

All of these factors led to a great uprising of the labor movement in the years 1833-1837. During this period labor organization grew with a rapidity hardly matched again during the century. Trade union membership grew from 26,250, to 300,000. In New York City 11,500 workingmen, almost two-thirds of the workers, were organized. More than 150 unions were organized in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. But trade unionism was no longer confined to the Atlantic seaboard. Workers were organizing unions in Buffalo, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Louisville, and other regions emerging out of the frontier stage.<sup>28</sup>

Wage earners who had never before been organized, including plasterers, cigarmakers, seamstresses, handloom weavers, and milliners, now formed unions and went on strike. In the four years from 1833 to 1837, in the country as a whole, there were one hundred and sixty-eight strikes. Of these, one hundred and three were for higher wages, twenty-six for a ten-hour day, and four for the closed shop. Unions in the building trades—carpenters, bricklayers, masons, plasterers, and painters—struck thirty-four times; the shoemakers or cordwainers twenty-four times, and the rest of the strikes were scattered among tailors, hatters, bakers, sailors, rope makers, printers, stonemasons, mechanics in government arsenals, leather dressers, glass cutters, railroad laborers, stevedores, and so forth.<sup>29</sup>

Women too "caught the spark of freedom's fire." "Women as well as men have certain inalienable rights," said the Lady Shoe Binders of Lynn, Massachusetts, when they formed their Society, "among which is the right at all times of peaceably assembling together to consult upon the common good." "We know of no method so likely to procure us relief," said another group of women workers, "as that which has of late been successfully practiced by the mechanics of this city."<sup>30</sup> Women tailors and seamstresses, umbrella sewers and bookbinders, shoe binders and cordwainers, in New England, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore joined together for protection "against the inevitable consequences of reduced and inadequate wages."

Women in the factories were also on the march. Indeed, the factory girls were among the most courageous fighters of the period, for they

between nations that have ever been hostile to each other. The interest of labor is a subject upon which all workmen can agree... [and] we may expect that it will not be long before the working classes of every part of the civilized world will be united by an indissoluble bond."

Probably the most practical example of international labor solidarity during the 1830's was the action in 1832 of the Typographical Association of New York in sending a delegate to visit the Journeymen Printers Unions of Great Britain to warn their members not to believe advertisements which appeared in the British newspapers announcing that "hundreds of printers could find employment and good wages" in New York City. These printers, the delegate informed the British trade unionists, would be used as strike-breakers. (*Boston Post*, November 17, 1832.)

had to conduct their struggles not only against their employers but against the overwhelming prejudice of the time against public activity of women.

"It required some spirit," one writer states, "for Yankee 'young ladies' to brave public opinion in order to develop strike tactics at this early period... It was felt that young women should not march about the streets, making a spectacle of themselves. And yet, in spite of disapproval they were prepared to do this in order to protect their standards whether it was conventional or not."<sup>31</sup>

When the factory owners cut wages in 1834, the Dover, New Hampshire, girls were the first to defy convention by turning out seven hundred-strong and marching down to the courthouse where these "daughters of freemen" drew up a statement which declared: "However freely the epithet of 'factory slaves' may be bestowed upon us, we will never deserve it by a base and cringing submission to proud wealth or haughty insolence." The strike was lost, but the girls, refusing to return to the factories, went home. They raised a fund to pay transportation for those who lived some distance from the mills, and sent an appeal to editors "opposed to the system of slavery attempted to be established in our manufacturing establishment," urging them to advise girls against coming to Dover to work.<sup>32</sup>

When the wages at Lowell, Massachusetts, were cut 15 per cent early in 1834, the girls held several protest meetings. A few days later the leader of the movement was fired. As she left the mill, she waved her bonnet in the air as a signal to the others who were watching from the windows. They struck, assembled about her, and eight hundred marched in a procession about the town. After listening to one of their leaders make a "flaming Mary Wollstonecraft speech on the rights of women and the iniquities of the monied aristocracy," they resolved "to have their own way even if they died for it." On the second day of their turn-out the strikers issued a proclamation entitled *Union is Power*:

"We circulate this paper wishing to obtain the names of all who imbibe the spirit of our patriotic ancestors, who preferred privation to bondage and parted with all that renders life desirable—and even life itself—to produce independence for their children."

