

Excerpts from *Who Built America?* (Volume 2) by the American Social History Project:

“Union for All”: The Knights of Labor

At the center of labor activity in the 1880s was the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor, a group founded by nine Philadelphia tailors in 1869. Its first leader, Uriah Stephens, had studied for the ministry before apprenticing as a tailor. A man of broad moral vision, he called for an organization that would unite all workers, regardless of race, nationality, occupation, or skill level. In the words of a Detroit parade banner, “Each for himself is the bosses’ plea; Union for all will make you free.”

Like middle-class Masons, the Knights of Labor engaged in elaborate rituals at secret meetings. In 1879, the Knights of Labor chose Terence V. Powderly as their “Grand Master Workman.” An Irish Catholic machinist and mayor of Scranton, Pennsylvania, Powderly led the Knights for fifteen years. The Order’s programs reflected not only Powderly’s beliefs in temperance, education, and land reform but also his conviction that the wage system should be abolished. Under his leadership, the Knights gradually put aside their secrecy, which had hampered their ability to grow, and membership soared.

Drastic wage cuts accompanying the economic downturn of the early 1880s gave the organization its greatest impetus for growth. Victories against two of the country’s most powerful railroads — the giant Union Pacific and financier Jay Gould’s Southwestern — brought workers across the nation into the Knights. By 1886, the Order boasted 15,000 local assemblies, representing between 700,000 and 1 million members. This was nearly 10 percent of the country’s nonagricultural workforce, a much higher proportion than had ever been enrolled in unions. In Milwaukee, where German-American craftsmen had dominated the Order in the early 1880s, less-skilled Polish immigrants streamed into the organization in 1886; nearly a thousand joined on a single day.

The Knights’ commitment to equality extended beyond healing the split between skilled and unskilled workers and included women, immigrants, and African Americans, all previously shut out of the labor movement. African Americans were welcomed from the beginning. Most joined all-black assemblies, but some locals had mixed membership, even in the South. Black dockworkers in New Orleans, turpentine workers in

Mississippi, tobacco factory workers in Virginia, and coal miners in Alabama, West Virginia, and Tennessee all joined the Knights in the first half of the 1880s. African-American workers became the mainstays of many fledgling local assemblies. “The colored people of the South are flocking to us,” trumpeted one Knights organizer.

In Fort Worth, Texas, the Knights united European-, African- and Mexican-American workers in the first coalition of its kind in state history. The Central Trades and Labor Assembly in New Orleans represented some 10,000 black and white workers who regularly joined forces in demonstrations and parades. “In view of the prejudice that existed a few years ago against the negro race,” a Brooklyn Knight wrote, “who would have thought that negroes could ever be admitted into a labor organization on an equal footing with white men?”

The Order’s practice of organizing separate black assemblies provoked controversy among African Americans. Some criticized the labor movement’s continuing racism, particularly its exclusion of African Americans from skilled trades. A North Carolina mason complained, “The white Knights of Labor prevent me from getting employment because I am a colored man, although I belong to the same organization.” But other black leaders believed that the Order’s local and national assemblies represented a significant advance, providing a context in which black and white workers could begin to make common cause.

The emergence of the Knights of Labor also moved Irish immigrants to the center of the American labor movement. Irish activism had begun with support for the Land League, an organization of tenant farmers in Ireland that built an enormous following in the late 1870s. In the early years, Powderly claimed, the American labor movement and the Irish land movement were “almost identical,” and secret gatherings of the Knights frequently followed public meetings of the Land League. As Patrick Ford, a New York editor, explained, “The cause of the poor in Donegal [Ireland] is the cause of the factory slave in Fall River [Massachusetts].” Monopoly took the form of rent-gouging in Ireland, of labor exploitation in America.

