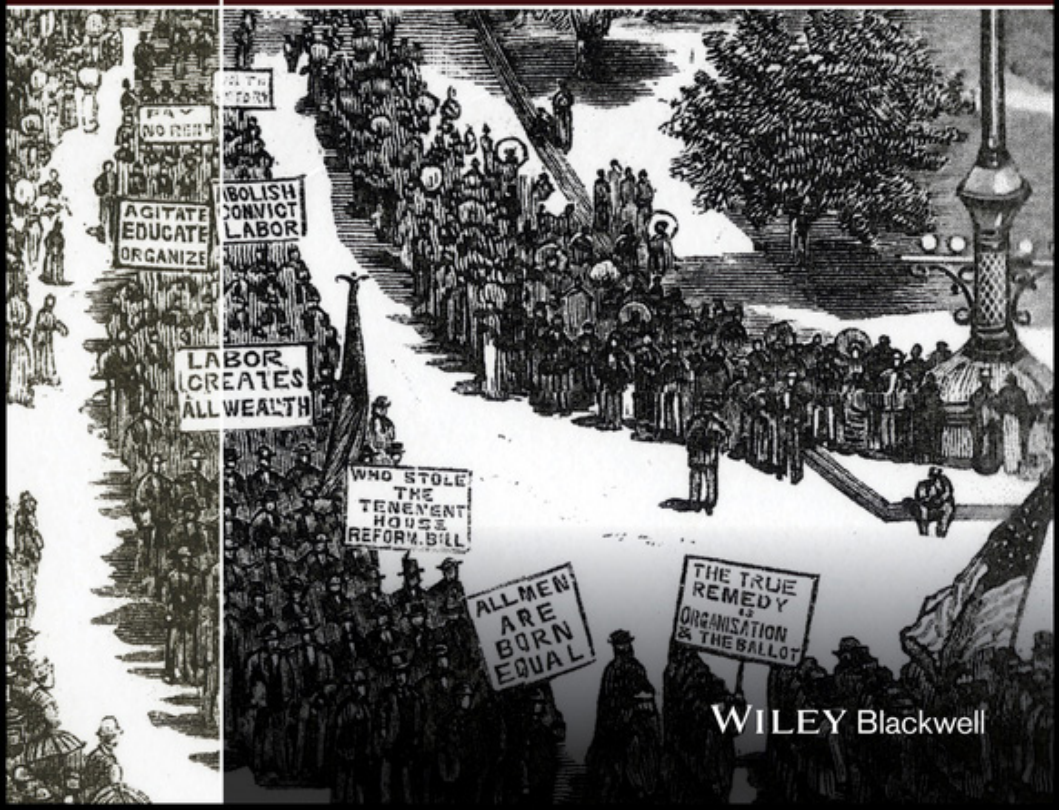
# THE DAWNING OF AMERICAN LABOR

## The New Republic to the Industrial Age

THE AMERICAN HISTORY SERIES

Brian Greenberg




WILEY Blackwell

**A concise history of labor and work in America from the birth of the Republic to the Industrial Age and beyond**

From the days of Thomas Jefferson, Americans believed that they could sustain a capitalist industrial economy without the class conflict or negative socioeconomic consequences experienced in Europe. This dream came crashing down in 1877 when the Great Strike, one of the most militant labor disputes in US history, convulsed the nation's railroads. In *The Dawning of American Labor* a leading scholar of American labor history draws upon first-hand accounts and the latest scholarship to offer a fascinating look at how Americans perceived and adapted to the shift from a largely agrarian economy to one dominated by manufacturing.

For the generations following the Great Strike, "the Labor Problem" and the idea of class relations became a critical issue facing the nation. As Professor Greenberg makes clear in this lively, highly accessible historical exploration, the 1877 strike forever cast a shadow across one of the most deeply rooted articles of national faith—the belief in American exceptionalism. What conditions produced the faith in a classless society? What went wrong? These questions lie at the heart of *The Dawning of American Labor*.

