flames. One hundred of the 160 people aboard perished, including a prominent Cleveland minister, a pair of newlyweds from Buffalo, and a female cousin of Rutherford B. Hayes.

Three months later the railroads faced a different kind of setback when in March the United States Supreme Court upheld the right of the states to regulate private enterprise used by the public, meaning that the railroads alone would no longer be allowed to set the highly profitable rates they charged for the storage and transport of goods. The case, *Munn v. Illinois*, was the result of efforts by farmers united in the National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry; the farmers sought to reduce price gouging by the railroads that controlled the flow of agricultural products to big-city markets. The high court, in a 7–2 ruling, established the constitutionality of the so-called Granger laws—the right of state governments to restrict commerce on railroads, ferries, bridges, waterways, and other facilities, on the grounds that when one puts "property to a use in which the public has an interest, he, in effect, grants to the public an interest in that use, and must submit to be controlled by the public for the common good." The decision was a blow to the autonomy of the railroads and the first step toward the creation of the Interstate Commerce Act of 1887 and the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate national transport.

Chastened by *Munn* and contemplating declining revenues due to the court's ruling, the major railroads agreed to halt their self-destructive rate wars. The heads of the big eastern roads—John W. Garrett of the Baltimore & Ohio, William H. Vanderbilt of the New York Central, Hugh J. Jewett of the Erie, and Tom Scott of the Pennsylvania—held a series of meetings in which they worked out ways to pool their freight schedules and adjust shipping rates for their mutual advantage. They also discussed the need for wage cuts and how any ensuing strikes might be combated. The Susquehanna debacle of 1874 was still a fresh memory, and in 1876 the Boston and Maine had been challenged by a potent walkout of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, a strike crushed only through attrition of the Brotherhood's funds.

It was also recalled, however, that Franklin Gowen's Reading had survived a recent work stoppage because it happened to have a pooling arrangement with other coal carriers; its share of the annual business secured, the railroad was less affected by a short-term strike and could afford to wait out disgruntled workers. The four major roads are believed to have agreed on a similar arrangement—what some critics dubbed "strike insurance." When one railroad cut workers' wages and suffered a strike, the other three would cover its lost traffic for the strike's duration. Once that strike had been broken or resolved, the next railroad could roll back wages, with the same guarantee of support from the others. It was a surefire plan to limit the potential losses from labor disruptions and render rail employees' striking power nil.

This self-serving strategy allowed the firms to conveniently avoid dealing with the very real grievances simmering among rank-and-file workers—exhausting work schedules, the lack of overtime pay, an unacceptable frequency of on-the-job injuries, and a seniority system that was exploited to underpay new hires. By choosing the subterfuge of "strike insurance," the corporations neglected the opportunity to address the simple fact that workingmen were being pushed by the rail system to work longer for less pay in a dangerous occupation that in every way treated them as replaceable cogs. "Drive a rat into a corner and he will fight," warned the *Irish World* at the end of June 1877. "Drive your serfs to desperation ... and in their desperation they will some day pounce upon you and destroy you."

The long-anticipated confrontation began two weeks later, on July 16, at Martinsburg, West Virginia. That day the Baltimore & Ohio had announced a 10 percent wage cut, the second since fall 1876. Firemen were to be lowered from $1.75 to $1.58 per day, brakemen from $1.50 to $1.35. The company also said it planned to reduce the number of days available for work. For several hours unhappy trainmen milled about the Martinsburg yards discussing the cuts; then the crew of a cattle train abruptly stopped work, leaving their live cargo stranded. When management sought other workers to replace the crew, the crowd...
of employees announced that the yard was to be frozen. To emphasize the point, B & O brakeman Richard Zepp led his fellow workers in uncoupling trains so they could not be moved. Mayor A. T. Shutt arrived on the scene and ordered three men taken into custody, but the arresting police were themselves quickly surrounded and made to free the prisoners. Railroad officials in Wheeling, the state capital, learning by telegraph of what had occurred, implored West Virginia governor Henry M. Matthews to order the Beverly Light Guards, a local Martinsburg militia, to secure the B & O yards at once.

The militia, under the command of Colonel C. J. Faulkner, entered the yards early the next morning and attempted to move the cattle train that was still standing in the station from the previous day, but no engineer would cooperate. Soldiers then took charge of the locomotive. When the cars began to move a striking fireman named William Vandergriff threw a track switch, diverting the train. Private John Poisal of the Berkeley Guards confronted Vandergriff, rifle in hand, at which Vandergriff drew a pistol and fired, grazing the soldier, who immediately returned fire as did other militiamen, mortally wounding Vandergriff. Other strikers then shot Poisal, bloodying his right hand. Most of the militiamen were locals who were halfhearted about policing the strikers in the first place, and the exchange of gunfire and the wounding of two men seemed to permanently sour them on the mission. Many walked away, ending the militia's brief effort to break the strike, while the cattle were off-loaded and driven to graze in a nearby pasture.

Frustrated by the militia's abandonment of its duty, the B & O demanded that Governor Matthews request federal troops, the rail bosses assuring President Hayes in a separate telegram that "this great national highway can only be restored for public use by the interposition of U.S. forces." Hayes, installed recently as president on a Republican promise to formally end Reconstruction by withdrawing federal troops from the South, stood at an historical crossroads. Although the fourth article of the Constitution, which promises each state a republican form of government, required the president to send troops at the request of a state's gov-

ernor to quell domestic violence, not since the time of President Jackson had the president dispatched federal soldiers during peacetime to settle a labor dispute. Hayes's immediate predecessor, President Grant, had had numerous opportunities to weigh the requests of Republican governors in Southern states for emergency military aid; often Grant had complied; more recently he had refused; but the resounding sentiment that accompanied the end of Reconstruction, as Hayes confided to his diary, was that the time had come to "put aside the bayonet," in effect to cease the practice of using federal troops to intervene in local affairs. Still, what was happening to the B & O was no longer local politics or civil rights but business. With governors and leading railroad men beseeching Washington's help, citing the complete disruption of America's railways and the inability or unwillingness of local militia to put down the rebellion, Hayes concluded he had no option but to direct three hundred troops to Martinsburg.

The soldiers, led by Major General W. H. French, were apparently under orders to avoid bloodshed; one observer said it looked as though they hoped to intimidate people simply by allowing sunlight to gleam off their bayonets. With help from those militiamen who had remained loyal, the federal troops were able to make it possible for trains to pass through the town, although they were unable to convince B & O employees to move stranded trains.

Those trains that did pass through were not having an easy time. In sympathy with Martinsburg, other workers in the vicinity--ironworkers, canal men, miners--had begun a campaign of harassment, hurling stones at trains, blocking the tracks, and occasionally skirmishing with crews. These trackside ambushes were impossible for even the army to detect or defend against, as they could come from the cover of woods or bushes, at blind curves, or from beneath rail bridges. The entire countryside, it appeared, was in rebellion against the railroad.

Hoping to head off further outbreaks, B & O brass on July 20 asked Governor John Lee Carroll of Maryland to provide armed assistance at Cumberland, a key rail junction in western Maryland, about forty miles
from Martinsburg, where a strike was imminent. Carroll wanted to avoid the mistake of Martinsburg—sending local militiamen who would prove timid and useless against their own neighbors—so he ordered two regiments of the Maryland National Guard to entrain at Baltimore. The march of the Guard’s Fifth Regiment from its armory to Baltimore’s Camden Station coincided with quitting time at local factories. At first the workers gathering along city streets instinctively cheered the passing soldiers; when word spread of their mission, however, the crowd’s temper changed. Ugly words and curses fell on the uniformed men, a hail of stones and brickbats followed, and in a moment the proud, orderly procession had become a rout, as the Guardsmen quick-marched, then ran toward the depot, covering their heads from airborne missiles.

Worse was to come. An officer of the other regiment ordered out, the Sixth, began leading his troops through the same streets where the Fifth had been attacked; by now nearly fifteen thousand protestors lay in wait. The regiment’s 150 troops cursed at, spat upon, showered with bricks and stones—ran and then panicked under the bombardment; nearly half the troops deserted. Some who gamely remained in ranks fired their rifles into the air to scare off their tormentors; when that proved ineffectual, they leveled their guns at the crowd. Ten men and boys were killed by the soldiers’ fire.

The depot itself proved no safe haven. A mob swarmed around the station and began vandalizing empty cars and equipment; one group of rioters commandeered a locomotive and managed to drive it entirely off the tracks, while another set fire to wooden freight cars on the south end of the train yard. Governor Carroll, who was himself trapped inside the station along with other state officials and National Guard officers, urgently telegraphed President Hayes for assistance. Without hesitation, Hayes dispatched several federal units to the scene.

