more alert than the previous generation to the social demands of the Christian tradition. The social gospel movement, as it came to be known, arose among middle-class Protestants, largely but not exclusively clergy. Gradually its participants developed a new theological framework from their experience with the contradictions of capitalism—the conflicts between

labor and capital and the gulf between wealth and poverty. As pastors, social workers, and church extension workers, these men and women wanted to make the church more responsive to the needs of workers and immigrants. Yet, with few exceptions, they remained wedded to basic elements of industrial capitalism and modern culture. The social gospel movement drew upon liberal theology, whose principal tenet was progress, interpreted as the ongoing development of the Kingdom of God in history. In addition, liberal social gospel leaders believed that the teachings of Jesus provided the criteria for judging the individual and society, and therefore they often considered such abstract concepts as cooperation, mutuality, service, personality, and sentimental love to be adequate guides in the formulation of economic and social policy. In Charles Sheldon's enormously popular novel *In His Steps*, for example, the pastor, a disciple of the social gospel, asks his congregation to consider the challenges the life of Jesus presents to all those who deem themselves his followers. What would it mean, he asks, to shape one's conduct on the question "What would Jesus do?" Sheldon and other liberals saw the human person as primarily moral and rational, and thus susceptible to moral suasion. They believed not necessarily that human beings are perfectible but that human nature is sufficiently plastic to allow for the creation of a new social order through individual conversion and benevolent action. The result of integrating the experience of suffering and social conflict with a liberal theology was an emphasis on the social dimensions of sin and on the possibility of building the Kingdom of God through cooperation and love.¹³

At heart, the social gospel was an attempt to Christianize society by reshaping social attitudes and institutions. Those who preached the social gospel sought to prick the conscience of a complacent public by speaking on behalf of those who bore the burden of unrestrained capitalism, but they remained out of touch with working-class life and certainly with working-class readings of Christianity. Advocates for a social gospel, like so many progressives, at times appeared radical as compared to apologists for the status quo, but their principle constituency remained the middle class, and their viewpoint reflected their identification with that class. Believing themselves to be neutrals in the struggle between labor and capital, they thought they could judge the conflicts of their time impartially. They were fearful of taking sides, lest the church, in the words of Shailer Mathews, "be identified with one social class and so lose its grip upon all others."¹⁴

What they offered was less an analysis of capitalism or a sociopolitical means of transforming the existing system than exhortations to do good. The "father" of the social gospel movement, Washington Gladden, argued that if the capitalists would measure both profits and wages by the Golden Rule, "instant peace" would result. Josiah Strong also located the primary cause of societal ills in selfishness. The institutional expression of the social gospel, the Fed-

eral Council of Churches, suggested that conflicts between industry and labor could be solved through cooperation. In seeking support for such cooperation, the council extolled “the doctrine of stewardship,” convinced that “if only the churches in the process of education and moral suasion get owners to hold their property as stewards of God, our industrial problems would be solved.” Even Walter Rauschenbusch, the most articulate and representative leader of the social gospel movement, could not escape its moralistic cast. Rauschenbusch had a basic faith in the power of ideas; he believed that the hope for human progress originated in religion, which he identified with moral forces, not with politics or education. In very Ritschlian terms he stressed that “the religious idea alone had power to transform.” To workers Rauschenbusch offered “Christian, human sympathy” as a fundamental “remedy” to their problems. Such sympathy, joined with a conversion of the wealthy and powerful, would bring about the needed changes in the socioeconomic order. Henry F. May concluded that the “Social Gospel of the American nineteenth century . . . did not grow out of actual suffering but rather out of moral and intellectual dissatisfaction with the sufferings of others. It originated not with the ‘disinherited’ but rather with the educated and pious middle class. It grew through argument not through agitation; it pleaded for conversion, not revolt or withdrawal.”¹⁵