- Provides a concise, comprehensive, and completely up-to-date synthesis of the latest scholarship on the early development of industrialization in the United States
- Considers how working people reacted, both in the workplace and in their communities, as the nation's economy made its shift from an agrarian to an industrial base
- Includes a formal Bibliographical Essay—a handy tool for student research
- Works as a stand-alone text or an ideal supplement to core curricula in US History, US Labor, and 19th-Century America

Accessible introductory text for students in American history classes and beyond, *The Dawning of American Labor* is an excellent introduction to the history of labor in the United States for students and general readers of history alike.

**Brian Greenberg, PhD,** is the Emeritus Jules Plangere Chair in American Social History at Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey, USA. He has also taught at Lehman College, Princeton University, and the University of Delaware, where he was director of the Hagley Graduate Program from 1980 to 1987. In addition to courses on the worker in America, he has taught courses on the rise of modern America, law and society in America, and the history of American public policy.

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# The Dawning of American Labor: The New Republic to the Industrial Age

Brian Greenberg

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Cover Image: First Labor Day parade in the United States, New York City, September 5, 1882. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 16, 1882. Courtesy American Social History Project.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In January 1989 I was invited by the distinguished historians John Hope Franklin and A. S. Eisenstadt to write a book on the history of labor in America in the early industrial era, 1783–1860. My book would be a volume in The American History Series, which they edited for the publisher Harlan Davidson. I was thrilled to be asked and immediately accepted, but other projects and changes in my academic and personal life continuously intervened, derailing my best intensions to finish this book. As the years passed, I would return to the manuscript for brief periods whenever I could. Fast-forward to 2014, when, during a sabbatical, I finally completed a draft of the book. I then sent the manuscript to Andrew Davidson, my editor at Harlan Davidson, which was now a part of John Wiley & Sons. Among his other responsibilities at Wiley, Andrew continued to oversee The American History Series. His response to my query about Wiley's interest in my book was to express shock as it was the first time that he had been contacted by an author who was not bowing out of a long-delayed book but was actually sending him a draft manuscript. From that point to this, once again a process that took much longer than I had planned, Andrew was all that an author could hope for in an editor. In gratitude for his abiding faith in this project and in me, I dedicate this book to him.

Andrew has since left Wiley, but my project has been ably shepherded by a number of capable individuals. In particular, I am very grateful to Janani Govindankutty for all she did to help me get my book into production and to Jacqueline Harvey for her meticulous copyediting. The draft that I sent to Andrew was reviewed by two anonymous readers, and I would like to thank them for their excellent comments. At their suggestion, I broadened the scope of the draft and, I believe, produced a stronger book as a result. I hope that they agree.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the research support I received as Jules Plangere Chair in American Social History and from Monmouth University. These funds were immeasurably helpful in my being able to obtain the many books and articles that I used in writing this book and in giving me the time necessary to think and to write. Similarly, I am grateful for the assistance that numerous librarians and their institutions provided me in obtaining necessary sources, particularly the Hagley Library in Delaware, especially Michael Nash, and Monmouth University's Guggenheim Library, especially Susan Bucks, Linda Silverstein, Eleonora Dubicki, and George Germek. Sherri Xie in Monmouth's Interlibrary Loan office always found what I needed in an amazingly short amount of time.

A number of people facilitated the process of obtaining and reproducing the images that are included throughout the book. For their kind assistance and permission to reprint these images, I want to thank Pennee Bender and Joshua Brown, at the American Social History Project; Jane Ward, the American Textile History Museum; Bryan Wright, Colonial Sense; Robert Delap, New-York Historical Society; Jennifer Strobel, Smithsonian Institution; Lori Urso, Old Slater Mill; Arthur Gaffer, Maine Charitable Mechanical Association; Sofia Yalouris, Maine Historical Society; Peter Hansen, *Railroad History*; Steven Lubar, Brown University;

Glenn Roe, The ARTFL Project; and Shane MacDonald, American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives. I am also very grateful to Wayne Elliott at Monmouth University for all his help.

