

Introduction

Silver miners in Utah's Cache Valley, roughly eighty miles north of Salt Lake City, in 1871, became the first group of noncraftsmen in the territory to organize. The *Salt Lake Tribune* sent a correspondent to ask them why. One of the miners looked at the reporter and said that he and his fellow workers wanted "to be governed only by laws of their own making."¹ This man meant that these laborers, based on their shared disgust with workplace conditions, desired to reconstruct industrial and social relations.

Over the next four decades, Rocky Mountain workers would write and speak of living by "their law" or "the law" in reference to workplace codes, union rules, contract stipulations, municipal ordinances, state statutes, federal laws, and constitutional amendments. For instance, a foreman at the *Rocky Mountain News*, in 1884, refused to pay a printer for the illustrations that he made. The foreman claimed the drawings belonged to the paper, but at their May 7 meeting members of the Denver Typographical Union (DTU) decided to "state the law" of their organization regarding artwork. Illustrations belonged to the worker who drew them according to the union's contract with the paper.²

Two years later a Butte laborer argued that "working men must learn to use the ballot in such a way" to secure "*just and pure law*."³ A Denver unionist, in 1899, provided a sense of what "just and pure law" meant. In a letter to a labor magazine he proclaimed that the city's Holden smelter

exemplified employers' "disregard for human life." When he and his fellow workers ate their lunches they had to "inhale lead dust and smoke instead of air." Such conditions, he argued, "can only exist in our republic" when "a law" that protects the health of workers "does not." "In this respect," he continued, "the people choose to make it comfortable for the robbers [employers] by granting them unlimited privileges."⁴

These differences in the use of "law" did not indicate a lack of shared meaning, but instead suggested that Rocky Mountain workers wanted their sense of justice operating on multiple levels: in customs, written codes, and statutes. Their conceptions of fairness originated with their visceral reactions to industrial realities. Collective anger fed their enthusiasm to transform social relations. They were outraged, for example, at watching co-workers have their fingertips cut off as they tried to link railroad cars; at witnessing friends die while attempting to turn a brake on the top of a moving train; at going home after ten or twelve hours of toil to find little food; at lacking enough money to afford basic necessities; at growing tired of draconian work rules; and at believing that these routine experiences occurred because legislators granted business owners and corporate managers near absolute authority over workplaces and markets.

The passionate rhetoric of the region's railroad laborers and their supporters elucidates this point. Officials at the Colorado Bureau of Labor Statistics (CBLs), an organization created to provide data on the state's industrial conditions, became increasingly troubled with what these workers faced, both nationally and in Colorado. They proclaimed: "Twenty thousand able-bodied men are annually sacrificed upon the railroad altar." CBLs investigators therefore argued in 1890 for states to pass liability measures "to correct this inhuman and monstrous wrong." These public employees found that switchmen and brakemen encountered the greatest risks for injury because they had to couple and uncouple cars, or climb to the top of moving trains to turn the brake, respectively. Air brakes existed, but owners kept their old cars running as long as possible. From June 1889 to June 1890, outdated equipment contributed to the deaths of forty-five brakemen in Colorado. During the full two years of the state investigation, 1889 and 1890, 9 percent of all brakemen and switchmen employed in Colorado (158 of 1,756) fell from trains. Some were drunk and some were simply tired from working long hours. The CBLs commissioners advised that workers adopt temperance as a habit and called upon the state legislature to pass an eight-hour-day law. For the most part, their recommendations focused on pressuring employers to

create safe workplaces by enacting liability laws. In "this age of progress," the study concluded, such "deplorable" injuries and deaths had to cease. These "are young men" and instead of having "a nation of stalwart, hard, robust men, we are raising an army of cripples."⁵