Unlike African Americans and Irish immigrants, women had to fight their way into the Knights of Labor. Leaders of the Order spoke vaguely about “equal rights” and embraced the idea of equal pay for women, but equal pay meant little in a gender-segregated workforce. The Knights

stopped short of granting membership to women, and Powderly refused to implement a resolution calling for women to be admitted until rules “for the governing of assemblies of women” were prepared. Then, Mary Stirling, who had led a successful strike of “lady shoemakers” in Philadelphia, presented herself as a delegate at the Knights’ convention in 1881. Forced to take a stand, Powderly finally declared that “women should be admitted on equality with men.” Within a few years, one in ten Knights was a woman.

The Knights of Labor provided an unprecedented opportunity for working-class women to join men in the struggle for better lives. The Knights mobilized support for equal pay for women, equal rights for women within all organizations, and respect for women’s work, whether unpaid in the home or for wages in the factory or mill. The Order’s eclectic reform vision linked women’s industrial and domestic concerns to broad social and political issues, giving rise to a kind of “labor feminism” in the 1880s.

The Knights of Labor, did, however, blatantly discriminate against one group: the Chinese. In the early 1880s, the major focus of the Order’s political activity was promoting the Chinese Exclusion Act, which closed the nation’s gates to Chinese immigrants. When it was passed in 1882, Knights hailed the law as a step forward for “American” workers. Especially on the West Coast, the union label was as much an expression of antagonism to the Chinese as a symbol of worker’s solidarity. Chinese workers served as convenient scapegoats when times were tough.

Despite this persistent racism, the Knights claimed to represent the last best hope for a republic weakened by the forces of monopoly, political corruption, cutthroat competition, and — most important — wage labor. “We declare an inevitable and irresistible conflict between the wage system of labor and republican system of government,” proclaimed the Knights, who sought to eliminate political corruption and industrial degradation and restore independence to American citizens.

With this commitment to republicanism went a deep faith in the “producing classes.” If properly mobilized, the Knights believed, this broad social group producing society’s wealth — the workers, the farmers, even the honest manufacturers — could rescue America from the hands of monopolists and other social parasites. “Nonproducers,” such as bankers, speculators, lawyers, and liquor dealers, were excluded from the ranks of the Knights of Labor. But “fair” employers, who respected the “dignity of labor” by employing union workers and selling union-made goods, could join.

Local Knights of Labor assemblies developed a variety of institutions

that reflected the ideals of mutuality and solidarity. Many maintained cooperative stores on the ground floors of their halls and assembly rooms above, where members could hear labor sermons, read reform papers, or debate politics and economics. The balls, picnics, and parades sponsored by the Knights were distinctive forms of recreation and group expression.

There was never total harmony among the groups that comprised the Knights of Labor, but for a time the alliance was sufficiently stable to spark widespread fear among industrialists and their friends. During a Cleveland steel strike, employers called on police to intervene. After violent confrontations at the mill gates, the city’s daily newspapers launched a torrent of invective against the “un-American” Polish workers, labeling them “foreign devils,” “ignorant and degraded whelps,” and “Communitic scoundrels.” But to those who joined the Knights, the important fact was that people of diverse backgrounds were marching together. “All I knew then of the principles of the Knights of Labor,” the Jewish immigrant Abraham Bisno later remembered, “was that the motto . . . was One for All, and All for One.”

1886: The Eight-Hour Movement and Haymarket Square

“The year 1886 will be known as the year of the great uprising of labor,” proclaimed George McNeill, a Massachusetts member of the Knights of Labor. “The skilled and the unskilled, the high-paid and the low-paid all joined hands.” The Knights’ membership drive and the boycott movement peaked that year. Even more important, hundreds of thousands of workers struck, demonstrated, and fought for an eight-hour day.

American workers had been agitating for shorter workdays for decades. In 1884, the demand resurfaced when the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions began a two-year campaign, resolving that “eight hours shall constitute a legal day’s work from and after May 1, 1886” and calling for a general strike to begin that day. The federation, an alliance of eighteen national unions, had been formed in 1881 by local unionists who called for national organizing to deal with employers operating in national markets. At its peak in 1886, federation membership totaled as much as 350,000, or 3 percent of the nation’s nonagricultural workforce.