By now the White House telegraph was clattering almost nonstop, as the workers’ insurrection—unguided by any organized trade union, yet abetted by throngs of angry citizens—spread from the B & O to the Pennsylvania Railroad. Trouble started on the Pennsylvania when the road announced that all freight trains bound east would be "doubleheaders"—a train with two locomotives and extra cars. Ordinarily a freight train was considered complete with seventeen cars, but doubleheaders often hauled as many as thirty-six. The doubling-up required one train crew to perform the work of two, allowing the railroad to discharge another crew from duty. Pittsburgh-based trainmen for the Pennsylvania had been following word of events in Martinsburg, and when at eight o’clock on the morning of Thursday, July 19, the call came to "shape up a doubleheader," a flagman named Gus Harris refused. Other railroad workers in the Pittsburgh yard were appealed to, but they chose to follow Harris’s example. When trainmaster David Garrett asked flagman Andrew Hice to get a train moving, Hice replied: "It’s a question of bread or blood, and we’re going to resist. If I go to the penitentiary I can get bread and water, and that’s about all I can get now." Within an hour of Hice’s declaration, other trains were stopped and a formidable crowd of men and boys had gathered in the Pittsburgh yard.

Railroad work stoppages in places like Martinsburg or Cumberland were inconvenient, to be sure, but Pittsburgh was a major rail crossroad and the nation’s leading industrial city. With its oil refineries, glass factories, iron mills, and steel rolling mills in almost continuous operation, the town by night, its smokestacks belching flames, was said to resemble "Hell with the lid off." The ramifications of a strike would be felt within a few hours across the entire country.

At first, efforts by local authorities to contain the situation were almost comical. Pittsburgh police ranks had been thinned by recent layoffs, so no more than eight officers were available for emergency duty in the train yards; meanwhile, a militia unit that showed up soon stacked its weapons and began mingling amicably with the strikers. "The laboring people . . . will not take up arms to put down their brethren," a striker told a reporter. "Will capital, then, rely on the United States Army? Pshaw!" He warned that even federal forces "would be swept from our path like leaves in the whirlwind." The rapidly spreading railroad strike was difficult for authority to
confront for the simple reason that it was unorganized—the largely spontaneous acting out by embittered workers of "mischievous passions...easily wrought to excess and desperation." But the circumstances did create instantaneous leadership. In Pittsburgh, a railroad federation called the Trainmen's Union had emerged in early June, its spokesman a twenty-five-year-old brakeman named Robert Ammons. The union sought to organize all railroad men under one flag, a departure from the traditionally stratified and not always cooperative brotherhoods of engineers, firemen, brakemen, and conductors. On the evening of July 19 Ammons's group rallied at Phoenix Hall on Pittsburgh's Eleventh Street, where resolutions were struck to continue opposition to the Pennsylvania's doubleheader policy. The list of other demands drawn up included a restoration of wages as received prior to June 1, rehiring of men dismissed for strike activities, and the equalizing of pay for certain job classifications. A visiting mill worker assured the railroaders of his support: "We're with you. We're in the same boat. I heard a reduction of ten percent hinted at in our mill this morning. I won't call employers despots, I won't call them tyrants, but the term capitalists is sort of synonymous and will do as well." The next night, the elite Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers had joined the Trainmen's Union, evidence of growing worker solidarity against the major roads.

Meanwhile, the brief holiday of Pittsburgh militia setting aside their duties and their guns came to an end. City officials had arranged to bring in six hundred troops of the First Division of the Pennsylvania National Guard from Philadelphia, a crack militia unit composed in part of Civil War veterans. There was a tradition of antagonism between the western areas of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia, and the First's "invasion" of Pittsburgh—it arrived in a convoy of two trains with several pieces of artillery and a Gatling gun—was vehemently resented. Even as the troop trains came into view at the outskirts of Pittsburgh, they already showed extensive damage from the stones, bricks, and chunks of coal with which they'd been bombarded as they'd passed through Harrisburg, Altoona, and other towns. Many of the trains' windows were broken and debris covered the rooftops.

The welcome was equally hostile at the corner of Liberty Street and Twenty-eighth, where the soldiers faced a crowd of six thousand strikers and spectators who pelleted them with a barrage of projectiles. The troops, hemmed in by the infuriated crowd, fired into the air, but a second volley was far more lethal, mowing down scores of people and killing twenty, including an eighteen-year-old local militiaman. The wounded included women and small children.

The town seethed in reaction. "Shot in Cold Blood by the Roughs of Philadelphia. The Lexington of the Labor Conflict Is at Hand," blasted one local headline. As the dead were grieved over and carried away, "howling crowds paraded the streets, and it was not safe to say a word against the strikers, as a blow would follow its utterance," reported the New York Times, which headlined its coverage "A Terrible Day in Pittsburgh." James Bonn & Sons, a prominent weapons dealer, was sacked of guns and ammunition. Some protestors managed to lay hands on rifles abandoned earlier by the local militia. These armed citizens then laid siege to the roundhouse, where the Philadelphia soldiers had taken cover after the shooting. The mob captured the soldiers' rations wagons, thus denying them food and water, but more dramatic measures were deemed necessary to deal with the cowards who had fired upon and killed innocent people.

The roundhouse, to the misfortune of those inside, lay at the bottom of an incline, and the crowd, unable to lure the invaders out, seized freight cars loaded with oil and coal, set them ablaze, and pushed them downhill toward the building. By Sunday morning the roundhouse was on fire and the captive guardsmen had no choice but to evacuate as best they could. "It was better to run the risk of being shot down than burned to death, and so we filed out in a compact body," one recalled. "It was lively times, I tell you, reaching the U.S. Arsenal...I thought we should all be cut to pieces." Some had changed into civilian clothes in the hope of blending into the crowd. Several soldiers were struck by bullets as they
headed for the safety of the arsenal, prompting a commander to order a Gatling gun fired to disperse those who continued to harass the troops. The mob, its fury unquenched, then turned on the railroad’s property and the downtown area, burning, looting, and destroying. More than a hundred locomotives and two thousand freight cars were savaged, along with a grain elevator and the city’s main passenger depot.

Residents awoke the next day to the sight of a huge plume of smoke over the rail yards and the newspaper headline “Pittsburgh Sacked—The City Completely in the Power of a Howling Mob.” In truth the mob, having rioted itself to exhaustion, had largely gone home, but two square miles of America’s greatest industrial city lay in near-total ruin.

By now, the Great Strike of 1877 had taken on a life of its own, causing violence and turmoil on a scale unprecedented in America’s peacetime history. In many places it assumed the form of spontaneous turnouts, as laborers at pipe works, tanneries, hog yards, mines, and rolling mills walked off. In Galveston, black longshoremen led a strike action demanding $2 per day, and were soon joined by whites. At Louisville, black sewer workers attacked the Louisville and Nashville Railroad while a marauding group of white strikers closed some factories and besieged others, urging textile workers, carpenters, and mechanics to join them. Sympathy strikes and sabotage tied up railroads from Worcester to San Francisco. So quickly did the fracas become widespread, a newspaper in Chicago telling of the rebellion’s arrival required only the succinct headline “It Is Here!”

Chicago could hardly expect a reprieve. It was the nation’s key rail hub, and its large and impoverished working class provided a tinderbox of discontent. The Workingmen’s Party (WP), the first Marxist-influenced political party in America, organized in Philadelphia in 1876, was active there with a substantial following of foreign-born laborers. It was led by two well-spoken Americans, Philip Van Patten and Albert Parsons. Van Patten was educated, a draftsman by trade. Parsons was an ex-Confederate officer driven from the South for his liberal ideas; and in Chicago he had been drawn into politics, running unsuccessfully for alderman.

With Parsons and Van Patten at the lead, the WP channeled the strike’s energy coming out of the East with local resentment against railroads and authority in general. On the evening of Monday the twenty-third, Parsons went before a crowd of thirty thousand on Market Street to appeal to unemployed war veterans; he urged the heroes of the Grand Army of the Republic—now soldiers in what he termed a “Grand Army of Starvation”—to join “the Grand Army of Labor.”

“A mighty spirit is animating the hearts of the American people today,” he declared of the rail strike. “When I say the American people I mean the backbone of the country…”

The crowd responded with boisterous cheers.

“…the men who till the soil, who guide the machine, who weave the fabrics and cover the backs of civilized men. We are part of that people…”

“We are! We are!”