An earlier version of the history of the 1806 cordwainers' conspiracy trial appeared in *Pennsylvania Legacies* (Brian Greenberg, "Class Conflict and the Demise of the Artisan Order: The Cordwainers' 1805 Strike and 1806 Conspiracy Trial," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 14 no. 1 [Spring 2014]: 6–11). I acknowledge the journal's permission to draw from that material in this book and thank, in particular, the journal's assistant editor, Rachel Moloshok. I would also like to recognize the research support that I received from the McNeil Center for Early American Studies.

A book like this, a synthesis intended to provide an introduction for undergraduate students to the key themes and issues that confronted Americans during the dawning of labor, relies heavily on the work of others who have tilled this field. The work of my many fellow labor historians has influenced my thinking on early labor history. Although the contributions of these scholars are noted throughout the book and in the bibliographical essay, I would like to single out Irwin Yellowitz, whose course on labor history at City College of New York first introduced me to the topic of labor history, and Charles Stephenson, who was also there at the beginning of my journey as a labor historian. Finally, at Monmouth, where I have had the opportunity to work with and to learn from many excellent colleagues in the History and Anthropology Department, I especially thank the many graduate and undergraduate students who, over the years, have taken my "Worker in America" course.

Of primary importance to my being able to complete this project was the support and love I have received from my family. Kae, Molly, and now Romina are contemporary

examples of the concern for others and the desire for social justice that has motivated American workers. But the writing of a book is also a practical matter. I cannot imagine having a better critic of my ideas and my writing than my wife, Susan. I have been most fortunate to be able to share with her all the highs and lows that come with writing a book.

PROLOGUE

# American Exceptionalism and the Great Strike of 1877

During the presidential election of 1860, Abraham Lincoln made a campaign stop in New Haven, Connecticut. Speaking to an audience that included local shoe workers who were taking part in the "Great Strike of 1860," Lincoln asked, rhetorically, "What is the true condition of the laborer?" Using himself as an example, he responded, "When one starts poor, as most do in the race of life, free society is such that he knows he can better his condition; he knows that there is no fixed condition of labor for his whole life." Although a man "this year" might be, as Lincoln had once been, a hired laborer, he must be able to look forward to working for himself in the future and, in time, to being able "to hire men to work for him." For Lincoln, as well as for most of those in his audience, this was "the true system." Long before 1860, most Americans, or at least those living in the states that would make up the Union during the Civil War, had become convinced that the free labor system in the North represented the fulfillment of the ideals that Lincoln articulated in his New Haven speech.

*The Dawning of American Labor: The New Republic to the Industrial Age*,
First Edition. Brian Greenberg.

Americans had reached a consensus about what constituted a natural distribution of wealth even before the eighteenth century drew to a close. For much of the next century, they accepted that the preservation of individual liberty required "equitability," that is, a nearly equal division of wealth among all working Americans. More an ethical standard than an economic principle, the free labor ideology bestowed property rights on all who labored. For free labor society to be practicable, each person (meaning, at the time, each adult white male) should expect to receive the fruits of his own labor. Although inequalities would persist, their assumption that today's laborer would become tomorrow's capitalist sustained free labor adherents in the belief that a natural harmony of interests existed among all classes in American society.

One of the many tragic ironies of the Civil War is that the free labor order that the Union, under Lincoln, was fighting to preserve was itself transformed by the conflict. By fostering the concentration of capital in the North, the war added to the region's already formidable forces of mechanization and undermined the social assumptions, as well as the material basis, on which the free labor ideology rested. For many of Lincoln's contemporaries, the possibility that rapid industrial expansion would produce a permanent wage-earning class created a sense of impending crisis. The poet Walt Whitman compared the "all-devouring modern word, business," to "the magician's serpent in the fable," which "ate up all the other serpents....[M]oney making is our magician's serpent, remaining today…unwieldy and immense." Even Edwin Godkin, who as editor of the new magazine *The Nation* made it the standard-bearer for free-market liberalism in the United States, recognized that "Corporations to a certain extent take the place in American society of the privileged classes of aristocratic Europe." The incompatibility of large-scale, corporate industrialism with prevailing social values would trouble Americans for the remainder of the century.