Middle-class Protestants, even the best intentioned, remained outside the working class, unlike Catholics, who made up a heavy proportion of America’s ethnically diverse workers. The institutional response of the Catholic church to the needs of working people was filtered through a maze of varying problems. For one thing, the demands of contending ethnic groups threatened to fragment the church. In addition, the church had to deal with nativists who perceived the post-Civil War influx of Catholic immigrants as undermining the Protestant “character” of America. As the nineteenth-century Methodist historian Daniel Dorchester put it, “The Roman Catholic Church is inimical to the best progress of society, and in direct antagonism to the historical religion of the nation—the religion of the Holy Scriptures.” Finally, there was Rome’s fear of secret societies and socialism. The European church associated secret societies with anti-Catholic groups such as the Masons. In the United States, secrecy and secret initiation rituals were part of workers’ fraternal and mutual aid organizations such as the Odd Fellows, the Knights Templar, the Ancient Order of United Workmen, and the Sovereigns of Industry as well as early trade unions including the Knights of Saint Crispin and the Knights of Labor. The issue of secret societies came to a head when the Vatican condemned the Knights of Labor in Canada in 1884. Cardinal James Gibbons, fearing the possible alienation of the working class from the church and sensitive to the reaction of nativists, supported the Knights of Labor and forestalled condemnation in the United States. Despite their defense of the Knights of Labor, the hierarchy remained fearful of radicalism as antithetical to Christian life and dangerous for the still-insecure U.S. church. Papal teachings, particularly Leo XIII’s *Rerum*

Novurum, affirmed the rights of working people, including the right to a living wage, but at the same time sanctified private property. Deep hostility to socialism and fear of governmental intervention against the church, in the words of David O'Brien, "set a framework beyond which reformers were forbidden to go."¹⁶

As one analyzes the strategy bishops employed to deal with the pressing conflicts between labor and capital, Joseph M. McShane's characterization of "masterly inactivity" seems most apt. Poverty was perceived not as a structural problem but as related to personal vices and attitudes. Consequently, the response of the church was to support temperance and the charitable works of various ethnic organizations and religious orders. One does not find among the bishops the uncritical Protestant celebration of wealth and privilege, but neither does one find a clear understanding of labor's problems. Cardinal Gibbons, often cast as a "friend" of labor, considered strikes a "questionable remedy" to the problems facing working-class people. Instead, he advised hard work, sobriety, self-denial, godliness, and contentment with "your station in life." Similarly, while Archbishop John Ireland took Leo XIII's encyclical as evidence that the church was the champion of working people, he unquestioningly accepted the myth of rags to riches and was sure that capital accumulation was socially beneficial. The "toiler," he thought, realizes that "he lives in a land of opportunities, where he may be rich to-morrow, and he is glad to defend his right to possible future possessions, by defending to-day the rights of other men to their possessions."¹⁷

Moving from the statements of the hierarchy to the role the church actually played in the lives of working-class Catholics presents a multidimensional picture. Richard T. Ely, the social gospel economist, observed that the average Catholic priest, as compared to his Protestant counterpart, had a better grasp of the problems facing workers. But that understanding did not automatically mean that priests supported the workers' cause. Victor Greene's study of the Slavic community in the anthracite coal regions of Pennsylvania points to the pivotal role of the church in helping uprooted peasants deal with the harsh realities of the coal-mining industry. Some priests supported the union-organizing efforts of Slavic workers; others saw unions as disruptive of law and order. In other parts of the country, from Rutland, Vermont, to DeSoto, Missouri, priests were occasionally active supporters and leaders of the Knights of Labor.¹⁸

Community studies by labor historians find the role of the church in the lives of working-class Catholics at best problematic. Stephan Thernstrom's analysis of Newburyport, Massachusetts, stresses how a largely Irish working-class Catholic population contributed to the growth of both church property and Catholic voluntary organizations. While working-class people were responsible [or developing the prestige the church acquired over the course of the late nineteenth century, effective control of the church remained in the hands of a business elite, supported by the clergy, who espoused the dominant ideol-

ogy of industry and success. Hundreds of miles away, in Albany, New York, Irish workers also contributed to the growth and development of the Catholic church. Church-sponsored voluntary cultural and social organizations forged a strong common Catholic identity. Nevertheless, parish life was still shaped by a business elite, which, like its Newburyport counterpart, was committed to the values of hard work, self-restraint, private property, and the overall soundness of the capitalist social order. Finally, John T. Cumbler, in his study of Lynn, Massachusetts, concludes that the church of Lynn did not really understand the problems facing its Irish working-class constituency. By continually taking a conservative stance on labor and social issues, the church failed to provide a countervailing institutional force. It refused to support union activities or any form of political or social action not under church sponsorship. It “opposed . . . all principles of subversive human society whether they be known as liberalism, socialism, anarchism, or by any other term.”¹⁹