“…and we demand that we be permitted to live, that we shall not be turned upon the earth as vagrants and tramps.”

The thousands roared their approval, taking up the chant, “Pittsburgh! Pittsburgh! Pittsburgh!”

Local commerce boarded up its storefronts as if in anticipation of a hurricane and waited in fear as the violence grew overnight in fervency, spreading rapidly from the rail yards to the packinghouses, to clothing plants, brickyards, and streetcars. The Chicago Board of Trade, a committee of businessmen led by retailers Marshall Field and Levi Leiter, hired Pinkerton guards, organized private militias to keep watch over affluent residential areas, and authorized the use of their store delivery wagons to transport police reinforcements.

By Tuesday, July 24, the police elected to meet rabble with rabble, hiring unemployed toughs as “special deputies” and arming them with clubs to clear the rail yards. Into the next day there were skirmishes, the beating of rioters by police squads and vigilantes, and several fatalities.
Thursday morning found a squad of police surrounded by a mob of five thousand on the west side near a viaduct where Halsted Street crossed Sixteenth Street. The mob began to gather, and surged up and down on the sidewalk and in the street—a howling, yelping mob of irresponsible idiots,” said Harper's Weekly. Hand-to-hand combat ensued, as the cornered police swung their clubs, “hitting to hurt.”117 The struggle with fists, batons, stones, and pistols lasted into the afternoon, claiming numerous lives. That evening the police, now barely discriminating in their attacks, stormed a meeting of the Furniture-Workers Union at Voorwaerts Turner Hall on Twelfth Street. The hall’s proprietor, a Mr. Wasserman, was knocked down by the police as they charged into the gathering; the laborers, caught by surprise, defended themselves with the only weapons available: pieces of furniture. A worker named Tessman was slain by gunfire, bringing the total number of victims in the Chicago violence to thirty.118

If the Great Strike was convincing of anything, it was that the shift of national concern from Reconstruction to the North’s festering labor problems had been present. The whiff of class upheaval in the smoke wafting from burning train yards, the bloody encounters between rioters and police or soldiers, the dead being carried away from the barricades, appalled the entire country. Equally distressing was the relative ease with which the rebellion had halted the nation’s business. Less than a decade before America had celebrated its new transcontinental rail network; now railmen and their allies had shown that they, too, could unite coast-to-coast; extraordinary as the country’s transportation system was, it was now revealed to be only as impregnable as its least contented workers.

One clear lesson that might have been drawn from the disturbances was that capital would be better off if strike actions were brought by “established” workers’ organizations, so that corporations and authorities could deal openly with such groups. While the rhetoric of organized strikers could be fierce, even insurrectionary, what they generally were after was respect, recognition, and the acknowledgment (and acceptance) of their demands. Such things could be discussed and negotiated. The alternative—armed boys and men, as well as some women, unaffiliated with any union or subject to group discipline, rioting, and vandalizing—brought only chaos.

But no such analysis emerged from the powerful. Instead, B&O president John W. Garrett was indignant that soldiers did not more willingly shoot rioters; Jay Gould, who had built up the Erie and now was developing the Union Pacific, suggested that perhaps what the nation most needed was a monarchy. Tom Scott of the Pennsylvania Railroad suggested that the hungry strikers try a “rifled diet for a few days and see how they like that kind of bread.”119 The nation’s editorial pages were filled with similarly indignant sentiments.

While the 1877 strike is recalled chiefly for its extreme violence and destruction, it actually attained what may have been its fullest fruition in a relatively peaceful general strike at St. Louis. With its eighteen-mile stretch of flour mills, breweries, foundries, and meatpacking plants abreast the Mississippi River, the city was one of the nation’s busiest ports. For years it had been a portal to the frontier West; now, with the advance of the railroads, it had assumed more the identity of a shipping crossroad. But the economic downturn of the 1870s had hit the town particularly hard. The National Bank of the State of Missouri had been forced to close in early 1877, and many other businesses followed. Thousands were left jobless. As a local paper warned, the city’s poor and out-of-work didn’t fully understand what had “struck them down and blasted their lives,” yet “they see the sharp contrast between their sufferings and the splendor of the rich; they have been made desperate by want, they are ready to follow any leader.”120

Unlike Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, there was no street fighting in St. Louis, but because the general strike—probably the country’s first—so thoroughly choked off the town’s commerce and industry, it was extremely frightening to established interests. The possibility of “an American Commune” became quite real to local merchants and men of property when the Workingmen’s Party led ten thousand in phalanx down the city’s broad avenues singing “La Marseillaise,” and a speaker
reminded the crowd of "a time in the history of France when the poor found themselves oppressed to such an extent that forbearance ceased to be a virtue, and hundreds of heads tumbled into the basket. That time may have arrived with us." Dismayed by what was occurring and being said in the streets, the St. Louis Republican lost no time in concluding, "It is wrong to call this a strike, it is labor revolution!"

Racial solidarity was achieved when black stevedores joined the ranks of the strikers. At one point a black man astride a muscular white horse galloped through the factory streets, beseeching workers to set their tools down and come out. Even the town's newsboys struck, declining to peddle newspapers. "All you have to do, gentlemen, for you have the numbers," a strike leader exhorted a rally, "is to unite on one idea—that the workingmen shall rule the country. What man makes belongs to him, and the workingmen made this country."

The strikers did "have the numbers," and so St. Louis employers, stunned by their militancy and made uneasy by the allusions to the guillotine's efficacy, hastily agreed to some wage hikes and shorter hours without a loss of pay. In a double cross, however, many of the offers were rescinded after the U.S. Army arrived, martial law was declared, and eighty strike leaders were arrested; these included several prominent Workingmen's Party figures seen leaping from the windows of their headquarters in a futile attempt to evade the police.

The upheaval of summer 1877 has always eluded easy explanation. The first labor revolt in American history to spread into a national civil disorder, it channeled not only the exasperation of the eighty thousand rail workers who walked away from their jobs, but the anger and sympathy of countless other workers and the unemployed.

"The Republic had celebrated its Centennial in July, 1876," historian David Burbank offers. "Exactly a year later, the industrial working class of the nation celebrated its coming of age."

There was an effort by a stunned nation to pin the disturbances on "communist influences" imported by foreigners, but while this charge may have been somewhat applicable to the St. Louis movement, it was an inadequate characterization overall, given the large number of participants and the inability to find any organization responsible for the strike or even a specific objective. More likely it was simply reassuring to assume that a disturbance that so resembled a class uprising could not possibly be American in origin. As a few editorialists quipped, most of the rioters could not, if queried, have explained what a "Communist" was, and even President Hayes poured cold water on the idea of alien influence by pointing out that the people's vengeance had been directed primarily at the railroads, not property per se. Still, the "Communist" label, once affixed to workingmen, would prove difficult to peel off. "War between labor and capital has begun in earnest," said the New Orleans Times of the summer's events. "America's first experience in communism is now the most significant episode of the most extraordinary year in our political history."

It is a revealing measure of how serious the threat posed by labor radicalism seemed in 1877 that a concerted response to the railroad troubles was to expand the National Guard and improve ways to coordinate its equipment and readiness. With the urging and support of leaders of commerce, Northern cities undertook to build armories in concentrated urban, industrial areas, for as Harper's Weekly noted, "The country has learned the necessity of a thorough and efficient local armed organization." Over the years Americans have come to think of these dour, substantial buildings as historic rallying places for troops in the case of foreign threats to U.S. soil, but their original purpose was to allow the rapid deployment of the militia to keep workingmen in check.

Were the armories necessary? Were the fears of "labor revolution" and "an American Commune" legitimate? At the time the answer appeared far from certain. Historically, U.S. business interests, the courts, the press, have been overly quick to discern conspiracy and foreign influence in labor's struggle for fundamental goals such as better pay, hours, and working conditions. Nonetheless, some conservative anxiety was perhaps understandable in 1877, given that what workers appeared to be challenging were the laissez-faire principles upon which the nation's
economy rested. And although labor technically “lost” the railroad strike, its actions inchoate and its gains temporary or few, there was no denying that the scope and vehemence of the outburst had changed perceptions of laboring people and the poor in ways that surprised the whole country, including the workers themselves. What labor had won was a new appreciation of its own strength, and of the power of the strike.