Likewise, William John Pinkerton, who worked for the Union Pacific Railroad and lived in Montana and Wyoming, among many other places, used his autobiography to call for safety legislation. Rather than reminisce about his triumphs as a labor leader or wax nostalgic over the courage he displayed during armed conflicts with company guards and state militiamen, he wrote of the realities of railroad work. "I am a switchman," he declared, "and as such am now across the dead-line. I am an old man, in the eyes of the medical examiner and my employers, and must soon give way to new timber." Employers, according to Pinkerton, fired railroad workers when they turned thirty-eight because actuary tables suggested that trips to the company hospital increased for laborers at that age. Pinkerton knew that his "personal record" stood against him because it "shows that I am thirty-seven." He wanted the public to know that although the railroad companies had relief plans and ran hospitals, owners did not pay for these services. Workers did through monthly deductions from their wages. By dismissing anyone aged thirty-eight and older, owners rarely had to pay on claims and thus made money. As he put it, "the veteran railroad man, with the tip of a finger missing since he made a coupling in the dark one winter night, is thrown on the rubbish-heap undone by his experience." In "calling for immediate legislation," an employer liability law, Pinkerton added his voice to all the others who advocated this life-saving reform.⁶

By acknowledging the constant bloodshed and pain that railroad laborers witnessed and felt by simply going to work each day, we realize that workers' political awareness did not simply ebb and flow between strikes and other moments of conflict. For these laborers, justice required the ability to obtain the power to alleviate danger. Labor leaders and rank-and-file political activists sought to turn the shared anger and revulsion over the events of everyday life into a series of unified actions that would provide all workers with the political power necessary to claim workplace rights, to influence labor-market variables, and to enjoy greater material comforts and more leisure time.

The Quest for "Just and Pure Law" contends that through their search for greater rights, Rocky Mountain unionists forged a social-democratic culture and captured enough political authority to turn the principles of that

culture into law. As a result, these workers played a central role in reshaping American economic and social relations. We can see the development of this culture by looking at the acts of solidarity and the struggles that took place in the region's factories, mines, union halls, streets, neighborhoods, saloons, stores, courthouses, city halls, and state legislatures. These were the places where workers formulated their notions of justice and battled to make those conceptions a reality. By looking at voting patterns, legislative aims, and unionists' ability to implement pro-labor laws, we can measure their success. Ultimately, it becomes apparent that politics were an aspect of workers' everyday lives.

In general, nations that embraced social democracy enacted measures that privileged society over markets. Lawmakers committed to social-democratic ends implemented statutes that resulted in a more equitable distribution of wealth, provided social insurance, and favored policies that reduced unemployment over arrangements that lowered inflation. Typically, social democracy is considered an ideology that emerged from the attempts by European labor and socialist parties to update Marx's ideas in the context of the political and economic realities of the approaching twentieth century.⁷

In the late 1890s, German Social Democratic Party activist Eduard Bernstein went from being the leading voice of orthodox Marxism in the industrialized world to the founder of what some have called revisionism, but what he referred to as evolutionary socialism. By then, most European Marxists argued that capitalist societies would face mounting economic crises. Based on the poverty and oppression that they would incur during these market collapses, workers, Marxists posited, would eventually unify, revolt, and replace capitalism with socialism. Marx and his followers considered working-class revolutions inevitable because they saw them as necessities for the evolution of civilization. By 1898, Bernstein questioned these assumptions.

Specifically, Bernstein challenged the belief that socialism was certain to follow capitalism. He argued that although unregulated markets thrust thousands of people into new levels of poverty and forced nations into economic catastrophes, those periods of tumult were alleviated by cartels, credit systems, and better modes of communication. Furthermore, the liberal state, which most orthodox Marxists considered a tool of the elite, proved willing to mitigate the worst social ills by offering welfare programs. Socialists, Bernstein contended, should not try to advance the cause of socialism by claiming it as some type of natural law, but by presenting it as the most moral and reasonable choice to make for those living

in a modern, urban, industrial society. This line of thinking led Bernstein to argue that a working-class revolution was not necessary. Instead of encouraging workers to act collectively based on their shared experiences of alienation from their labor and exploitation by their bosses, evolutionary socialists called for the extension of workers' political rights. By gaining political power, laborers could bring about socialism through piecemeal reforms.