Twelve hundred more girls responded by joining in a pledge "not [to] go back into the mills to work unless our wages are continued to us as they have been." They also pledged "That none of us will go back unless they receive us all as one."<sup>33</sup>

The strike was broken. Many of the Lowell girls went home to the farms but those who remained in the mills were not discouraged by their

"If the mass of the people were enabled by their labour to secure for themselves and their families a full and abundant supply of the comforts and conveniences of life, the consumption of articles, particularly of dwellings, furniture, and clothing, would amount to at least twice the quantity it does at present, and of course the demand, by which alone employers are enabled either to subsist or accumulate, would likewise be increased in equal proportion. . . . It is therefore the real interest (for instance) of the Hatter, that every man in the community should be enabled to clothe his own head and those of his family with an abundant supply of the best articles of that description; because the flourishing demand, thereby created, and which depends altogether on the ability of the multitude to purchase, is that which alone enables him to pay his rent and support his family in comfort. . . ."

On the other hand, if labor was miserably paid, "the demand for their articles must necessarily cease from the forced inability of the people to consume: trade must in consequence languish, and losses and failures become the order of the day."<sup>19</sup>

The Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia which lasted until 1831 devoted most of its energy to political action. Its most important contribution to the rising labor movement was its example of labor solidarity among workers of various trades. The next development of this trend was the organization in 1831 of the New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and Other Workingmen.

Like the Mechanics' Union of Philadelphia, the New England Association was a product of the struggle for the shorter workday. Although by this time the ten-hour day had been gained in New York and to some extent in Philadelphia, New Englanders still worked from sunup to sunset. In 1827 the carpenters and masons of Boston had been unsuccessful in securing the shorter workday, but the movement continued, spreading north to New Hampshire and south to Connecticut. "Meetings have been held and resolutions adopted in various parts of New England," said the *Boston Transcript* of February 20, 1832, "recommending ten hours per day, as the amount that ought hereafter to be considered a day's work." Out of one such meeting in Providence, Rhode Island, came the call for the organization of a movement which would unite "the

too many members. The number of educated physicians, for example, is not too great for the population. But, not a few physicians remain without employment, while many persons, from inability to pay for medical advice, suffer all the evils of sickness. It cannot be said that we have too many shoemakers, tailors, or cabinet-makers, while multitudes are but indifferently provided with clothing and furniture." Gouge, a progressive Philadelphia editor, was active in the workingmen's movement and may have had a hand in drafting the preamble of the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations.

cultivators of the soil, and the mechanics and every class of laborers [to overthrow] the oppression of the idle, avaricious, and aristocratic."

The New England Association first convened in Boston, February, 1832, to draw up a constitution. One of its provisions was that all members except practical farmers should pledge themselves to work only ten hours a day with no reduction in wages. It was found impossible to enforce this provision so a war chest was set up to relieve any member thrown out of work for living up to the pledge. But this war chest was puny indeed compared to the \$20,000 put up by the employers to break the Boston ship-carpenters' strike for the ten-hour day. Discouraged in its attempt at direct trade union action for the shorter day, the Association turned to political action. Vigilance committees organized in various states collected data on labor conditions and memorialized state legislatures to regulate the "hours of labor, according to the standard adopted by the Association." After four conventions, the Association devoted most of its time to political activity. Its most important contribution to the labor movement in the United States was the fact that it made the first attempt to include all groups of workers in a single organization—factory workers, common laborers, and skilled mechanics. The true union, the founders of the Association believed, should "embrace every citizen whose daily exertions from the highest Artist to the lowest Laborer, are his means of subsistence." These men—Dr. Charles Douglas, editor of the *New England Artisan*, a weekly labor paper published in Rhode Island, Seth Luther, the *Artisan's* "Travelling Agent," and John B. Eldredge and Samuel Whitcomb, Jr., trade union leaders—believed strongly in labor solidarity, and when they emphasized the need for "the organization of the Workingmen in every town and county in New England," they meant all types of workers.<sup>20</sup>

Association leaders had expected to recruit many factory workers whose current militancy seemed to promise much in the way of trade union organization. When, in 1828, the mill owners in Paterson, New Jersey, tried to change the dinner hour from 12 to 1, the operatives, mostly children, conducted the first recorded strike of factory workers in America. "The children would not stand for it," said one observer, "for fear if they assented to this, the next thing would be to deprive them of eating at all."<sup>21</sup> The militia was called out to quell this labor disturbance. Later that year four hundred girls in the textile factories at Dover, New Hampshire, went on strike, and as they paraded through the town they asked: Who among the Dover girls could "ever bear the shocking fate of slaves to share?"<sup>22</sup>