“The calcium light that illumined the skies of our social and industrial life,” Socialist George Schilling termed the upheaval, opening the country’s eyes irrevocably to the frustrations of a large underclass of its own citizens—those who lived on the margins, enduring joblessness, inadequate housing and sanitation, at times facing starvation. It was increasingly evident this was an American dilemma, that there was something fundamentally wrong with the persistence of such dire want in the midst of the world’s greatest democracy. Middle class people began at last to realize what ‘survival of the fittest’ implied, and to reject it,” notes historian Robert Bruce. “More than that, they began to question its corollary of rugged individualism.” Harper’s Weekly, a barometer of middle-class opinion, fretted that the strike had revealed “a vast movement of the poor against the rich, of labor against capital, which is nothing less than absolute anarchy,” but went on to suggest it was high time this suffering became “the business of the State, that is, the people, to prevent disorder of the kind that we saw in the summer, by removing the discontent which is its cause.” Voters appeared to agree. That fall the Workingmen’s Party in Louisville elected five men to the Kentucky state legislature, and with the news from Kentucky serving as a catalyst, Workingmen’s groups organized around the nation, running candidates for offices across the electoral spectrum. “The laissez-faire policy,” one newspaper concluded, “has been knocked out of men’s heads for the next generation.”

For longer than that many Americans would look back to the summer of 1877 as a turning point, a season whose disruptions helped stir to life multiple strains of reform—the muckrakers’ exposé of corruption and corporate excess, the settlement house movement and its determination to educate and lift up the immigrant worker and poor urban dweller,
CHAPTER THREE

WE MEAN TO HAVE EIGHT HOURS

TO TERENCE J. POWDERLY, GRAND MASTER

Workman of the Knights of Labor, the
group's philosophy, "an injury to one is a concern
to all," always held special meaning. His conversion
to the necessity of labor unity had occurred on
September 6, 1869, as he watched the bodies of the 479
victims of the Avondale mine disaster brought to
the surface and returned to their grieving families.
A twenty-year-old railroad machinist, Powderly had
until that moment felt "no more cause for complaint
of ill-treatment in the shop I worked in than hun-
dreds of other young men, and had I considered my
own selfish interests alone it is quite likely I would
never have affiliated with any labor organization.
[But] when I saw a mother kneel in silent grief to
hold the cold, still face of her boy to hers, and when
I saw her fall lifeless on his dead body, I experienced
a sensation that I have never forgotten." John Siney
of the Workers Benevolent Association spoke to the
gathered sufferers, and Powderly thought he saw
Christ in Siney's face and heard a new Sermon on
the Mount. "I there resolved to do my part, humble
though it may be, to improve the condition of those who worked for a
living."1

Five years later, in 1874, Powderly joined the recently-founded
Knights, which had grown out of a small Philadelphia tailors' union, and
whose guiding light, Uriah S. Stephens, shared Powderly's conviction that
bettering workers' lives was a sacred cause. A garment cutter and aspir-
ing Baptist minister, Stephens had been inspired by the Freemasons and
other mystical orders in devising a structure of elaborate titles and offices
for the Knights (he declared himself Grand Master, Workman) as well
as secret rituals, such as never writing out the organization's name, but
instead designating it with five asterisks.

As their name implied, the Knights insisted on the inherent nobility
of labor. Like the National Labor Union, they believed the amassed power
of capital could be met successfully only by an organization represent-
ing the broadest possible community of workingmen. To their ranks Ste-
phens and Powderly welcomed men and women of any race, of all crafts
and levels of skill, as well as previously unorganized laborers such as laun-
dresses and tobacco harvesters. So certain was their belief that Americans
of good conscience shared the desire for sweeping reform in the dynamic
between labor and capital, even employers were encouraged to join.2

Powderly succeeded Stephens as Grand Master, Workman, in 1878
after Stephens, disavowing his usual contempt for politics, ran and lost
in a bid for a congressional seat on a Greenback-Labor ticket. Stephens
departed the Knights (and died a short time later), although his ideas
survived under the leadership of Powderly, who shared Stephens's doubts
regarding the wage system and hopes that working citizens might own
the means of production. Like Stephens, Powderly had also succumbed to
politics, in 1878 becoming the mayor of Scranton.

Powderly, as the labor reporter John Swinton wrote at the time, hardly
looked the part of "the leader of a million of the horsey-fisted sons of toil."3
With his small build, bookish mien, and delicate features, he more closely
resembled a country parson. In the mode of Rutherford B. Hayes's wife,
Lucy, known as "Lemonade Lucy" for her banishment of liquor from the
White House, Powderly was a strict teetotaler and obsessed with the need for temperance among union members. He eschewed giving speeches in casual settings where workers might be drinking beer, warning his aides, "I will talk at no picnics."

The Knights reprised some of the objectives of the NLU, such as cooperatives, land and currency reform, an end to child labor, and economic parity between male and female laborers. In lieu of strikes, which Powderly associated with the railroad troubles of 1877 and considered "a relic of barbarism," the group pursued what he called "uplift," the gradualist improvement of workers' lives through long-term goals like public ownership of the railroads and the disciplining of wayward employers through worker boycotts of consumer products. They established 135 manufacturing cooperatives in areas as diverse as coal mining, cooperage, printing, and shoe-making. Unfortunately all struggled and eventually sank under the same general lack of financing and market skills that had doomed similar NLU experiments. These mostly fruitless efforts drained the Knights' treasury, while the organization's ambivalent and inconsistent attitude toward strikes mace its course difficult. Particularly infuriating to members was Powderly's habit of tentatively backing strike actions, only to then withdraw support and recommend conciliation with employers. He also kept the rank and file on edge with his flair for melodrama, announcing frequently that he could no longer carry on the responsibilities of his office, but then fiercely defending his leadership when others appeared willing to accept his departure.

In spite of Powderly's quirks and distaste for work stoppages, the group did claim several strike victories against the railroads beginning in 1882. These led ultimately to a showdown in 1885 with the nation's most powerful railroad financier, Jay Gould. When Gould tried to smash a regional railroad union affiliated with the Knights, Powderly heroically demanded and won a face-to-face meeting, the first time the leader of an American workers' organization had been granted such an encounter with a major capitalist. Gould, no friend of labor, was notorious for the remark, "I can hire half the working class to shoot the other half," but the

meeting with Powderly resulted in a significant breakthrough—Gould's agreement to stop targeting the Knights and to accept their right to organize. For his part, Powderly vowed that the Knights would not strike Gould's railroads again without first engaging in direct consultation with management. This unprecedented bringing to terms of a feared a monopolist as Gould greatly enhanced the Knights' reputation, sending their membership soaring from one hundred thousand to seven hundred thousand in just one year. With lighter hearts and a new swagger they sang,

Storm the fort, ye Knights of Labor,
Battle for your cause;
Equal rights for every neighbor—
Down with Tyrant laws?

So completely did the Knights, with this membership surge, assume domination of the U.S. labor movement, there were rumblings of concern among business interests and in editorial pages at the prospect of a national labor organization so powerful it would be capable of launching strike campaigns potentially crippling to commerce. Particularly worrisome was the group's long-term agenda items such as the nationalization of the railroads and other industries. Labor union activity confined to workplace issues was vexing enough; messianic movements fostering economic revolution were unacceptable.

Such anxiety on the part of the establishment proved premature, for the group was soon humbled at the hands of the same Jay Gould whose earlier capitulation had led to its overnight rise. The trouble began when a Knights-federated rail union struck without Powderly's say-so, taking three thousand trainmen off their jobs. Gould responded swiftly, accusing the Grand Master Workman of abnegating the nonstrike agreement; Gould then called in Pinkerton detectives and state militia and hired anti-labor toughs to safeguard replacement workers. He ordered strike meetings broken up and labor-sympathetic journalists intimidated. The strikers,
and the Knights leadership, came in for criticism for inconveniencing the national rail system and selfishly "trying to introduce into modern society a new right... the right to be employed by people who do not want you and who cannot afford to pay what you ask." Powderly offered to negotiate, but Gould, sensing he'd gained the upper hand, remained aloof. Ultimately, with the rail workers beset by Gould's hired guns and the rail baron refusing to once again join Powderly at the bargaining table, the latter withdrew the Knights' formal support of the strike and demanded the trainmen return to their jobs. It was an all-out defeat for the Knights, as dispiriting to its members as it was heartening for critics.

An equally serious blow to the Knights' prestige was workers' disappointment with the group's lackluster support of the revived crusade in the 1880s for an eight-hour day. That cause had waned since the collapse of the NLU, but in 1884 the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, a new trade union conglomerate led by Samuel Gompers, chose eight-hour agitation as a means of galvanizing and growing its membership. Short-hour campaigns were always popular with rank-and-file workers and suited Gompers's philosophy of organized labor's proper aims. Although he's often quoted as having responded cutover to the question "What does labor want?" with the single word "More!," as if his federation's aims were solely pecuniary, Gompers's actual statement, published in 1893, was both visionary and humane, stating in part,

What does labor want? It wants the earth and the fullness thereof... Labor wants more schoolhouses and less jail cells; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures, and to make manhood more noble, womanhood more beautiful, and childhood more happy and bright."