From Milwaukee, Chicago, and New York, the eight-hour movement spread to towns and cities throughout the country. “This is the

workingman's hour," proclaimed the workers at Boston's Faneuil Hall on the eve of May 1, 1886. Across the nation, about one-third of a million workers demonstrated for the eight-hour day, and 200,000 actually went out on strike. By the end of the year, 400,000 workers had participated in 1,500 strikes, more than in any previous year of American history. Most of the strikers won shorter workdays, and 42,000 won an eight-hour day. These strikes marked an important new phase in the mobilization of unskilled workers, brought many workers into the ranks of the labor movement, and turned thousands of union members into activists.

The national leadership of the Knights of Labor discouraged the demonstrations and strikes for the eight-hour day, but many Knights led local campaigns, working with the unions and with the socialists and anarchists who played a prominent role in the agitation. Although united in their challenge to the concept of private property, socialists and anarchists differed in their views of the role of government. Socialists advocated government ownership of factories and mines, whereas anarchists argued that organized government was by its very nature oppressive.

In Chicago, the eight-hour movement was led by radicals — most notably Albert Parsons, the son of a prominent New England family. Parsons arrived in Chicago after apprenticing as a printer in Waco, Texas, where he had moved before the Civil War. Although he had served in the Confederate Army, Parsons became a Radical Republican during Reconstruction, championing African-American rights, addressing meetings, and mobilizing black voters. He met his wife Lucy when she was sixteen and already a passionate labor and anti-racist activist. Lucy had probably been born a slave in Texas, but she claimed to be the orphaned child of Mexican and Indian parents. Because Texas laws banned interracial marriage, they moved north in 1873, settling in Chicago, where Albert found employment as a typesetter.

Making contacts among Chicago radicals and hosting socialist study groups in their home, Lucy and Albert Parsons were soon at the center of socialist and anarchist agitation. When Albert lost his job because of speeches he gave during the 1877 railroad strike, Lucy set up a dressmaking shop to support them both. By 1885, the Parsons were the most famous radical couple in Chicago and were subjected to regular and vicious attacks in the mainstream press.

On May 1, 1886, Parsons led the 80,000 Chicago marchers in a parade for the eight-hour day. The day passed without incident, but two days later, a clash at the McCormick Reaper Works ended in police beatings and the

fatal shooting of two unarmed workmen. August Spies, the editor of a pro-labor German newspaper, witnessed the bloodshed and issued a fiery leaflet, calling Chicago's workers to a protest at Haymarket Square the following evening. Attendance was sparse at the hastily called rally. As the small crowd began to drift away, a bomb exploded, killing a policeman. The police opened fire immediately, killing at least one more person and wounding many more.

The city's anti-radical, anti-immigrant civic leaders quickly sought revenge for the policeman's death. Parsons, Spies, and six other anarchist leaders were arrested, charged with conspiracy to commit murder, tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. No evidence ever connected any of the accused with the bomb. Even so, Powderly refused to support Parsons, a member of the Knights, or to criticize the courts. Despite worldwide protest, Spies, Parsons, and two of their comrades went to the gallows in November 1887. One of the remaining anarchists committed suicide; the three others were pardoned in 1893 by John Peter Altgeld, a German immigrant who had by then become the pro-labor governor of Illinois...

The Decline of the Knights

Haymarket raised fears among the middle and upper classes — anxiety about aliens, radicals, mobs, and labor organizations, and more broadly about the prospects for anarchism and revolution. Government responded to these fears by strengthening the police, militia, and the U.S. Army, and vigilante groups proliferated. Capitalists mounted a sustained counteroffensive to destroy the insurgency of the eight-hour movement and other organized labor efforts. Some employers attempted to undercut unionization by hiring workers from different ethnic groups who would have difficulty communicating with one another. Trade association members discharged strikers, locked out workers who joined unions, and circulated blacklists of labor activists. Industrial spies, many of them employees of the rapidly growing Pinkerton Detective Agency, infiltrated labor organizations.