Although the progress of industrialization in the United States through the nineteenth century was uneven, within a decade of the end of the Civil War the nation was second only to Great Britain in manufacturing. Between 1860 and 1880 the total value of US manufactures more than doubled, as did the size of the industrial labor force. Expansion was especially strong in heavy industry: coal and iron production quadrupled, and the total number of steel ingots produced rose more than six times. As an example of greater economic concentration, both the number of workers and the amount of capital invested in the pig-iron industry during the 1870s nearly doubled even though the number of firms in that industry remained constant.

Yet, as understood by Whitman, Godkin, and other contemporary commentators, the critical change in the ongoing process of industrialization was less a matter of the growing size and scale of manufacturing than of the emergence of a permanent wage-earning class. In 1860 roughly the same number of workers were self-employed as were earning wages, but by 1870 wage earners and salaried employees made up the majority of productively engaged Americans, including farmers. In the industrial Northeast at this time, the odds against being self-employed – the entrepreneurial ideal of antebellum free labor society – were even greater. In Pennsylvania, for example, between 65 and 75 percent of the laboring population worked for someone else; in Massachusetts, the rate was between 75 and 85 percent. Even though the American economy remained primarily agricultural, the age of the yeoman farmer and of the economically independent producer was becoming a distant memory.

The driving of the final ceremonial golden spike in 1869 at Promontory Summit in the Utah Territory symbolized not only the completion of the transcontinental railroad but also the start of a new era of economic consolidation and expansion that further transformed America. By 1880 the railroads, the "first modern

business corporation," stretched more than twice as far as they had twenty years before, linking the United States into one vast market. As business enterprises, the railroads, which required huge amounts of coal, iron, and steel, far outstripped the largest manufacturing concerns in capitalization, operating expenses, and number of employees. The Pennsylvania Railroad, the nation's largest corporation, forged an economic empire under the aggressive leadership of Thomas A. Scott that spread across the continent. Indeed, the Pennsylvania's 6,000 miles of track in the United States was outstripped by the track mileage in only two other nations, Great Britain and France.

In 1877 one of the most militant strikes in US history convulsed the nation's railroads. The private detective Allan Pinkerton compared this labor upheaval to "some sudden central volcano" that "belched forth burning rivers that coursed forth in every direction." Outbreaks of labor strife had not been uncommon in the United States before this time, but they had largely remained local brush fires. The Great Strike of 1877, however, engaged hundreds of thousands of railway and other workers and their supporters in communities across the nation in an uprising that left more than 100 workmen killed and several hundred badly wounded. Coming just one year after millions of Americans had gathered in Philadelphia at the Centennial Exposition to celebrate the country's first century of progress in industry, science, agriculture, and the arts, the 1877 strike marked the beginning of a new age of industrial conflict.

The genesis of the Great Strike lay in the depression and financial panic of the early 1870s. After the discovery in 1873 that the railroad magnate Jay Cooke had issued millions of dollars of worthless bonds, investors panicked: Wall Street crashed, banks closed, and thousands of businesses failed. Most working people, especially those in the nation's cities, found themselves either unemployed or, if not wholly out of work, then seriously underemployed. Employers repeatedly cut wages until they were only

slightly more than half of what they had been just before the depression began. In no sector of the American economy was the depression's impact more severe than in the nation's rail system.

For railway workers, irregular employment and wage cuts led to a long list of grievances that accumulated especially in the wake of the panic of 1873. Work might be available for only three, four, or five days of each week, yet the men were on call for the entire time. On the days that they did have work, they labored long hours, often fifteen to eighteen at a stretch. During the 1870s depression, many rail companies stopped issuing free passes to their workers for transportation to and from their jobs, and often the cost of his trip home would be greater than the wages that the railway worker had earned that day. Even more objectionable was the policy of "doubleheaders" that was adopted in 1877 on the freight lines. Without increasing the size of the train crew, employers such as the Pennsylvania Railroad doubled the length of freight trains (going from one locomotive and seventeen cars to two locomotives and thirty-four cars per train). For rail workers "doubleheaders" meant a loss of jobs, harder work, and greater physical danger.