To give workers an objective to rally around, the federation chose May 1, 1886, as a fixed date beyond which no American trade union-ist would ever again work more than an eight-hour day. Plans were set for a general strike to take effect on that date—der Tag it was called, in anticipation, by German American workers—and the revived movement buzzed with fervent editorials, poetry, and music, including the infectious "Eight-Hour Song."

We mean to make things over;
we're tired of toil for naught,
But bare enough to live on:
ever an hour for thought.

We want to feel the sunshine;
we want to smell the flowers;
We're sure that God has willed it,
and we mean to have eight hours.

We're summoning our forces
from shipyard, shop, and mill:
eight hours for work, eight hours for rest,
eight hours for what we will."

Although Powderly gave the crusade his halfhearted approval, he cautioned his supporters away from direct conflict with employers or strike talk, urging them instead to seek change through legislation and other peaceful means, such as writing short essays on the benefits of the eight-hour day for their local newspapers. As had become a pattern with the Knights, many of its unions listened politely to Powderly's cautious instructions but then went their own way, unable to resist the broadening surge of the eight-hour crusade. Gompers's federation, as well, found it could not keep pace with its own members' zeal for the reform. Indeed, enthusiasm proved so universal it brought even doubting anarchists and other radicals into the fold. What neither Powderly nor Gompers could have foreseen was that the growing call for eight hours would
sparked an incident so emotional and divisive it would not only paralyze the eight-hour cause, but change forever the way America viewed organized labor.

The workingmen's party, prominent in the St. Louis General Strike of 1877, is often viewed as the first tangible political representation of the Socialist impulse in America. Its seven thousand members were mostly German American craft workers but the group favored worker unity across ethnic and racial lines. Where the organization foundered was on the question of advancing Socialism's cause through electoral politics. Some members, composing the so-called Lassallean faction, followers of the ideas of the German theorist Ferdinand Lassalle, envisioned a Socialist political party that would incrementally develop support based around appealing core ideals, much as the Republican Party had done in the 1850s. Marxian Socialists, adherents of Karl Marx, did not believe it worthwhile to engage in party politics. There would be no progress until man's labor was fairly valued, and toward achieving that goal Marxians promoted strong trade unions, strikes, and boycotts that would reveal the weaknesses of capitalism and private property.

Having renamed itself the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) shortly after the 1877 rail strikes, it achieved its most notable electoral success in Chicago, where in 1878-1879 its candidates won slots in a state senator, three state representatives, and four city aldermen. But within a few years many in the Chicago SLP became disillusioned with the frightful degree of local political corruption. Particularly galling was an 1886 incident in which two crooked election judges tried to deny reelection to Frank A. Stauber, a Socialist alderman popular for his efforts to open public bathhouses for workingmen. He was eventually given his post, but only after a lawsuit that cost his supporters $2,000 and effectively kept Stauber from office for a full year. The two election officials were tried but set free. Such outrages greatly offended Albert Parsons, who had led the Workingmen's Party in the trying days of 1877 and who had previously placed his faith in the ballot as a means of alleviating the workers' plight. "It was then I began to realize the hopeless task of political reformation," Parsons said of the Stauber scandal, and among many Chicago workers, he recounted, the conviction began to spread that the State, the Government and its laws, was merely the agent of the owners of capital... that the chief function of all Government was to maintain economic subjection of the man of labor... and that the element of coercion, of force, which enabled one person to dominate and exploit the labor of another, was centered or concentrated in the State... [and] in the last analysis... force was despotism, an invasion of man's natural right to liberty."

Chicago authorities had kept their eye on Parsons ever since his rousing Market Street speech, which was blamed for having helped trigger the violence in the city during the railroad upheaval. What worried them was not solely that he was devoted to workers' rights; it was that he was an American, gentlemanly and articulate, and his family background denied critics the usual means by which they might smear him as a "labor radical." Parsons was descended from one of the oldest Anglo-Saxon families in America; his ancestors had arrived in New England in 1632. The Reverend Jonathan Parsons of Newburyport, Massachusetts, a fervent resister of British occupation forces in the 1770s, became the inspiration for the popular American caricature "Brother Jonathan." An anti-British sermon he delivered from his pulpit in early June 1775 led to the forming of a military company that distinguished itself at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Another relation, Major General Samuel Parsons, lost an arm in the fighting.

Albert was born into a large family in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1848. Both of his parents, who were religious reformers, died before he was five, leaving him to the care of his eldest brother, William Henry Parsons. A skilled horseman and crack shot by age thirteen, Albert ran away to join the Confederate forces in 1861, eventually serving as a scout attached to
a cavalry brigade led by his brother, who was known during the war as “Wild Bill” Parsons. After the peace Albert apprenticed as a printer, and following the example of both William and the renowned Confederate general James Longstreet, became a Republican, accepting Reconstruction and its efforts to assist the former slaves. Such views soon came to be held as traitorous by his neighbors, particularly after he “took to the stump to vindicate my positions,” and Parsons was forced to cease operation of a small newspaper he published. In 1869 he began work as a traveling correspondent and agent for a Houston newspaper, and in his meanderings through rural Texas met Lucy E. Gathings, a head-turning beauty who claimed mixed Mexican and Native American heritage but was in all probability part black. They married in Austin in 1871. Two years later, after a brief stint as an internal revenue agent, he and Lucy went north, first to Philadelphia, then Chicago.

Parsons had been a member of the Typographical Union while still a teenager in Texas, and in Chicago he joined local Typographical Union No. 16, working as a printer and compositor at both the Chicago Inter-Ocean and the Chicago Times. His special empathy for issues affecting working people probably dated from 1874, when he became involved in protests against a local relief agency that in the aftermath of the Chicago Fire of 1871 had taken funds meant for the destitute and diverted them to stock market speculation and other unauthorized investments. The city's newspapers declared the rumors false and tried to tar those who'd raised suspicions as “Communists, robbers, loafers, etc.” As Parsons wrote:

I began to examine into this subject, and I found that the complaints of the working people against the [agency] were just and proper. I also discovered a great similarity between the abuse heaped upon these poor people... and the actions of the late Southern slaveholders in Texas toward the newly enfranchised slaves... It satisfied me there was a great fundamental wrong at work in society and in existing social and industrial arrangements.12

Parsons joined the Workingmen's Party in 1876 and, believing their admirable socialistic aims were misunderstood partly because many members spoke less-than-perfect English, volunteered to become their tribune as a writer and speaker. That same year he gained the distinction of being the first person in Chicago to join the Knights of Labor, serving the organization in various official roles while contributing pieces to the Knights' periodical, the Journal of United Labor. After he came to national attention during the railroad strike of 1877, he was regularly sought as a lecturer.13

In fall 1877 Parsons garnered eight thousand votes for county clerk in Chicago on the Workingmen's Party ticket, narrowly losing, then went on to the national convention in Newark, New Jersey, where the party's name was changed to the Socialist Labor Party. At an SEP convention in 1879 he was nominated for president of the United States; deeply honored, he nonetheless declined, reminding the delegates that he had not yet reached the qualifying age of thirty-five, as required by the U.S. Constitution. However, he did accept appointment as the head of the Council of Trade and Labor Unions of Chicago, and later broke away to help found the city's Socialist-oriented Central Labor Union.

Parsons's counterpart—another rising star in the Chicago labor firmament—was August Spies, a skilled upholsterer and saddle maker who had come to Chicago from his native Germany in 1872. Two years later he "went on a tramp" of the West and South, then returned in 1875 to Chicago, where he became a convert to Socialism. Said to possess "a warm heart controlled by a cold, philosopher's brain," Spies was as impressive to look at as he was to listen to, an exceedingly handsome man and physical fitness devotee who belonged to a local turnverein, a German American gymnasion. In 1877 he became business manager of a German-language daily, the Arbeiten-Zeitung, and a year later its editor. Spies gradually made the paper's tone more radical, his anger toward authority deepening in 1884 after one of his brothers was shot dead in a fight with a policeman.14 In December of that year he challenged the police directly when he aided a local German family in bringing charges against an "Officer Patten,"
who had allegedly taken advantage of their daughter, sixteen-year-old Martha Seidel, a domestic jailed on an accusation of household theft. In what the Alarm termed “an unparalleled crime,” Patten, aware that her family was too poor to post bail for the girl, removed Martha to his own home and, “there, during the long moaning night,” forced her to endure “all that a mountain of bestial flesh insane with lust, restrained by no fear, secure of immunity, could inflict upon her shuddering helpless.”