Further evidence of Catholic ambivalence and caution can be found in the work of Catholic journalists. During the 1870s, for example, Patrick Ford, editor of the *Irish World*, supported trade unions and strikes as means of resisting “combined Capital” and obtaining justice, and he regularly condemned a class system based on the perpetuation of human misery and exploitation. Ford later modified his views; in the late 1880s and 1890s he struggled as hard to combat radical ideas among Irish workers as he had earlier done to make them acceptable. As the *Irish World* became increasingly conservative, the Boston *Pilot*, under the editorship of John Boyle O’Reilly, became the leading advocate for labor. Historian Aaron Abell contends that the *Pilot* “devoted more attention . . . to the working-class agitation than did any other journal not published under labor auspices.” O’Reilly denounced all forms of injustice that debased human beings, made in the image of God, but unlike Ford in his radical phase, O’Reilly opposed the use of strikes to solve labor’s problems and argued instead for arbitration. O’Reilly was a romantic idealist who hoped for the resolution of societal problems by the application of “spiritual values of generosity, kindness, truth, and sacrifice.”²⁰

What gained the *Pilot* its notoriety were not so much O’Reilly’s editorials as the weekly commentaries of the paper’s anonymous labor correspondent, “Phineas.” Here, Aaron Abell notes, was one of the few mainstream Christian commentators to grasp the central idea that labor’s hopes for the future lay in its own hands. Only if workers organized themselves, instead of relying on the “better classes,” could they create labor organizations such as the Knights of Labor to give “courage and confidence to the hitherto hopeless masses” and thus regain their lost sense of dignity and worth. The Catholic *Quincy Monitor* went beyond Phineas in exposing the political and economic sources of labor’s problems. One editorial, “Workingman’s Friends,” noted with feigned amazement that during election years textile manufactures and coal and iron

“kings,” who “receive the wages of treason from Capitalists,” had the “unblushing effrontery” to pose as the friends of working people. It seemed to the *Quincy Monitor* the height of irony that those who most loudly proclaimed their sympathy for the problems facing working-class people were the same ones most responsible for their misery and exploitation. Workers should use their hard-gained political experience to discern the difference between election pledges and political practice and to separate the demagogue from the statesman.²¹

While some Catholic journalists and newspapers wrote about the needs of working people, Humphrey Desmond, editor of Milwaukee’s *Catholic Citizen*, addressed the responsibility of the church to deal with the conflict between labor and capital. Desmond argued for a more active church role, which should begin with less concern for upholding the status quo and more for supporting labor by denouncing monopolies, poor working conditions, and less than living wages. Desmond believed that the key to social justice was not so much the positions of the hierarchy as the actions of the laity. Critical of any attempt to create Catholic political parties or trade unions, he agreed with Phineas and the Catholic *Quincy Monitor* the emancipation of workers would come not from above but from below. Rejecting the bishops’ emphasis on charity, Desmond contended that workers could deal more effectively with the problems of poverty by organizing trade unions. The church had to realize, Desmond maintained, that “labor may find its own Moses, that useful, practical expedients are apt to come, not from men trained in seminaries, but from men close to the working conditions.” Phineas, Desmond and the *Quincy Monitor* at least addressed the necessity of sociopolitical change and placed their faith in working people’s abilities to solve their own problems through their own organizations. They were isolated voices in the Catholic church, however, which remained preoccupied with its own pastoral problems. Most Catholic journalists, like the bishops, through they readily acknowledged the problems confronting working-class people, were reluctant to give their unqualified support to trade unions.²²

The Christian Labor Union

Defenders, apologists, and critics of industrial capitalism more often than not wrote, lectured, preached, and argued far removed from the day-to-day realities facing American workers. Even those most attentive to the problems of a rapidly changing social order, such as proponents of a social gospel, wanted to reform the existing system, not transform it. While they spoke out against the ravages of unrestrained individualism and the excesses of wealth and power, they refused to take sides. Their reliance on moral suasion and an abstract ide-

alism did little to meet the pressing needs of working people or provide them with tools for understanding the world around them. However, there were a few exceptions.