In March 1877, even as the railroads continued to pay their investors high dividends, the presidents of the nation's four largest lines – the Pennsylvania, the New York Central, the Erie, and the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) – met and agreed to cut workers' wages yet again. In response, a general railway strike was called for June 24 by the newly organized Trainmen's Union, but it never materialized. Then, on July 11, John W. Garrett, president of the B&O, announced a 10 percent wage cut to take effect on Monday, July 16, for workers earning more than $1 a day. On July 16, a small group of firemen for the B&O at Martinsburg, West Virginia, refused to work at the reduced rate. The town's mayor had the men arrested, and a crowd quickly gathered, forcing their release. All the trains remained in the rail yards. Unplanned and without any central organization, the events at Martinsburg nevertheless

set the pattern for strikes over the next several weeks at rail centers across the nation.

What began as a local conflict quickly spread to other industrial and transportation hubs. Within days, the uprising had shut down not only the B&O rail yards at Martinsburg but also the yards at junctions up and down the line. Moreover, inspired by the rail laborers' protest, other workers, like the canal boatmen, also walked off their jobs. After local militia companies supported the rail strikers, West Virginia officials appealed to President Rutherford B. Hayes to send in federal troops to regain control. Inevitably, armed conflict erupted between the troops and the crowds that collected to protest their presence. In Martinsburg, at least thirteen local citizens lost their lives, and fifty were wounded, during a three-day battle. After nearly two weeks, an uneasy peace finally restored service on the B&O.

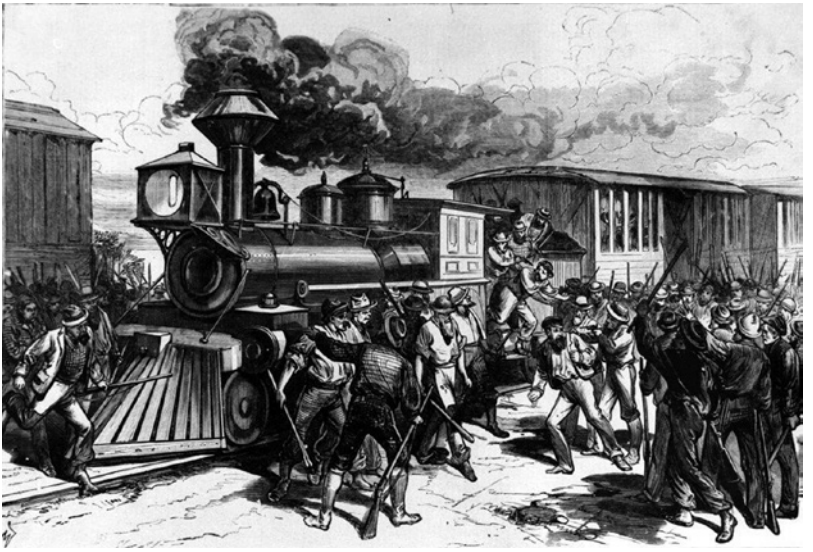

**Figure P.1** Labor conflict on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in West Virginia during the Great Strike of 1877. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 4, 1877. Courtesy American Social History Project.

In Pittsburgh, the strike against the Pennsylvania Railroad replicated events in Martinsburg, only on a larger scale. On July 19, the city's rail workers walked off their jobs in opposition to the Pennsylvania's effort to deploy "doubleheaders." Here again the local community was mostly supportive, and the strike soon spread to involve thousands of workers throughout the city. For the next seven days, angry crowds of strikers and sympathizers

**Figure P.2** A march in Pittsburgh against the railroads during the Great Strike of 1877. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, September 4, 1877. Courtesy American Social History Project.

confronted federal troops sent to Pittsburgh to restore order, resulting in the deaths of more than fifty people and many casualties. On July 27, a fire that started among Pennsylvania's freight cars, which had been stacked up outside Union Depot, consumed 500 freight cars, 104 locomotives, and 39 buildings, resulting in a loss to the company of some $5 million. Reflecting anxieties shared by many Americans, the editor of a local paper likened the Great Strike to "the beginning of a great civil war in this country" but this time one "between capital and labor."