Soon after its formation the Association appointed lecturers to spread the doctrines of trade unionism to the factory girls. Their efforts to

organize the women were unsuccessful. Though it failed to recruit factory workers in any number, the Association brought the conditions of the factory prisons to public attention and initiated the movement to place the operatives under the supervision and protection of the law of the land. It also denounced the practice of forcing little children to work in factories "without any time for healthy recreation and mental culture."<sup>23</sup>

One of the Association's most important contributions to the labor movement was its publication of an address delivered by one of its leaders, Seth Luther. Luther was the Tom Paine of the first labor movement, and his *Address to the Working Men of New England* was widely read during the 1830's. It was both a call to action and a penetrating analysis of conditions in New England factories which made a mockery of the Declaration of Independence. It was to restore the ideals of the Revolution that Luther wrote his impassioned analysis.

He began by referring to the sufferings and privations of the great patriots of the Revolutionary War. When we read "of their undying zeal and untiring efforts, we feel it incumbent upon us to sound an alarm when our rights are not only endangered, but some of them already wrested from us by the powerful and inhuman grasp of monopolized wealth." These monopolists, he said, were advising the American people to follow the splendid example of England. Luther revealed that beneath the cover of English monarchical brilliance, half the people of England were starving. Child labor, shortened lives of workers, ignorance, vice and universal squalor—is this what the manufacturers wanted in the land of Washington, Revere, and Warren?

"A patriotic cry is kept up by men who are endeavoring by *all the means in their power* to cut down the wages of *our own people*, and who send agents to *Europe*, to induce *foreigners* to come here, to underwork *American* citizens, to support *American* industry and the *American* system." After describing the conditions in the "prisons of New England called cotton mills," Luther said, "We do not believe there can be a single person found east of the mountains who ever thanked God for permission to work in a cotton mill."

The time had come to bring an end to this type of "American system" and replace it with an American system "where education and intelligence are generally diffused, and the enjoyment of life and liberty secured to all." Only through united effort and organization could the workers bring this new system into being. Men of property who maintained organization "to protect their precious persons from danger," ranted and denounced the efforts of the poor to seek justice as a "most *horrible combination*." But these arguments had been used before. "The Declaration of Independence was the work of a combination, and was as hateful to

the *traitors and Tories* of those days as combinations among working men are now to the *avaricious monopolist and purse proud aristocrat*."

Luther's address concluded:

"Fellow citizens...farmers, mechanics and laborers, we have borne these evils by far too long; we have been deceived by all parties; we must take our business into our own hands. Let us awake. Our cause is the cause of truth—of justice and humanity. It *must prevail*. Let us be determined no longer to be deceived by the cry of those who produce nothing and who enjoy all, and who insultingly term us—the farmers, the mechanics and the laborers—the lower orders, and exultingly claim our homage for themselves, as the *higher orders*—while the Declaration of Independence asserts that 'All men are created equal.'"<sup>24</sup>

Luther's *Address* quickly ran through three editions and a special edition for European workers was planned. From Maine to Philadelphia, workers were stirred by his call to restore the ideals of the Revolution. He reached them at a time when workingmen were being hard hit by the steeply rising cost of living. The price index rose from 90.1 in 1833 to 115.7 in 1836. Yet skilled mechanics were averaging only \$4 to \$5 a week, cotton factory operatives from \$2.19 to \$2.53 a week, seamstresses on home-work \$1 to \$1.25 a week, and several thousand women in Massachusetts, working in their homes as shoe binders, as little as 25 cents a day. Moreover, most workers were paid in notes issued by state banks and actually worth only 50 cents on the dollar in payment for goods and rents.<sup>25</sup>

Luther's pamphlet strengthened the determination of American workers to unite to solve their problems—a determination fired by the revolutionary European upheavals of the early 'thirties. The Revolution of 1830 in France in particular convinced them that the workers were "the masters of their own liberties, that they have but to will it, and cooperate one with another, and they must be free."<sup>26</sup> A message sent by mechanics and workingmen of New York to the workers of Paris declared: "Fellow Laborers! We owe you our grateful thanks. And not we only, but the industrious classes—the *people* of every nation. In defending your own rights, you have vindicated ours."<sup>27</sup> \*

\* Another example of the interest of the early labor movement in the international struggle for freedom is the Philadelphia Typographical Society's contribution of \$90 in 1827 to assist the Greek people in their battle for independence. (See George A. Tracy, *History of the Typographical Union*, p. 55.)