James Dombrowski's study of the Christian Labor Union concludes that it was "one of the earliest efforts to bring religion into the class struggle on the side of the workers." The union was founded in Boston in 1872 by a group of wage-working laypersons and led by Henry T. Delano, a Congregationalist ship carpenter, Edward H. Rogers, a Methodist ship joiner, and Jesse H. Jones, a Congregational minister. The CLU, through its two short-lived publications, *Equity* (1874-1875) and *The Labor-Balance* (1877-1879), supported both the Boston Eight-Hour League and the Socialist Labor Party, and according to the noted labor reformer George E. McNeill, "commanded the respect of labor organizations." What distinguished the CLU was its accountability to working-class people and its radical interpretation of the Christian tradition. Its goals were best summed up by a cabinetmaker interviewed by the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor in the late 1870s: "Abolition of the present unjust political and social conditions. Discontinuance of all class rule and privilege. Abolition of the workingman's dependence upon the capitalist, by the introduction of co-operative labor in the place of the wage system, so that every laborer will get the full value of his work." The CLU's expressions of accountability and solidarity with workers were deeply rooted in its reading of Scripture. In ways analogous to the experience of present-day Christian-based communities, the CLU maintained that the Bible was centrally concerned with the destructiveness of poverty, issues of land tenure, labor, usury, and profit. They called the Bible "the chief Labor Reform book of the world." By contrast, they perceived the existing churches as engrossed in programs—Sunday schools, revivals, or temperance and missionary societies—that had little to do with either the needs of working-class people or Scripture. Churches seemed to be more preoccupied with singing the praises of mammon, accompanied by a disembodied spirituality, than with establishing God's Kingdom of justice on behalf of the poor and marginalized.²³

The contribution of the Christian Labor Union to the cause of working people and to our understanding of economic justice is revealed in the lives of those most responsible for developing its analysis of the conflict between labor and capital: Jesse H. Jones, Edward H. Rogers, and T. Wharton Collens. Historians Henry E. May and C. Howard Hopkins have characterized them as neglected prophets, the first of a series of reformers who blazed the unpopular path that other left-wing Christian social movements would follow.²⁴

When the CLU was founded, Jesse Henry Jones was pastor of the Congregational church in Rockland, Massachusetts. Born in 1836 of well-established New England parents, Jones decided to follow in his father's footsteps as a Congregational minister. After graduating from Harvard College, he entered Andover Theological Seminary. Although Jones was critical of Calvinist ortho-

doxy, he never accepted the liberal Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer, and he had reservations about those aspects of biblical criticism which he believed lessened fidelity to the demands of Scripture on individual and corporate behavior. During the Civil War, he served first as a chaplain and later as captain of an infantry company. Like other labor reformers, Jones supported the wartime alliance workers had made with Radical Republicans, who were allied with the manufacturing elites of the North. Jones believed the alliance called for a reconstruction of the North as well as the South. He reminded the Radicals that, whereas workers had sided with them in their struggle against slavery, they would resist the “masters of wealth” just as strongly as abolitionists had fought the slave masters.²⁵

After the war Jones served a number of pastorates in New York and Massachusetts. He was active in the Boston Eight-Hour League, served the working-class constituency of North Abington in the Massachusetts legislature, and edited the Christian Labor Union’s publications. Acknowledging that the “power of press is proverbial,” he contended that the New England labor movement needed a paper not afraid of “speaking the plainest truth” from a Christian standpoint on issues of concern to working people. It was not the function of the press to be the instrument of reform, Jones argued, for that could only be accomplished face-to-face. Instead, the press should communicate facts, both past and present, and describe the relationship between those facts and the day-to-day realities of life. Labor reformers such as George McNeill, Ira Steward, E. M. Chamberlain, and George Gunton praised the CLU publications, but the response of the Christian community was limited, according to Jones: “Except for . . . a letter from a negro minister in Arkansas, there has never come from a Christian brother one word of cheer.” Undaunted, Jones worked for the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor and in 1884 helped establish the first local of the Knights of Labor in North Abington. He continued to write for a number of Massachusetts publications, among them the *Labor Standard* of Fall River, and he was active until his death in 1904 in the women’s suffrage, labor, and temperance movements.²⁶