From Pittsburgh, the Great Strike spread to every region of the United States except New England. In the Midwest, the upheavals soon became general strikes in Chicago and St. Louis, affecting industries throughout the two cities. In St. Louis, the strike was coordinated by the Workingmen's Party, and, because local business was paralyzed, the party had effective control of the city for several days. Yet, in contrast to the pattern set in other localities, "respectable citizens" in both Chicago and St. Louis organized committees of safety to restore order. Nationwide, however, negotiations throughout the strike were hampered by the rail companies' refusal to meet with representatives of the strikers or to compromise. The railways responded to the strike, as did President Hayes, as an "insurrection" that must be "put down by *force*." After two weeks and confrontations with federal troops and armed local police forces ready to shoot directly into the crowds, the Great Strike ended.

The commercial press condemned the Great Strike as a mass rebellion, another Paris Commune of 1871, only on a much larger scale. On July 26, at the height of the disturbances, the *New York Times* characterized the strikers as:

> disaffected elements, roughs, hoodlums, rioters, mob, suspicious-looking individuals, bad characters, thieves, blacklegs, looters, communists, rabble, labor-reform agitators, dangerous class of people, gangs, tramps, drunken section-men, law-breakers, threatening crowd, bummers, ruffians, loafers,

bullies, vagabonds, cowardly mob, bands of worthless fellows, incendiaries, enemies of society, reckless crowd, malcontents, wretched people, loudmouth orators, rapscallions, brigands, robber mob, riffraff, terrible fellows, felons, idiots.

Such comments reflected little of the optimism expressed by Lincoln nearly twenty years earlier that the United States could be a land of both economic progress and social justice.

The free labor ideology invoked by Lincoln had celebrated the nation's dynamic economy and the opportunity and dignity that it offered to workingmen. When acting in concert, capital and labor were thought to be part of an economic process that produced prosperity for all. Expressing these sentiments in an article on local efforts by workers to win the eight-hour workday, the *Albany (NY) Evening Journal* in the late 1860s commented, "Capital and labor are not antagonistic. They are the positive and negative elements which complete the currents and help the circuit of commerce and trade. Neither can exist without the other, and both have claims to consideration." Compare this sentiment, which echoes Lincoln's faith in the mutuality of interests, with the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher's opinions expressed in a sermon he delivered at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn on a Sunday evening during the 1877 strike. Beecher informed his congregants, "God has intended the great to be great, and the little to be little. No equalization process can ever take place until men are made equal as productive forces. It is a wild vision[,] not a practicable theory."

A month after the Great Strike ended, the treasurer of the Gatling Gun Company, which manufactured the forerunner of the modern machine gun, wrote to President Thomas A. Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad that "the recent riotous disturbances" demonstrated the need for better preparation. Corporations like the one over which Scott presided had to "strengthen themselves *now* against such emergencies in the future by providing

yourselves with Gatling guns." A few loyal employees "supplied with Gatlings afford a Railroad a perfect means of defense within itself." There is every reason to believe that Scott responded favorably to the gun company's suggestion. Not only did many corporations thereafter hire and arm private armies, but cities across the nation began construction of massive armories on land that was often donated by the local chamber of commerce.

Class lines hardened in the aftermath of the 1877 strike. Strikes during the final decades of the nineteenth century occurred with greater frequency, better organization, and more violence. During the Great Strike, the *New York Times* sadly noted that "The days are over, in which this country could rejoice in its freedom from the elements of social strife which have long abounded in the old countries." A leading historian of the era concludes that the 1877 strike threw into question one of the most deeply rooted articles of national faith – the dream of American exceptionalism. From the days of Thomas Jefferson, Americans had believed that they could have capitalist industrialism without class conflict and that the United States could avoid the negative economic and social consequences of Europe's "dark Satanic Mills." For generations of Americans after the Great Strike, "the Labor Problem," that is, the presence of fixed class relations, became the critical issue facing the country.

What conditions produced America's faith in exceptionalism? What, as evidenced by the Great Strike, went wrong? We begin by looking at the world of the American worker at the time of the ratification of the US Constitution.