Orthodox Marxists charged Bernstein with using the language of socialism to advocate liberal ends. He, and those who supported his position, countered that critique by arguing that perceptions and political structures mattered. Even if workers could successfully carry out a revolution, evolutionary socialists reasoned, they still had to create a functioning government that had the support of the conquered bourgeoisie. If, however, socialists united, won greater citizenship rights, exercised political power collectively, and extended liberal reforms into programs that resulted in wealth redistribution and public services, they could establish a precedent for state-administered markets and prove that socialism was a more advanced form of civilization than capitalism. Social democrats conceded that the lines between liberalism and socialism would blur at first, as the orthodox Marxists suggested, but that lack of clarity would mean the general public was becoming increasingly accepting of state involvement in the economy.⁸ As a result, socialist practices would become naturalized because a collective change in values would occur.

Although the United States had its social democratic devotees, such as Milwaukee's Victor Berger, the making of American social democracy was centered in the Rocky Mountain West, and it was less formal and less ideological than the European model.⁹ This was largely because Mountain West workers lived the class struggle differently than their fellow laborers east of the Mississippi River. From the 1870s through the 1890s, the Rocky Mountain unionists who came to champion social democracy shared an outlook—antimonopolism—and a set of political tactics with their eastern counterparts. By the late 1880s, differences in organizational practices combined with variations in regional political structures and power relations allowed Mountain West unionists to follow a divergent path from workers elsewhere. Examples of these differences manifested themselves in a number of ways. For instance, between 1870 and 1920, Rocky Mountain unionists earned the highest real wages in the country, obtained the first constitutionally recognized eight-hour-day measures for private employees, and rejected affiliation with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), instead creating their own regional labor federations: the

Western Labor Union (WLU) and the American Labor Union (ALU).¹⁰ We must account for these important distinctions.

A brief overview of Rocky Mountain unionists' outlook, organizational practices, and political strategies, presented alongside national events, will clarify how this regional social democratic culture emerged. By the 1870s a loose alliance of middle-class and working-class groups and thinkers united in opposition to the growing concentration of wealth in the hands of a few elites. Often referred to as antimonopolists, these reformers attempted to reestablish the founders' notion that producers deserved the full value of the crops and goods their labor created. Farmers and artisans served as the ideal Americans under this model. As the industrial economy expanded, factory owners, antimonopolists argued, expropriated much of the wealth those who toiled deserved. Workers wanted to live up to the republic's principles, but employers prevented them from doing so, and, in the process, business owners subjected workers to all the cruelties that accompanied abject poverty. These opponents of corporate power looked to the state as the only force strong enough to challenge employers' authority and aid producers in acquiring a larger share of the wealth they helped to generate. Antimonopolist activism led public discourse to focus on the relationship between corporations, the state, and workers to the point that political economy became popular culture. From the 1860s through 1920 the fiction of Edward Bellamy, Theodore Dreiser, and Upton Sinclair combined with Henry George's wildly popular *Progress and Poverty* and the exposés of corrupt businesses and politicians written by Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens to shape public animosity toward "robber barons."¹¹ Working-class publications added to this literature of dissent and fed the growth of antimonopolism.

Three strains of antimonopolism—bimetallism, the single tax, and co-operatives—proved especially popular. Alexander Campbell's *The True American System of Finance* (1864) underpinned the arguments of most Gilded Age reformers who favored bimetallism. The book claimed that economic elites used the money supply to skew income distribution. Money, Campbell argued, gained its value from its utility. That meant that interest rates determined money's worth. By constricting the money supply and inflating interest rates, bankers could profit from producers' need for specie. These bankers would then lend the wealth they, according to Campbell, appropriated from workers wages to railroad, coal, and other corporation owners. Corporate officials would further deny workers their fair share of the wealth that they created by paying subsistence wages. As a result Greenbackers—as the first incarnation of these reform-

ers called themselves—demanded an expansion of the money supply based on gold and silver reserves and advocated lower interest rates.¹²

Other antimonopolists focused on land and supported Henry George's call for a national single tax. In his 1879 *Progress and Poverty* George demanded that the federal government tax all unearned income, rents or other monies not garnered from work done in the form of farming or manufacturing on that specific site. His plan sought to force speculators to sell their investments to people who would actually produce crops or goods.