Despite Parsons’s outrage over the Stauber affair and Spies’s cynicism about the Chicago police, both men retained a tenuous faith in the ballot as an instrument of change; but increasingly they found themselves alone among more adamant colleagues at national gatherings of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, an anarchist splinter element whose New York wing advocated direct actions including terrorism as a means of harassing the ruling elite and emboldening the masses.

The views of Johann Most, a German émigré and resident of New York’s Lower East Side who published the nation’s best-known anarchist paper, Die Freiheit, typified the radicals’ estrangement from “routine” labor-management solutions. “Exterminate the miserable brood!” he declared of the lords of capital. “Let us rely upon the unquenchable spirit of destruction and annihilation which is the perpetual spring of new life. The joy of destruction is a creative joy.” The aim was to disrupt the world of commerce and government, not to gain such “petty reforms” as shorter hours or higher wages, which Most dismissed as “sops thrown to the proletariat.” As one anarchist paper explained, “Right and wrong cannot arbitrate. The wage laborer who resorts to arbitration condones the wrongs, practiced by capital upon himself, and compounds the capitalistic felony which robs him of his labor product.”

Most had emerged from childhood with a mysterious “cancer” of the cheek, and a botched operation to repair it left his face “a wrinkled, malformed, lurid knot” that gave him a freakish jawline, which as an adult he attempted to disguise with a bushy beard. ostracized by his peers on account of his disfigurement, he pursued a life of the mind, reading deeply in politics, history, and philosophy and becoming a Socialist scholar and politician. He served two terms in the Reichstag, although his own father, who had brutalized the boy when young, disliked his progeny to the extent that he gave speeches on behalf of Most’s political opponents. Eventually he surfaced in London, where he was jailed in 1889 for publishing an article approving of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II.

In America Most lectured widely and spread his views through Die Freiheit and other publications, including a seventy-four-page booklet called The Science of Revolutionary Warfare subtitled A Little Handbook of Instruction in the Use and Preparation of Nitroglycerine, Dynamite, Gun-Cotton, Subliming Mercury, Bombs, Fuses, Poisons, etc., this “manual for the extermination of the bourgeoisie” denigrated police, capitalists, clergy, and government officials and recommended they be killed by whatever means came to hand. It offered detailed information on arson, poisoning, the use of knives, guns, and letter bombs, and waxed rhapsodic about the day when massive annihilation might be visited on the powerful by dropping bombs from hovering airships, particularly into the midst of military processions. The Science of Revolutionary Warfare sold well in anarchist circles and its contents were often excerpted by radical newspapers. Thanks in part to Most’s exhortations, allusions to dynamite, a substance possessing an almost mythical power to equalize society, became frequent in radical journals. Inexpensive to make, easy to conceal, it was technology’s gift to the have-nots of the world. A disciple of Most’s, a “Professor Mezzeroff” of New York City, reported that he took a dynamite bomb with him wherever he went. “If you carry two or three pounds with you people will respect you much more than if you carried a pistol,” Mezzeroff advised.

Popular in late-nineteenth-century America primarily in the immigrant enclaves of large cities, anarchism centered around the view “that all forms of government rest on violence, and are therefore wrong and harmful as well as unnecessary.” There were no better forms of government. Whether organized as a dictatorship of the left or right, or as a democratic republic, each ruled by force, each was a means for the for-
to safeguard their property and privilege, and all were at odds with natural principles of human social organization. Anarchists, like Socialists, believed that private control of the means of production was unfair to labor, but while Socialists envisioned the end of capitalism and the creation of a revolutionary proletariat through worker solidarity and either electoral politics or trade union agitation, anarchists sought more immediate means of displacing the state apparatus. Rather than contracting with governments to ensure his well-being, as in the Lockean tradition that informed the American Declaration of Independence," writes scholar Miriam Brody; "the individual liberated from state tyranny enters into free associations with other individuals, these associations forming the social networks of public life."

The anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin, a Russian aristocrat and geologist, promulgated the idea that all living creatures have the capacity for self-organization "in response to natural conditions," and that "free of the constraints of government, [they] would continue to do so." The New England anarchist Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who would later, along with Nicola Sacco, be executed for their anarchistic beliefs, described it as a living philosophy, an insight that guided one to a state of buoyant liberation. "The anarchism is as beauty as a woman for me," Vanzetti wrote, "perhaps even more since it includes all the rest and me and her. Calm, serene, honest, natural, virile, muddy and celestial at once, austere, heroic, fearless, fatal, generous and implacable—all these and more it is."

But what always remained somewhat vague (even to anarchists) was precisely how the desired future would come into being. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, an early-nineteenth-century French founder of anarchistic thought, saw widespread proletariat cooperation geared to a world of artisans and small craftsman; he didn't account for large-scale industrialization. Mikhail Bakunin, Proudhon's Russian compere, saw "an apocalyptic breakdown of society, a purifying and regenerating baptism by fire out of which, phoenix-like, the voluntary and autonomous network of workers' federations would emerge." Bakunin's vision gained adherents in the radical wing of anarchism peopled by the likes of Johann Most, but Karl Marx deemed such notions so unacceptable that in 1872 he drove Bakunin's followers out of the First International, the original version of the International Workingmen's Association, founded in London in 1864.

The prospect of an "apocalyptic breakdown" that would shock societies into self-recognition and change, likely through acts of terror the anarchists called attentats, or "propaganda by the deed," was likely better suited, it all, to authoritarian societies in which citizens had little other opportunity, such as the ballot or the courts, to effect change. The fact that the United States possessed such options, and that anarchism was more an ideal than a program, diminished its appeal to pragmatic Americans, and indeed frightened many. The daily press took a dim, condescending view of the anarchist fringe, which it considered juvenile and maladjusted. Harper's Weekly advised:

The present situation has shown that there are two very different kinds of so-called labor movements. There are those which seek redress for real grievances, when the demand for redress is so reasonable that it commands general sympathy and support, and there are those which spring from certain social theories, and seek the violent overthrow of the existing social order. These last are mainly led by foreigners who scarcely speak our language, and who have no knowledge of the country nor comprehension of American institutions.

Yet it is a measure of how deeply alienated many workers felt in American industrial society of the Gilded Age that anarchy, despite its lack of clarity, attracted both serious devotees and the merely curious. "We are the birds of the coming storm," August Spies liked to say, "the prophets of the revolution." Even for the generally clearheaded Albert Parsons, notes a biographer, "principles of anarchism, socialism and equalitarianism were hopelessly entangled." He recognized inherent value in each and tended to use the concepts interchangeably, as his memberships in vari-
ous causes and groups overlapped. "We are called Communists, or Socialists, or Anarchists," Parsons conceded. "We accept all three of the terms."30

By 1884 Chicago's Central Labor Union had two thousand members, chiefly Germans and Poles, and a lively journal, the *Alarm*, edited by Albert Parsons,31 which urged readers to "join with your comrades in the warfare against your deadly foe—poverty—and against the accursed system that rewards industry... and makes of this fair earth a slave pen." The *Alarm* enjoyed a subscription list of twenty-five hundred, although its pass-along readership was likely much higher.32 Parsons was also a popular soapbox speaker, his appearances at rallies and meetings regularly attracting substantial audiences of keen-eared listeners; like his friend August Spies, he exhorted workingmen to arm themselves. Both men did so in the context of advocating workers' self-defense, but the *Alarm*, per Johann Most, carried a regular column dealing with the technical aspects of bomb-making and the various properties of dynamite and nitroglycerin, the articles provocatively titled "Explosives: A Practical Lesson in Popular Chemistry; The Manufacture of Dynamite Made Easy,"33 or "Bombs! The Weapon of the Social Revolutionist Placed Within the Reach of All."34 Even Parsons's wife Lucy got into the act, allowing herself to be quoted by the Chicago *Tribune*: "Let every dirty, lousy tramp arm himself with a revolver or knife and lay in wait on the steps of the palaces of the rich and stab or shoot the owners as they come out."35