May contends that Jones is best understood as a “come-outer,” uncomfortable with official Protestantism. Clearly he was indeed uncomfortable with the established church, but there was more to his life than an inability to accept the status quo. In refusing to grant legitimacy to the supposed virtues of the Gilded Age, he was not unlike other, better-known advocates of the social gospel, but he went beyond them in his radical reading of the Christian tradition and his identification with the hopes and aspirations of working-class people. Jones contended that it was necessary to transform the productive process so that working people could have control over both the means of production and the fruits of their labor. He believed the existing system was an “order of despotism, whose end is *death* of person and *people*, and that end for our land is now hastening on *apace*. *Life* must be found, and put in the place of death.

To find *the* life, and put it in the place of *the* death; and develop there from a new order, which shall be the order of freedom and blessedness of human toil, instead of despotism and drudgery. . . . rather than the making of money, this is the Labor problem.”²⁷

Edward Henry Rogers was born in 1824 in Medford, Massachusetts, the son of a ship carpenter who worked his way from foreman to owner of a South Boston shipyard, then lost it during the depression of 1837. Rogers’s religious upbringing, like Jesse Jones’s, was Congregational, but at the age of sixteen, when he sought membership in the Winthrop Congregational Church in Charlestown, his critical attitude toward Calvinist orthodoxy was found unacceptable. In addition, he discovered that “the church was very unsocial” and that “poor people were not wanted” by the merchants and mill owners who controlled it. He later joined the Methodist church and in its class meetings gained the self-confidence to enter the public arena. Upon leaving school he worked first as a dry goods clerk and then, like his father and brothers, entered the shipbuilding trade. At the outbreak of the Civil War, he became a ship joiner in the Charlestown navy yard, then served briefly with the Massachusetts volunteers. Returning to the navy yard, he became increasingly radicalized by his association with ship caulkers and carpenters, who had a history of strikes calling for a shorter working day. He later recalled that they taught him the importance of working-class organization. One of his coworkers was Henry Delano, a ship carpenter and deacon of the First Congregational Church of Charlestown. Delano’s developing class consciousness and radical appropriation of the Christian tradition transformed Rogers’s previously vague and ill-defined inclinations toward social reform into convictions about working-class solidarity and the closed shop. Rogers became convinced that one of the chief obstacles to Christian support of working people was individualism, which left the church with “no authority over the social question.” The end result was its permanent abandonment of workers and an inability to speak out against “mammon worship.”²⁸

In the fall of 1864 Rogers was elected to the state legislature. As a spokesperson for over four thousand shipbuilders Rogers served on an investigative committee on the apprentice system and the hours of labor. Rogers insisted that “laboring men had as much right to develop and expand [their] mental and material capabilities and surroundings as have those whom wealth has favored with its advantages.” After his experience as a state legislator, Roger continued to work for the eight-hour day, particularly targeting church people. In a lecture, “Eight Hours a Day’s Work,” before the Third Massachusetts Methodist State Convention in 1870, he stated bluntly that labor had “no industrial rights which capital is bound by statute to respect” and that the rights of workers could not be won by “moral means,” preferred by most Protestants. “Our success lies in our own hands, and depends upon the discretion [and energy [with] which we

continue to press our claim.” For his own part, Rogers joined Jones, Delano, and other workers in the Christian Labor Union, and he insisted as strongly as Jones on the necessity for labor to have its own vehicle for expressing its views since capitalists shaped public opinion by their control of the press.²⁹