Employers also relied increasingly on the coercive power of the government. During the 1880s, legal charges such as "inciting to riot," "obstructing the streets," "intimidation," and "trespass" were first used extensively against strikers, and court injunctions restricting workers' right to picket became commonplace. One judge, handing down an injunction in a labor dispute, proudly called it a "Gatling [machine] gun on paper."

Weakened by internal disputes, faulty decisions, and disunity of purpose, the Knights of Labor proved especially vulnerable. The most dramatic setback occurred on the same rail lines where the Knights had first become prominent. After a successful strike in 1885, Southwestern Railroad workers struck again in March 1886, demanding wage increases and the reinstatement of a discharged comrade. But railroad executives, having discovered that placating workers' organizations fostered militancy and unionization, were intransigent. In the midst of the eight-hour strikes, the Knights capitulated on May 4, 1886 and called off the walkout.

Across the country, employers who had negotiated with labor in 1884 and 1885 refused to do so two years later. The Illinois Bureau of Labor reported that of seventy-six attempts to negotiate differences between labor and employers in 1886, employers rejected any discussion in thirty-two cases. In the second half of 1886, employers locked out some 100,000 workers. Attempts to improve working conditions — by laundry workers in Troy, New York; packinghouse workers in Chicago; and knitters in Cohoes and Amsterdam, New York — ended in harsh defeats.

All these unsuccessful strikes involved the Knights of Labor, which collapsed, no longer able to protect members' workplace rights. The Knights had claimed 40,000 members in Chicago prior to a confrontation in the meatpacking plants; less than a year later their number had fallen to 17,000. Across the nation, the organization that had boasted perhaps three quarters of a million members at its peak in 1886 shrank to half that size within a year. By 1890, the Knights could claim only 100,000 members.

End of a Century; End of an Era

Class conflict defined the final two decades of the nineteenth century as working people confronted, with extraordinary creativity, the profound changes wrought by industrial capitalism. The first truly national working-class movement emerged in these years out of the militant protests and oppositional ideas of workers and farmers across the country. In creating a culture of resistance, the late-nineteenth-century labor movement rejected not only capitalists' growing control over the nation's economic and political life but also the twin ideologies of acquisitive individualism and Social Darwinism that served to justify that control. While the movement's programs were eclectic, its philosophies diverse, and its outright victories

few, it nonetheless succeeded in galvanizing millions of people with an alternative vision of industrial America.

But the bitter defeats suffered by the Knights of Labor in 1886, the Homestead workers in 1892, the industrial armies in 1893 and 1894, the Pullman workers in 1894, and the Populists in 1896 eroded the power of this alternative vision and marked the end of an era. As a result, many working people in cities and the countryside retreated into insular cultures that included strong elements of racism and nativism. The nineteenth century closed with the labor and agrarian movements fragmented and their broad, organizing efforts defeated. The return of economic prosperity, the expansion of American corporations abroad, and the wave of mergers that swept through the economy further consolidated the power of giant corporations.

The bitter defeats of the 1880s and 1890s left permanent scars. The United States would never again witness such a broad or fundamental challenge by working people to the claims of capital. Racial, ethnic, gender, skill, and ideological divisions would define the labor movement after 1900, displacing the working-class unity of the preceding decades. Thus, as the new century dawned, neither popular movements nor the government imposed serious constraints on the actions of the nation's capitalists. Working people, African Americans, immigrants, and women would need to find new ways to mitigate their subordinate position in American society.