But was this all talk? Most, Spies, and Parsons clearly used the symbolism of dynamite as an expressive metaphor, a means of articulating their utter contempt for authority; yet none of them ever personally acted on the principle, or urged others to do so in a specific instance. Of course their exaggerated threats—including Most's prediction that "sooner or later the red flag of the revolution will wave over Independence Hall" in Philadelphia—were understandably troubling to Chicago businessmen such as Marshall Field and Cyrus McCormick Jr., as well as the police.36 Such flaming rhetoric tended to make even the most legitimate demands of organized labor dangerous and insurrectionary, so that "every striker was a foreigner and every foreigner a Communist, Anarchist, Socialist or Nihilist."37 No less an authority on lethal conflict than General William Tecumseh Sherman saw looming in the anarchists' speech "an armed contest between Capital and Labor... who will oppose each other not with words and arguments and ballots, but with shot and shell, gunpowder and cannon. The better classes are tired of the insane howlings of the lower strata, and they mean to stop them"38; the Chicago *Tribune* reassured its readers that "Judge Lynch is an American by birth and character" and that "every lamp post in Chicago will be decorated with a communist carcass if necessary."39

The anarchists were playing a dangerous game, one frightening enough to Chicago's business and government elites that Illinois in 1878 prohibited all paramilitary organizations not part of the state militia. But in fact, any such official restrictions were routinely ignored. Among German workingmen in nineteenth-century America, self-defense belonged to a proud tradition. Recreational *Schanzengesellschaften* or *shooting clubs*, where members took target practice or carried their guns into the countryside on weekend outings, were a corollary to the *popular gymnasia*, or *turnverein*, which emphasized physical fitness and were central to German American social life. The German community even had its own American military hero and patron saint, the Prussian militarist Baron Friedrich von Steuben, who had joined General Washington's staff in 1777 and trained the Continental army at Valley Forge, and who was honored in annual festivities. During the Civil War many *turnverein* in Northern cities such as New York and Chicago had sent German American fighting units to the Union army, and they proudly retained their flags, uniforms, and soldierly customs.

No doubt the idea of a coming "workers' society" seemed almost tangible at the massive picnics held on the southwest side of Chicago at Wright's Grove, in the north side at Ogden's Grove, with its revolving stage and a band shell, or along Lake Michigan. For these events entire neighborhoods emptied out of a Sunday afternoon to eat, drink, lounge, watch acrobatics and shooting contests, and mingle in the sunshine. Especially popular were the annual March 18 celebrations marking the anniversary of the Paris *Commune*, events that were martial in character and featured
neighborhood “defense corps” parading with guns and bayonets to the rousing sounds of “La Marseillaise” and shouts of “Vive la Commune!” A highlight was occasional appearances by actual survivors of the Commune itself. 

In April 1885 there was an incident even radical Chicagoans likely did not dare expect—a violent confrontation with capital in which the workers came out on top. Located south of town, the McCormick Reaper Company was, with its two thousand employees, the world’s largest farm implement manufacturer. Workers had struck McCormick over “poor pay, long work hours,” and their frustration with “the insulting and dictatorial bearing of the foremen and superintendent.” The company responded by bringing in scabs protected by detested “Pinkerton pups.” When rumors spread that strikers had been fired, a group of them boldly ambushed two wagons being used by the Pinkertons, dragging the detectives to the ground and beating several of them senseless. Inside one of the vehicles the strikers discovered two cases of Winchester rifles and twenty-five Colt revolvers, which they seized.

McCormick executives were caught off guard by the workers’ terrorizing of the Pinkertons, and with their great factory largely idle and the roads leading to it blocked by strikers, they asked for a parlay. A company spokesman met with a workers’ delegation and, after “dealing in palaver and taffy until it disgusted the committee,” offered terms of compromise and acceded to many of the employees’ demands, including a wage increase. The Alarm cheered the victory as “the most exciting, serious and determined struggle between capitalists and wage laborers that has occurred in Chicago in several years,” and termed McCormick’s capitulation “an unconditional surrender.” Both Parsons and Spies emphasized the heroic example the McCormick workers had given in conquering force with force.

But the episode would have serious ramifications. As a result of the workers’ bravado, Mayor Carter Harrison, who had dedicated his efforts to maintaining a relative calm between workers and the police, came under pressure from local businessmen to institute stronger checks on radical agitation. In October 1885 he promoted to police inspector one of the city’s toughest cops, Captain John Bonfield, who was so feared in the city’s ethnic enclaves, he was known as “Black Jack” or simply “The Clubber.”

The decision certainly was not typical of Harrison, a joyful rustic from Kentucky who was popular with voters and famously in love with his job and his city—his “bride,” as he called Chicago, “who laves her beautiful limbs daily in Lake Michigan and comes out clean and pure every morning.” He was often to be seen riding through the streets on a black bay mare, cigar in hand, his shirt festooned with tiny diamonds, hat at a rakish tilt. “He was thrilled with the sensation of being on parade,” recalled a memoirist, “and never grew weary of seeing himself pass by.” Born into a family that claimed descent from Pocahontas, Harrison had been educated at Yale, had traveled widely in Europe, and had done exceedingly well in Chicago real estate, as mayor he had secured the loyalty of the city’s working neighborhoods by learning a smattering of several immigrant languages and showing up regularly at block parties and ethnic celebrations. Unlike some politicians who did such things stiffly and out of a sense of obligation, Harrison actually appeared to be enjoying himself. Influential Chicagoans such as Daily News publisher Melville Stone tolerated the mayor so long as his outgoing demeanor kept the working class quiet, but in the wake of the McCormick violence they demanded a firmer guarantee of protection.

Bonfield, the man who embodied the new policy, had been with the police since the 1877 railroad disturbances and had won several promotions for his willingness to take on assignments in areas of the city considered dangerous. These lonely postings led to Bonfield’s suggestion for a unique innovation—a system of call-boxes so that a patrolman walking a beat in a remote area could notify headquarters for backup if trouble arose. The concept, which made use of the then-emerging technology of the telephone, was implemented in Chicago and soon replicated elsewhere in America. Bonfield’s real value, however, was his courage in aggressive street actions. During a July 1885 confrontation with striking trolley car employees, he had ordered his men to clear protestors from a street, and
when demonstrators had refused to budge, deriding the officers as "scabs" and "rats," an infuriated Bonfield had personally led his troops directly into the crowd. He was seen pounding protesters into submission, even gashing the heads of two strikers' representatives who had approached him, seeing his captain's uniform, in hopes of calming the situation. One of Mayor Harrison's own sons was among the many hundreds of people bruised by cops that afternoon. There was some pro forma grumbling over Bonfield's excessive behavior in the affair, but in truth his performance had made a very favorable impression.

Radical labor elements had initially disparaged the plan by Samuel Gompers and the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions to use May 1, 1886, as a day of nationwide demonstration and a general strike in support of the eight-hour cause. They derided the campaign as "soothing syrup for babies, but of no consequence to grown men," with Johann Most predicting the "eight-hour fraud" would never squelch "the revolutionary tension," and the Alarm writing it off as "literal foolishness."

The eight-hour cause had proven a compelling rallying cry, however, as recently as September 5, 1882, when it was one of the themes featured in a "monster labor festival" in New York City. The daylong event, scheduled in early September so as to flex labor's strength at the opening of the fall political season, brought ten thousand trade unionists from Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Jersey City to Union Square, many in their work uniforms or shop aprons. Five hundred jewelers marched tapping canes along the pavement, the cigar makers' unions distributed free storys, along with numerous bands and floats as well as a sizable turnout from 1typographical Union No. 6, which had helped in the event's preparations along with the Knights of Labor. The workers, "determined to show their numerical strength in order to satisfy the politicians of this city that they must not be trifled with," marched around the square's perimeter behind Grand Marshal William McNab and a multitude of banners declaring LABOR CREATES ALL WEALTH and LABOR BUILT THIS REPUBLIC AND LABOR SHALL RULE IT. Other signs denounced convict labor or demanded the closing of stores at 6 p.m.; one in particular that caught the attention of the city's editorial writers, PAY NO RENT, was a tribute to the Paris Commune. Assorted clergy and union dignitaries watched approvingly from a reviewing stand at the northern end of the square. It was reportedly one of these impressed observers who dubbed the passing spectacle "Labor Day," the beginning of the American tradition honoring an annual workers' holiday.

By February 1886 the Alarm had come around to the view that the popular "eight-hour movement is a sign of the progressive ideas underlying the entire labor movement," and Parsons and his fellow anarchists embraced it for its potential to humiliate and inconvenience the industrial system. "Winning the eight-hour day would give the workers more leisure in which to train for the greater task of emancipating themselves from capitalism," he wrote. Always fond of lacing his arguments with statistics (and sharing them with an audience), Parsons soon became enamored of data suggesting that, historically, shortened hours led to increased wages, "more leisure from mere drudge work," and the opportunity for workers to "minister to their higher aspirations."