Still others went beyond antimonopolism and promoted outright anti-capitalism. Cooperativists, for instance, sought an alternative structure to capitalism that depended on personal relationships and communal ownership, not the logic of profit maximization and private property. Gilded Age cooperativists drew on a number of inspirations including Robert Owen's model factory in Scotland and the religious communities that espoused this ethic in antebellum America. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) rekindled this movement. In Bellamy's story, a fictional cooperative commonwealth developed when the government confiscated the trusts and redistributed wealth. A number of farmers and workers, influenced by Bellamy and European writers, engaged in efforts to recreate small-scale production and offered an alternative to the growth of corporate capitalism. They usually met with failure.¹³

If we accept the common historiographical stance that suggests that antimonopolists failed to alter employer control over economic relations, then we are left seeing these critics of capitalism as the unsuccessful defenders of an earlier notion of value. Essentially, they lacked the social authority and political might to prevent the elite from defining the nation's economic agenda and laws.¹⁴ This remembering-the-losers approach would make sense if we conceive of antimonopolism as an ideology, a well-defined set of beliefs that united a movement aimed at overthrowing the wage system.¹⁵ Such a view, however, ascribes a coherence to antimonopolists' actions and thoughts that never existed.

Examining the Knights of Labor (KOL) illustrates this point. Philadelphia tailors founded the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor in 1869 as a secret fraternal organization. By 1876, the unskilled laborers in Pittsburgh's developing industries and a number of Pennsylvania's coal miners joined the order and altered its character. Two years later, Terence Powderly, an Irish Catholic former railroad worker turned machinist, won the KOL's top position, grand master workman. Powderly convinced the membership to abandon its commitment to secrecy and to express its growing militancy in a new "Declaration of Principles." That document

claimed that unchecked "aggressiveness of great capitalists and corporations" would result in the "hopeless degradation of the toiling masses." To ensure that workers received "the wealth they create," Knights favored abolishing the wage system and replacing it with cooperatives. Recognizing that the complete restructuring of the nation's economic order would take time, the delegates at this gathering also enumerated more immediate changes to limit the inequalities workers faced. Protecting public lands for "actual settlers" instead of granting acreage to railroad companies, promoting workplace safety, ending child labor, and making eight hours the standard workday comprised the Knights' demands.¹⁶

As more and more workers joined the order, Powderly and other leaders urged new members to focus on their similarities, such as their opposition to wage labor, rather than their differences, namely, political beliefs that ranged from socialism to anarchism. Indeed, this commitment to unity can be found in the KOL's motto, adopted in 1882, that "an injury to one is the concern of all." KOL rank-and-file members accepted this blend of pragmatism and radicalism because they recognized that it allowed the ideological and strategic flexibility necessary to construct a national labor movement. Most members also realized that much of the KOL's emerging strength resulted from the fact that power within the order flowed from the bottom up. A hierarchy did exist where local, district, state, and national trade assemblies sent delegates to national general assembly meetings to set the order's policies. Those elected to represent their fellow Knights at these meetings consulted with the general executive board and the grand master workman on the decisions they had made and sought advice on the problems they currently faced. The members of the local and district assemblies, however, had a great deal of authority over when to strike and boycott; how, if at all, to engage in electoral politics; and how to organize. Some KOL district assemblies, for example, consisted of a single trade. Others were mixed, which meant that they accepted all who wanted to join regardless of their occupation. The Knights did bar lawyers, bankers, speculators, gamblers, and drunkards, as they understood them to be nonproductive workers and immoral human beings. Leaders and members proudly spoke of their acceptance of immigrants, African Americans, and women. At the same time, however, many organizers and KOL leaders, especially in the West, took equal satisfaction in their support of Chinese exclusion legislation and in banning Asian immigrants from their locals.¹⁷

Pronouncements and platforms certainly fostered a sense of unity, but victories on the industrial battlefield proved the real engines of expan-

sion. Workers throughout the nation adopted a more militant attitude as indicated by the increasing number of strikes. In 1881, for instance, roughly 101,000 workers participated in 474 strikes, compared to 407,000 workers engaging in 1,432 strikes in 1886. In fact, from 1881 to 1900, at least 22,739 strikes occurred. Officially the KOL opposed strikes except in extreme circumstances. Local union officials, however, followed the wishes of their constituents rather than national officers. Between July 1885 and June 1886, 6,200 new district assemblies formed. For a brief period then workers won strikes, membership rolls swelled, and militant actions determined the order's course. These strikes centered on the immediate demands of higher wages, union recognition, and shorter hours, not the overthrow of the wage system.¹⁸