Radicals and Reformers in the Progressive Era 1900—1914

...By the turn of the century, many Americans — wageworkers, the middle class, elite humanitarians — sensed that corporate power was out of control and that the industrial order needed fundamental reform. The same giant corporations that had brought an incredible new array of products from Crisco to the Model T had also brought incredible exploitation, indignities, and even death. The bitter defeats of the Homestead and Pullman strikes had confirmed the dominance of corporate enterprise and large-scale production and distribution. The United States was now the greatest industrial power in the world, and the Populist vision of a nation of yeoman farmers had faded. Even the republican and producer ideals of the Knights of Labor, which were rooted in the world of the artisan, were clearly no longer viable. But

millions of ordinary Americans had grown indignant over the inhuman living and working conditions endured by many laborers and with the corruption that had been rife in U.S. political and economic spheres since the Gilded Age...

Historians use the term *progressivism* to describe [a wide-ranging set of movements or coalitions that had sprung up to address the cultural, economic, social, and political dislocations and inequities caused by the growth of industrial capitalism.] The term is confusing because it does not refer to a single movement or party but rather applies to a network of overlapping and sometimes conflicting organizations and coalitions that campaigned to reform American society between 1890 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914...

Millions of Americans from all walks of life marched under the progressive banner. Some were working people battling for better pay and control over their lives. Others were urban reformers striving to improve living and working conditions in the slums. Some “reformers” were actually what we might consider conservative in their goals — they wanted to “Americanize” millions of new immigrants, to close working-class saloons, or to make city government more businesslike. Progressive politicians set goals of “trust busting,” regulating corporate activity, and conserving the natural environment. And some parts of the movement addressed issues specific to a certain gender, race, or social group, such as women campaigning for the right to vote and African Americans protesting disfranchisement and lynching...

Progressivism was much more than that: it was an insurgency from below. Women of all classes were important in spearheading major reforms. Another critical influence came ironically from radicals skeptical of progressivism’s potential for effectiveness. Socialists, Wobblies, and other groups who wanted a more thoroughgoing transformation of the system than that offered by progressive reformers mobilized pressure that would lead to more moderate reforms. As these popular insurgencies moved party politics to the left, national political leaders — for one of the few times in U.S. history — competed to be known as “reformers” and “progressives.” Even if feminists, radicals, African Americans, and industrial workers failed to win all of their demands, they succeeded in setting the political agenda to which the more famous progressives like Roosevelt and Wilson would respond.

Militant Communities

Although most working people were neither anarchists nor socialists, radical ideas about the need for fundamental changes had substantial influence in working-class communities in the early twentieth century. The clearest indication of this sentiment was the creation of a new labor organization, the Industrial Workers of the World — the IWW, or Wobblies, as they were popularly known. “An injury to one is an injury to all,” the IWW declared; “the working class and the employing class have nothing in common.”

The IWW sought to abolish the wage system and to create a society in which workers would own and control the factories, mines, and railroads where they labored. IWW leaders believed that the vehicle for revolutionary change should be a union, not a political party. Organizing all workers into one militant union, they asserted, would lead to a massive general strike. Capitalism would be overthrown, and the people would run industry in a decentralized, democratic fashion.

Dissident socialists, including Eugene V. Debs, together with other radicals and industrial unionists organized the IWW in 1905. Leadership came, in part, from the Western Federation of Miners (WFM), which represented thirty thousand hard-rock miners in the Rocky Mountains. During a decade of bitter strikes against some of the largest corporations in America, the WFM’s leaders had come to reject capitalism and to embrace unions that spanned an entire industry (steelworkers or railroad workers) rather than a specific craft (carpenters or machinists). The federation’s efforts to build alliances with workers in the East culminated in the founding convention of the IWW in Chicago. “Fellow workers,” western miner Big Bill Haywood proclaimed, “this is the Continental Congress of the working class.” The new movement, he declared, “shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism.”

Spirited, colorful, and proud in the face of jail sentences and vigilante attacks, the IWW was the most egalitarian labor organization in American history. It was committed to organizing all workers — skilled and unskilled, men and women, black and white, Mexican, Chinese and Japanese. The Wobblies drew upon longstanding traditions: the Knights’ belief in organizing across ethnic and racial lines; the shop-floor control enjoyed by skilled craftsmen; and the industrial unionism of coal miners and the American Railway Union.