In an 1876 pamphlet based on sermons given as a Methodist lay preacher, Rogers argued that Christ, like Moses, had been concerned with the material needs of common people, but the church, in its privatization and spiritualization of the Christian message, had reduced faith to individual religious experience at the expense of God’s demand for justice. Jesus’ concern for the poor was transformed into schools, temperance reform, and above all, preoccupation with the conversion of individuals. Protestantism’s obsession with the individual, particularly Martin Luther’s doctrine of justification by faith, led to a failure to take on the “strongholds of Mammon.” The end result was a “public economy . . . based on selfishness,” which “arrogantly demanded that the law of the market shall set aside the law of God.” Hence a community that was supposed to preach love and justice had allowed the “pride and vain pomp” of the business system to displace fidelity to Jesus of Nazareth. Naturally, this attitude had emptied the churches of working people. To recover its own integrity the church must once again preach love and justice, reestablish contact with working people, and spend less energy on moralizing and more on self-sacrificing action on behalf of the poor.³⁰

In the decades that followed the demise of the Christian Labor Union, Rogers continued to champion the cause of working people. With the emergence of Christian Socialism in the late 1880s and early 1890s, Rogers joined the Boston Society of Christian Socialists. Soon after, believing that it was important to belong to an organization and a church that “would be more in touch with the sentiment of the masses,” as he put it in his “Auto-biography,” Rogers withdrew from the Methodist church, of which he had been a member for forty-four years. He had come to believe that its leaders listened less to the Holy Spirit and more to the “conservative utterances of the traders and money changers in opposition to reform. Claiming to be the church of the common people it closes its press to our just complaints.” Rogers joined the Church of the Carpenter, which had evolved from an Episcopal mission, founded in 1890, to become a center for Fabian social reform in the Boston area. Until his death Rogers was an active pamphleteer on behalf of a more equitable social order. Shortly before his death, he berated a Congregational pastor in Chelsea, Massachusetts, for being inaccessible to the “distressed cry of Labor” and for reducing the poverty and pain of working-class life to complaints about intemperance. Throughout his life Rogers challenged the church to recover the very meaning of the gospel as good news for the poor. For the gospel to be in fact good news, Christians had to work for structural transformation of a capitalist economy, stand in solidarity with workers as they reestablished their dignity as human beings, and

proclaim that wealth and power must take a backseat to the meeting of basic human needs. Rogers implied that the Christian community had much to learn from working people about the nature of faith and the meaning of community.³¹

T. Wharton Collens joined the crusade for working-class people in the early 1870s when he read the published version of Rogers's address to the Methodist State Convention. Until his death in 1879, Collens corresponded with Rogers and was not only the major financial backer of the Christian Labor Union's publications but one of their more prolific contributors. Thomas Wharton Collens was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1812. After a limited education, Collens first apprenticed as a printer and later became an editor and, by the early 1830s, a lawyer. Thereafter he served as deputy clerk for the United States Circuit Court, district attorney for Orleans Parish, and judge of the City Court of New Orleans. When the Christian Labor Union was founded, he was a judge of the Seventh District Court. In his youth he was greatly influenced by the utopian socialism of Robert Dale Owen and Charles Fourier, evident in Collens's stress on models of society that were structured to serve the common good and in his attempts to explore the implications of Cooperation rather than competition as the basis of human life. Collens had come of age in antebellum America, and he would always maintain, as had labor leaders of the Jacksonian period, that the good society was based on labor as the source of all wealth.³²

Robert C. Reinders, Collens's biographer, contends that by the early 1860s, Collens had distanced himself from "youthful iconoclasm" and returned to the Catholic church. But his rediscovery of faith, far from moderating Collens's earlier concerns with social reform and "the rights of labor," grounded these convictions less in the power of reason and more, he wrote to Rogers, on what "Jesus Christ has determined shall be the form and substance of his Kingdom on Earth." In "Views of the Labor Movement," written for the *Catholic World* in 1870, Collens argued that Catholics should not close their eyes to the clamor of the poor. Existing public and private responses were insufficient; Christian responsibility was not limited to pointing out the inadequacies of the system or the pitfalls of sociopolitical answers deemed out of keeping with church teachings. Instead, Christians should heed the call of Jesus on behalf of the poor and take seriously the "real communism" of Jesus and the apostles. Collens insisted that this communism had originated in the Christian mandate that the community share its worldly goods and possessions. In addition, Christian charity was demonstrated not by service to the Christian community but by "the alleviation of the burden and pains of the poor in general."³³