In fact, KOL members proved far from unified in their reasons for participating in reform actions. For example, the fight for the eight-hour day in 1886 saw New York cigar makers—affiliated with the KOL and belonging to the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (FOTLU) led by Samuel Gompers—combine with Chicago's Anarchist International members, many of whom also held KOL cards, to plan a May 1 strike. On March 13, Powderly informed local and district assemblies that he opposed the protest. The grand master workman argued that the order did not have the necessary funds for strike relief that such a massive effort would require. By that point, Chicago workers had proven too excited to wait for May 1. They struck early. By May 1, about 200,000 workers, despite Powderly's objections, were on strike across the nation. Chicago remained the center of this fight as 40,000 workers there participated in the protest. On May 3, police attacked picketers outside the McCormick reaper plant. In the struggle that ensued, at least two unionists were fatally shot and a number of other demonstrators were wounded.

In opposition to this act of police brutality, labor activists organized a protest rally at Haymarket Square on May 4. The demonstration ended when a bomb exploded and killed four policemen. Officers responded by firing into the crowd. Employer and police hyperbole, aided by the *Chicago Tribune's* antiunion vitriol, stirred the public's fear that the city teetered on the brink of revolution. Over the next three weeks, Chicago's district attorney indicted thirty-one people for the bombing and murders. Eventually eight men stood trial for conspiracy to commit murder, and the jury found all of them guilty. After the appeals process, the state of Illinois sanctioned the hanging of four of the convicted men. Workers across the nation marched in opposition to the verdicts, but Powderly, worried about the image of the KOL, refused to authorize an official protest.¹⁹

Already angered by his lack of support for the eight-hour strikes, many Knights became increasingly disappointed in Powderly. The struggle for power that followed saw radicals, especially the leaders of District Assembly (DA) 49 in New York City, attempt to exclude craft unionists from the order. They hoped to turn the KOL into a radical organization and assumed that craft unionists by their very nature lacked the proper militant spirit. Eventually, with Powderly's help, DA 49 succeeded in purging some specific craftsmen from the order. These expelled skilled workers formed the AFL. Critiques of leadership, factionalism, and failed strikes put the order on the brink of collapse. In July 1888, the once powerful Knights had 220,000 members; by 1890, that number had fallen to 100,000.²⁰

While the KOL declined, the AFL ascended and abandoned anti-monopolism. The twentieth century opened with Gompers successfully advancing "pure and simple unionism" at the expense of the more bottom-up unionism of the Knights. This meant that between 1886 and 1900, AFL leaders centralized power in the hands of national leaders, largely ignored unskilled laborers, and prevented, as best they could, eastern and southern European immigrants, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, and women from joining the ranks of organized labor. AFL chiefs also encouraged members to reject associations with political radicals.²¹

A number of scholars have claimed that the AFL's ascent signified the defeat of a radical working-class alternative to capitalism.²² Those who see the fall of the antimonopolist Knights and the rise of the pure-and-simple AFL as a crucial example in the larger tale of the decline of American radicalism overstate their case. They ignore the reality that anti-monopolism represented a general displeasure with the power relations produced by concentrated wealth. In other words, anti-monopolism was not a well-defined alternative to capitalism. Antimonopolists had no single plan to resolve the problems they identified. They indeed unleashed a spirit of industrial and social reform that evoked passion, but their schemes lacked consistency. Their views on property rights bear this out. Bimetallists had no problem with the way in which judges and the general public interpreted property rights; single taxers, however, wanted different standards of ownership for individuals and companies; and cooperativists sought drastic changes to popular and legal conceptions of assets. Thus the question should not be what prevented Gilded Age Americans from implementing this alternative to capitalism. Instead we should ask, which groups took advantage of this reform mood, and what kinds of movements