On September 13, 1834, the *National Trades' Union* (New York) printed the address of the working men of Nantes, France, to the Trades' Union of England which proposed "to unite the working men of several countries." The labor paper hailed the address. "This," it declared, "is now the most important movement that has ever been made in the world. From it will result union and harmony

failure. When the factory owners cut wages another 12½ per cent in 1836, 1,500 Lowell girls struck again. As they paraded in their strike demonstration they sang:

*Oh! Isn't it a pity that such a pretty girl as I  
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?  
Oh! I cannot be a slave;  
I will not be a slave,  
For I'm so fond of liberty  
That I cannot be a slave.*<sup>34</sup>

This time the girls formed the "Factory Girls Association" with a membership of 2,500. Their resolutions informed the manufacturers that they would not receive communications except through their officers. They were "daughters of freemen" and would not permit corporation tyrants to dominate their lives. "As our fathers resisted unto blood the lordly avarice of the British ministry," they announced, "so we, their daughters, never will wear the yoke which has been prepared for us." They would rather die in the alms-houses "than to yield to the wicked oppressions attempted to be imposed upon us." The strike lasted a month. Evicted from their boarding houses, and with no funds to sustain them, the girls were starved into submission.<sup>35</sup>

Other factory girls followed "the example of their pretty sisters at Lowell." When the girls of Amesbury were ordered to tend two looms at the same pay, they stopped work, proceeded to the Baptist Vestry, elected officers and adopted resolutions pledging that "under a forfeit of five dollars" they would not go back until the speed-up was abandoned. "The agent," reported the *Boston Evening Transcript* of March 25, 1836, "finding them determined to persevere, sent a written notice that they might come back." The strike was victorious.

These struggles, though militant, were not succeeded by stable labor organizations. Although employers did not greatly fear these activities, they took no chances. Strike leaders were discharged for "mutiny" and their names forwarded to other manufacturers to prevent them from getting jobs elsewhere.

Some workingmen were hostile to the entrance of women into industry and their activities in the labor movement on the ground that women workers lowered men's wages. But many agreed with Seth Luther who pointed out in an *Address*: "It is quite certain that unless we have the female sex on our side, we cannot hope to accomplish any object we have in view."<sup>36</sup> Thus when the Ladies' Shoe Binders of Lynn struck for higher wages in 1834, they were supported by the men's Cordwainers Union, which solicited strike funds and, even more important, resolved that they "would not work for any shoe manufacturer" who refused to

meet the women's demands. They even urged all citizens in Lynn and surrounding towns to boycott such manufacturers.<sup>37</sup>

The Philadelphia Journeymen Cigar Makers welcomed the formation of a union of women workers in the trade, and in 1835 resolved, "That the present low wages hitherto received by the females engaged in cigar making, is far below a fair compensation for the labor rendered. Therefore Resolved, That we recommend them in a body to strike with us, and thereby make it a mutual interest with both parties to sustain each other in their rights."<sup>38</sup>

In 1836, in Philadelphia, the men's Cordwainers Union and the Ladies' Shoe Binders Society—though not organically united—struck together. The men announced: "Although they [the employers] may forget that they have mothers, we have resolved to take them under our protection, to flourish or sink with them." Even if they won their demands, they declared, they would not work until the women had won theirs.<sup>39</sup>

Co-operation between factory workers and skilled mechanics occurred frequently during the 1830's. The best example is the great struggle in Paterson during the summer of 1835. On July 3, the children in Paterson's textile mills struck for the reduction of the working day to 11 hours for five days and 9 hours on Saturdays. Other reasons for the strike were: opposition to the store-order system, the vicious fine system, and holding back of full wages. Toward the end of the month, the parents and guardians of the striking children formed the "Paterson Association for the Protection of the Working Classes of Paterson." They called for assistance from the workers in neighboring cities.

Newark workers responded at once by setting up a committee to raise funds and sending another committee to investigate conditions in Paterson. The investigators reported that conditions in the Paterson mills "belong rather to the dark ages than to the present times, and would be more congenial to the climate of his majesty the emperor and autocrat of all of the Russias, than this 'land of the free and the home of the brave,' this boasted asylum for the oppressed of all nations." The mechanics of Newark urged the strikers to stand out until they won, and promised continued financial support. Money and encouragement came from New York workers as well.

Heartened and sustained, the Paterson workers held out until the owners agreed to reduce working time by one and one-half to two hours per day. The working week was to be 69 hours, 12 hours a day for the first five days and nine hours on Saturdays.<sup>40</sup>

This working class solidarity led to organic labor unity. The Mechanics' Union of Trades' Associations had vanished, but its spirit was marching on.

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## CHAPTER VIII

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## CHAPTER IX

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