Unable to win a proper hearing in the South, Collens joined forces with Jones and Rogers to support the Christian Labor Union, whose publications gave him a vehicle for communicating what he believed to be a Catholic perspective on political economy and the labor movement. Collens's Catholicism was shaped by his admiration for the Jesuit "reductions" in Paraguay, his familiarity with developing social trends among European Catholics, and his own

reading of the biblical texts. In opposition to what he regarded as the paternalism of most Catholic social commentary, Collens insisted that Christians must acknowledge workers' need to create their own political alternatives to the dominate social order. Christians could contribute to the workers' cause through a discipleship that took seriously Christ's preaching on the abandonment of wealth, self-sacrifice, voluntary poverty, and Christian community. Much of Collens's writing dealt with the establishment of decentralized Christian communities that could serve as models for a society without extremes of wealth and poverty. Such communities "produced by the poor for the poor," would illustrate what Collens labeled "proportionalism," a system of political economy in which labor was understood to be the source of wealth and the measure of exchange, so that all participate equally in the abundance labor created. Reflecting his past utopian socialism, Collens, more than Jones or Rogers, believed that the first step in establishing a juster, more equitable society was to envision alternatives to a world ruled by mammon. As Jones wrote upon Collens's death, he strove unceasingly to put before the public the "new order of ages" where "the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb."³⁴

Christian Labor Union and the Eight-Hour Movement

In the early 1870s, a member of the Massachusetts clergy, having lived among factory workers for over twenty years, concluded that the end result of industrialization was the improvement of machinery for the benefit of "the capitalist and not the laborer." Technological changes had not enhanced human lives. Instead, they had reduced men to "stooping forms and hopeless faces," and women to "dispirited, slovenly and aimless" human beings. Even children had become "the embryos of an emasculated adulthood," experiencing "the collapse" of "childish merriment" as they joined their mothers and fathers, exemplars of "overtasked, exhausted and despondent humanity-veritable mudsills of society." Employers constantly reminded workers "that Labor is dependent upon Capital. Labor must work. Capital may or may not—the presumption is very strong that it need not." In addition, the relationship between employer and employee, as established by the wage contract, implied "a certain amount of deference to . . . the ruling or managing power of the concern. . . . When workmen accept employment from such a person, they must be understood as surrendering their individual freedom to the extent which is necessary for enabling him to fulfill the responsibility of his position."³⁵

To Jones, Rogers, and Collens such unfair, undemocratic, and unrelenting dehumanization was unacceptable. They not only criticized the shortcomings of industrial America and advocated the eight-hour day but, in contrast to social gospel advocates, they argued for a reconceptualization of the nature of work and gave a religious meaning to a labor theory of value. As the captains of industry subjugated labor to capital, Jones, Rogers, and Collens proclaimed in *The Labor-Balance* that "the value of a thing is its power to make for life.

The cost of a thing is the labor, or lapse of life, which goes to produce it. The price of a thing ought to be its labor cost.” Jones and Collens, in particular, approached the issue of work as part of a still only half-developed theology of life that set Christianity over and against the forces and idols of death and in opposition to the gods of capitalism, such as power and wealth, through which the capitalist mode of production structured work. It was an indication of how little value a capitalist society placed on the lives of working-class people, Collens stressed, that capitalism as a system necessitated the death of workers at an early age. He contrasted the life expectancies of theologians, teachers, doctors, lawyers, and merchants to those of miners, glass workers, copper workers, and above all, working-class children. Instead of serving “to preserve life, renew life, save life,” work under capitalism shortened life, demeaned life, and denied workers the very right to life itself.³⁶

