

Work, Class, and Politics in Civil War Era Chicago, 1848–73

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This is an interim report on an 18-month research project led by John Jentz and Richard Schneirov investigating the industrial, social, and political sources for working-class formation in Chicago, 1848–73 under a grant awarded by the National Endowment for the Humanities for a pilot project for a longer and more ambitious study of Chicago's working class in the 1877–94 period.

The project is based at the Family and Community History Center of The Newberry Library in Chicago. With the aid of several part-time assistants we are thoroughly researching Chicago's English and German-language press, as well as undertaking a computer analysis of the local federal manufacturing and population censuses for 1850, 1860, and 1870. Our goal is to produce a book-length monograph.

It is a curious fact that 1848–73 is a much-neglected period in U.S. labor history. Labor historians who begin their studies in the early national period usually end in the 1850s on the eve of the Civil War. Alternatively, recent monographs on the later nineteenth century begin with the 1870s or 1880s and study the origins of an overtly class movement in the Gilded Age. Yet, the 1848–73 period is a distinct and formative period in American history. It witnessed the coalescence of a revolutionary middle class, the emergence of a new party system, a bloody civil war, and an attempt at a thoroughgoing social reconstruction of the South. In the midst of this came the birth of the first viable national unions and a new labor reform movement with national political ambitions.

Almost two decades ago David Montgomery wrote *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862–1872*, which dealt with these issues and still remains the touchstone for any labor historian investigating this period. Nonetheless, that book has not inspired monographic work on the local level. Consequently, a major gap remains in nineteenth-century labor history.

An equally serious gap exists in the lack of work on Chicago labor history. In 1870 Chicago was a city of 300,000 and was on the cutting edge of industrialization. By 1880 it had been transformed from a commercial center to the nation's third leading manufacturing city. More important, Chicago had a

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diverse industrial base and a multiethnic, largely foreign-born work force, which distinguishes it from Philadelphia and much-studied Eastern manufacturing towns such as Lynn, Massachusetts. It seems something of a scandal, therefore, that after decades of neglect, scholarly work on Chicago's labor history revived only in the late 1970s with the Chicago Project in Munich and the research of a growing number of doctoral candidates. Even this work, however, has not focused on the period before 1873.

In attempting to redress this imbalance our project began with two central questions: What were the origins of the eight-hour general strike that swept the city in May, 1867, and why did the labor reform movement which gave rise to that strike decline in the late 1860s, culminating in a split between German-speaking Lassallean socialists and English-speaking labor reformers? Our concern for situating labor history in the overall political and economic nexus of the period led us in several directions in search for answers.

One major focus for our work has been to explain the political origins of the multiethnic labor reform movement that emerged during the Civil War era. This has led us toward the thesis that ethnic culture served as a "carrier" of different but compatible versions of an international plebeian republicanism which was particularly strong among artisans speaking the German language. Support for the war effort was an outgrowth of this republican commitment. At the same time, workers' experience in the war helped spread this culture more widely among the Irish, primarily through the Fenians.

A second focus of our work has been the industrial transformation of Chicago as a context for the labor movement. As part of our research we are comparing the manufacturing economy of Chicago to that of Philadelphia based on census data from the Philadelphia Social History Project. We find that by 1870 the size of firms and the concentration of employees in most of the city's industries were roughly equal to that in Philadelphia, although Chicago's economy was obviously smaller. The accumulation of capital that underlay this growth took place in two significant ways. Merchant capitalists invested in manufacturing, applying the latest machine technology to the production of simple goods like wooden building materials, packed meat, and clothing. The unskilled and casual laborers who worked in these industries rarely organized and tended to engage in riotous strikes as a means of protest. In contrast, artisan entrepreneurs predominated in the metal industry and wood crafts. This craft sector was the origin of a "mechanics' ideology" based on the notion of reciprocal relations among producers. This ideology lay at the heart of labor reform that produced the eight-hour and producers' cooperation movements.

Our third focus is the relation between the social mobilization of workingmen during this era and an emerging form of ethnic politics. As the millennial élan of the eight-hour movement faded in the late 1860s, making a city-wide, interethnic labor coalition harder to organize, the political activity of workingmen took new forms. The creation of immigrant working-class neighborhoods,

whose residents were increasingly mobilized by ethnic leaders and professional politicians, lay the groundwork for a shift in the early 1870s from work issues to neighborhood and cultural issues. The arrival of this form of politics, which was at the center of Chicago labor history for the rest of the century, has led us to select one of the most important of working-class industrial neighborhoods, the Irish community of Bridgeport, for intensive study.

In the interests of furthering a comparative perspective in labor history, we would be interested in corresponding with those who are doing similar work either in this or in other periods.