At first, factionalism, government harassment, and an economic downturn frustrated the IWW. But in 1909 it won nationwide attention by

leading a successful strike among unskilled immigrant steelworkers in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania. In 1909 and 1910 the IWW also led a series of “free speech” fights in western cities, which served as hiring centers for jobs in forests, mines, and fields. But the union’s reputation soared in 1912, when it led a massive textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. A new Massachusetts state law requiring employers to cut workers’ hours had backfired when employers retaliated by speeding up the looms to compensate for the lost time. The last straw for Lawrence’s thirty thousand textile workers came when mill owners announced a pay cut. Half of the mills’ labor force were young women between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, many of whom suffered from malnutrition and overwork. Two days after the pay cut announcement, more than twenty thousand workers of forty nationalities went on strike. “We want bread and roses, too” was the strikers’ memorable slogan.

The IWW organized separate strike and relief committees for workers of different nationalities and translated speeches and literature into every language. Strikers threw up massive picket lines around the mills and paraded through the streets. Mill owners and government officials responded with a massive show of force, including a declaration of martial law and a ban on public meetings. With an entire town deprived of the workers’ meager wages, hunger was widespread. Eventually, New York socialists, concerned about the effects of hunger on the strikers’ children, organized to care for them. Margaret Sanger, a nurse who later became famous for promoting birth control, arrived in Lawrence to transport children out of the strife-torn town. “Out of the 119 children, only four had underwear on... their outerwear was almost in rags... their coats were simply torn to shreds,” she later testified.

The departure of the children generated so much sympathy for the strikers that Lawrence authorities decreed that children would no longer be allowed to leave the city. Two days later, a group of Philadelphia socialists arrived to transport two hundred children. As a member of the Philadelphia Women’s committee testified, “The police closed in on us with their clubs, beating right and left with no thought of the children who were in the most desperate danger of being trampled to death. The mothers and children were thus hurled in a mass and bodily dragged to a military truck, and even then clubbed, irrespective of the cries of the panic-stricken women and children.” This was the turning point. Across the country, public opinion turned against the employers. In March, the mill owners agreed to a settlement providing raises and overtime pay to workers.

The Lawrence textile strike demonstrated that immigrant workers could unite to win a strike, but the victory did not open the way for widespread industrial organization. A year later, in 1913, the IWW met serious defeat in a silk workers’ strike in Paterson, New Jersey, where thousands of immigrant women, men, and children had walked out of the mills. Over the course of seven months, IWW leaders again organized picket lines and called enthusiastic rallies, and again the authorities responded with repression, even arresting socialist Frederick Sumner Boyd for reading the free-speech clause of the New Jersey state constitution at a strike meeting. But Paterson employers, unlike their Lawrence counterparts, exploited divisions within the silk workers’ ranks. The skilled, English-speaking workers and their craft unions, put off by the radicalism and anarchism of many of the Italian and Jewish workers, were slow to join the strike. The strike collapsed when the English-speaking mill workers agreed to return to work on a shop-by-shop basis, leaving the unskilled immigrants without support.

In mining communities in the Appalachian and Rocky mountains, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) overcame the cultural difficulties that defeated the strikers in Paterson. Although highly skilled, coal miners had no tradition of apprenticeship and therefore little control over who entered their trade. Thus recent immigrants or African Americans could find work as miners more easily than in other trades. Drawing on the legacy of interracial unionism inherited from the Knights of Labor and black UMWA activists, the UMWA extended itself to organize all who worked in and around the mines. By 1910, nearly one-third of all coal miners were unionized, compared with one-tenth of the broader U.S. labor force.

But the mine owners fought back fiercely. In late 1913, John D. Rockefeller’s Colorado Fuel and Iron Company led other companies in an open-shop drive — an attempt to guarantee the right to work without union membership — that prompted more than ten thousand miners to strike. The battle was long and bitter. Despite the determination of the miners and their wives, who were active in the struggle, the owners refused to recognize the union. They evicted strikers from their company-owned homes and brought in deputies and the state militia to quell the protest. On Easter night in 1914, the troops attacked a strikers’ tent camp in Ludlow. Firing machine guns and setting fire to the tents, they killed sixteen people, including twelve children.