Since one of the signs of the Kingdom is the fullness of life in which human beings can enjoy the fruits of their labor, the Christian Labor Union supported the battle for the eight-hour day. As Jones put it, when “the real religion of Jesus prevails, and his real spirit rules among men, and when all work is done to establish the kingdom of God on the earth, then, in no place where men work in large companies, shut in from the sky, will they work more than eight hours a day.” The push for a shorter workday began in Massachusetts among Boston carpenters, who struck for the ten-hour day in 1825. Seven years later, in 1832, the ship carpenters and caulkers of Boston and Charlestown challenged the traditional sunup-to-sundown working day, and the house carpenters, masons, painters, daters, and other artisans joined them. In May, 1835, Boston ship carpenters, masons, and stonecutters struck again for the ten-hour day, and in a meeting held at Julien Hall, they charged that “Capital . . . is endeavoring to crush labor, the only source of wealth.” They demanded their “Natural Right to dispose of our time in such quantities as we deem and believe to be the most conducive to our own happiness.” By July they were supported by other workers, who marched with them through wealthy sections of Boston singing the “Marseillaise.” The strikes of Boston workers on behalf of the ten-hour day spread in the 1840s to women textile workers in towns such as Lowell, where women operatives were among the leaders of the ten-hour movement through the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association. From the 1850s until the outbreak of the Civil War the ten-hour movement fell into the hands of middle-class reformers, who were more concerned about their own political agendas than responding to the needs of working people, but the end of the Civil War witnessed a renewed attempt on the part of workers themselves to obtain shorter working hours.³⁷

Karl Marx observed that “the first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours’ agitation, that ran from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.” In New England the Grand Eight-Hour League of Massachusetts and its successor, the Boston Eight-Hour League, were founded by Ira Steward and

George McNeill. Born in 1831, Steward was a self-educated machinist who was dismissed from his job for advocating the eight-hour day. Like Jones, Steward was deeply indebted to Radical Republican principles and the antislavery movement. Believing that the struggle for equality did not end with the Civil War, he connected freedom for African-American people to freedom for wage laborers. For Steward “the *idea* of eight hours isn’t eight hours; it is *less poverty!* Eight hours is never an *IDEA* or a panacea, but as a *first measure*.” This first step would focus the attention of workers on the exploitative nature of the capitalist system, Steward said, in which the wages workers received were never equal to the wealth they produced, for if workers were truly paid what they produced, they would be as wealthy as the Astors and Belmonts of the world. The call for an eight-hour day was also a call for working-class solidarity, part of the drive to end the system that pitted overworked and underpaid workers against one another by maintaining a reservoir of cheap labor in the form of the unemployed. Thus the fight for a shorter workday was in reality nothing less than a demand for a “share of what we produce.” Steward reasoned further that an eight-hour day would provide time and leisure in which working people could reclaim a sense of pride in themselves and their accomplishments, could educate themselves and study their common political and social interests. He also reminded capitalists that an increase in wages would permit an increase in production, for workers would have enough income to buy the commodities merchants and manufacturers were so eager to sell. The goal of the eight-hour day was to consign capitalists to the dustbin of history, along with “kings and royalties of the past,” by putting back into the hands of workers “the wealth of the world,” which they produced, by splitting the world not into workers and owners but into producers and consumers who divided the profits of capital between them.³⁸

Like Steward, George E. McNeill, cofounder of the Boston Eight-Hour League, was an ardent abolitionist and labor reformer. Born in 1837 in Amesbury, Massachusetts, he began working in the Amesbury woolen mills at the age of fifteen; later he became a shoemaker and then a printer in Boston. McNeill was, according to Kenneth Fones-Wolf, New England’s most renowned labor agitator, and his organizational skills greatly aided the eight-hour movement and influenced Steward’s analysis of the eight-hour cause. McNeill underscored the effects of “the physical and moral degradation of over-work” on working people and stressed that the reduction in hours would not only allow workers to regain their dignity and renew the human spirit but also create work for the unemployed. It was, he wrote, a “demand for a better distribution of work, as well as a demand for an increase of value on each hour’s service.”³⁹

In his lectures for the Boston Eight-Hour League, Edward Rogers used both McNeill’s and Steward’s perspectives. Reducing the hours of labor would address the problem of unemployment and would permit workers to meet their material needs and develop their creative faculties. But the only remedy, Rogers