In the wake of the Ludlow massacre, the UMWA issued a “call to arms.” For ten days war raged between miners and the state militia, until federal troops finally disarmed the miners. IWW leader Bill Haywood

concluded that the country was gripped by “an irreconcilable class struggle” between workers and capitalists. Most progressives would have avoided those terms, but many of them agreed that in Lawrence, Paterson, and Ludlow, the industrial system had generated a terrifying conflict that threatened the very stability and promise of American society.

Like the electoral challenge by the Socialist party, the militant agitation of the Wobblies and mine workers moved the terms of progressive debate to the left. Moderate reformers took up more radical ideas for two reasons. First, they were worried about the threat posed by socialists and Wobblies. They sought to counter the appeal of the radicals — and prevent the more fundamental changes those groups favored — by offering changes that responded, in part, to the radical critique. When the radicals publicized the inequities and degradations brought by industrial capitalism, progressives proposed ways that reform and regulation could make capitalism more humane while also preserving it.

The second reason moderate reformers incorporated some radical ideas is that they found them attractive. They agreed with the radicals about the threats posed by unregulated big business and great concentrations of wealth. They also adopted the radicals’ view that only a strong national state could tame the giant national corporations — an idea that socialist activists had long argued, but that broke with deep-seated U.S. traditions of limiting the power of the federal government. Although the role of the state espoused by Democratic and Republican progressives was not as vast as that endorsed by the socialists, the moderate reformers did come to accept and endorse a new regulatory function for the federal government.

Toward the Modern State

Progressivism responded to the economic, social, and political dislocations that accompanied industrial capitalism’s dramatic growth during the Gilded Age: rapid technological change; intense and episodic conflict between capital and labor; the influx of enormous numbers of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America; and the growing national and international reach of American capitalism. Each of these problems posed a special challenge to older American ideals of individual independence and equality.

Progressivism looked to an active government to blunt the worst of

capitalism’s economic and social problems. Working people, in coalition with socialists, radicals, and feminists, were key participants in progressive reform struggles, helping to win passage of pro-labor legislation, especially the federal Clayton Act. These reforms helped lay the foundation for our modern notion of government and were among progressivism’s most lasting contributions to American political life.

But by the time war broke out in Europe in 1914, the central role many progressives desired for government had been only partially realized: federal, state, and local laws minimally regulated the economy and industrial relations while extending limited protections to consumers and women and children. Assembling the cross-class coalition that made progressive reforms possible had involved significant compromises. Only a relatively small number of working people — those organized into skilled-craft unions and those working in industries covered by limited factory reforms — fully benefited from the passage of progressive legislation. Many others — unskilled and manual laborers, domestic servants, agricultural wageworkers, and sharecroppers — remained outside progressivism’s protective sphere.

African Americans experienced the Progressive Era quite literally as a tightening noose: the federal government repeatedly ignored the wanton lynching of hundreds of African Americans in the South. At the same time, the modest political and economic gains these Americans had made during Reconstruction were rolled back in a flood of Progressive Era disfranchisement laws and the purging of African Americans from federal jobs by the Wilson administration. Women had been central to the movements that made up progressivism and had succeeded in expanding their public role in American life. Yet their most important demand — for the right to vote — remained stalled as the United States entered World War I.

Despite these very real limitations, progressivism represented a watershed that marked the beginning of a new relationship between working people and the government. The era’s limited reforms inaugurated a period of governmental involvement in economic and social affairs that would intensify in coming decades. As a result, working people would look increasingly to government to ameliorate the worst excesses of industrial capitalism. Progressivism set the terms of this new relationship, as working people’s experiences in their struggle for a better life were now linked inextricably to national political, economic, and social developments.