However, it appeared that something other than "higher aspirations" preoccupied the Alarm in the week before Chicago's big May 1 eight-hour demonstration, when the paper ran the headline "To Arms! American Workingmen Are Called Upon to Arm Themselves." The article that followed discounted existing options for progress in electoral politics, religion, and industry, and demanded to know if the present generation had the audacity of early American revolutionaries such as Paul Revere. The conservative Chicago Mail, apparently deciding it had had enough of the Alarm's provocations, replied: "There are two dangerous ruffians at large in this city, two sneaking cowards who are trying to create trouble. One of them is named Parsons; the other is named Spies... Mark them for today. Keep them in view. Hold them personally responsible for any trouble that occurs. Make an example of them if trouble does occur."

There were other public warnings that any radical shenanigans on
May 1 would be quashed at once by Inspector Bonfield and his men, but in fact the day's events were largely calm and orderly, despite Chicago's having the nation's largest eight-hour rally and parade, with nearly one hundred thousand people marching down Michigan Avenue. Tens of thousands also turned out in New York, Detroit, Milwaukee, and other cities, and more than a thousand factories across the country suffered strike actions in observance of the day's event. While there was some friction elsewhere, the mammoth Chicago outpouring was fairly anticlimactic. "Expecting Armageddon," notes an historian, "Chicago felt a little cheated at getting only peace."55

Monday, May 3, however, brought a far different result: another riot at McCormick-Reaper. The company was still smarting over its capitulation to the workers the previous spring. That settlement, in which the company had agreed to boost wages, had proved a bitter pill for the firm's executives, who had to suffer the annoyance of hearing radical propagandists cheer the "people" for humbling the mighty McCormick. In early 1886 it chose to once again move aggressively against employees, dismissing a large number of skilled iron molders so they could be replaced by new pneumatic molding machines. Other workers walked out in sympathy, demanding the rehiring of the molders and higher pay for unskilled employees. McCormick replied by importing three hundred scabs to take the strikers' jobs, but this time, instead of Pinkertons, the firm arranged for a special 350-man force of police organized by Inspector Bonfield to protect the scabs and the firm's property. Even with this police coverage tension persisted; there were several brawls and exchanges of insults between the ousted workers and their replacements.

On May 3, August Spies was in the vicinity of the McCormick factory at an unrelated rally of lumber workers, when shots were heard coming from the McCormick site; a shift change was under way and the usual taunting of scabs had apparently escalated. Some of those in Spies's audience were McCormick workers, and they immediately ran toward the scene of the fighting. In the ensuing fracas, Bonfield's police savagely beat dozens of workers and shot four men to death. Enraged, Spies returned to his newspaper office and produced what would become known as the Revenge Circular. Under the single word "Revenge" ran the bold headline "Workingmen, to Arms!!" and a text that was equally fiery:

You have for years endured the most abject humiliations; you have endured the pangs of hunger and want; you have worked yourself to death; your children you have sacrificed to the factory lords. . . . If you are men, if you are the sons of grand sires who have shed their blood to free you, then you will rise in your might . . . and destroy the hideous monster that seeks to destroy you. To arms, we call you. To arms!56

To protest the slaughter at McCormick a rally was called for the next evening at Chicago's Haymarket Square. "Good speakers will be present to denounce the latest atrocious act of the police, the shooting of our fellow-workmen yesterday afternoon," it was promised.

Perhaps because many workers had marched only a few days before in the big eight-hour rally, or due to fears of police violence after what had occurred at McCormick, only about three thousand people rather than the twenty-five thousand organizers had hoped for materialized the evening of May 4 in Haymarket Square. The square was far too large for the modest turnout, so those in charge maneuvered an empty wagon into an alley to provide a platform for the speakers. The gathering was peaceful, and Mayor Harrison came and mingled with the crowd as Spies and Parsons spoke. It was a breezy evening, threatening rain, and Harrison was forced to strike several matches in order to keep his cigar lit; when someone advised him that in doing so he'd give himself away to the crowd, he insisted that he didn't mind because "I want the people to know their mayor is here."

Before heading home, Harrison stopped at the nearby Des Plaines Street police station house where Bonfield had his troops in readiness if it became necessary to confront the group in the Haymarket. The police had wisely elected not to have a uniformed presence in the square, but Bonfield had sent observers there to monitor the event and report back if words became inflammatory or the crowd troublesome. Mayor Har-
rison informed the inspector and other police officials that the rally was lightly attended, not at all boisterous, and even suggested that some of the reserve officers on duty be allowed to go home.

Back at the rally, Spies was speaking from the wagon, accusing the McCormick bosses of murder although cautioning against thoughtless retaliation. Parsons, who had arrived back in town only that evening from a speaking engagement in Cincinnati, came to the square with his wife, Lucy, and their two small children, Lulu and Albert Jr. He urged the workers to arm in self-defense, but otherwise devoted his remarks to the prospects for international socialism. After speaking, Parsons left the Haymarket with his family to join friends at nearby Zepf's Saloon.

Last to address the gathering was Samuel Fielden, a former English lay preacher who worked as a teamster. Rugged and bearlike in appearance, with a full bushy beard, Fielden was a favorite speaker at such events, known for his sense of humor and occasional use of quaint Briticism. Rain had begun to fall and people had started to drift away, leaving Fielden with a crowd of only a few hundred. He proposed to speak briefly. His remarks were not unlike those already made from the wagon, but one of the plainclothes detectives noted that Fielden was counseling his hearers to defy the law. "Keep your eye upon it, throttle it, kill it, stab it, do everything you can to wound it—to impede its progress," he advised. "Socialists are not going to declare war; but I tell you war has been declared on us, and I ask you to get hold of anything that will help to resist the onslaught of the enemy and the usurper. The skirmish lines are met. People have been shot. Men, women, and children have not been spared by the capitalists and minions of private capital. They had no mercy, so ought you."

Something of these remarks was transmitted to Bonfield, who ordered his men out of the station house. As Fielden was closing his remarks and the rally was moments away from adjournment, Captain William Ward walked to the speaker's wagon at the head of a column of police and told Fielden, "In the name of the people of Illinois, I command this meeting immediately and peaceably to disperse." Fielden replied, "We are peaceable, and was stepping down from the wagon when suddenly there was a terrific explosion, the square lit by a blinding white light. A bomb had been thrown at the police. One, Mathias Degan, was killed instantly; many others died, wounded, some mortally. Those officers who could quickly unholstered their guns and "swept the sidewalks with a hot and telling fire." Several workers were struck, a few may have returned fire, and in the smoke and confusion the police also shot into their own ranks. It all happened within seconds, and just as swiftly the crowd was in full flight, some helping to carry away bleeding and injured comrades.

The police retreated en masse to the Desplains Street station house, where the scene was one of carnage, the floor slick with blood, as dying policemen and the wounded writhed in pain and volunteers tried frantically to administer aid. Seven policemen ultimately died from wounds received in the Haymarket; sixty-seven were badly hurt. Of the workers, four had died and fifty were wounded. Samuel Fielden was led away by companions, a police bullet lodged in his knee.

The nation was outraged over the incident, a deadly assault on uniformed police by anarchists. Commentators reached back to the murder of Lincoln for a comparable act as horrendous. The New York Times began its excited coverage, "The villainous teachings of the Anarchists bore bloody fruit in Chicago..." and blamed "the doctrine of Herr Johann Most." Harper's Weekly saw the terror bombing as the result of passions "plainly gathering for several days... an outburst of anarchistic violence, the deliberate crime of men who openly advocate massacre and the overthrow of intelligent and orderly society."

Chicago Daily News publisher Melville Stone did more than editorialize. He contacted William Pinkerton, son of the detective agency's founder, and urged him to at once "put shadows" over Spies, Parsons, and Fielden—"the same little coterie [that] had been preaching anarchy for months." In fact, Chicago police, in some cases assisted by Pinkertons, had already reacted, descending on dozens of homes, businesses, and meeting halls frequented by workingmen. "There is hardly an Anarchist in the city... not in a tremor for fear of a domiciliary visit from the police," it was reported. "Search warrants are no longer considered
necessary, and suspicious houses are being ransacked at all hours of the day and night.\textsuperscript{663}

While the much-published assumption was that the bombing was “a concerted, deliberately planned, and coolly executed murder,”\textsuperscript{664} it became apparent to investigators within several hours that there was little proof to support such a theory. Police hauled in dozens of men (and a few women), along with cartons of suspicious papers and other items, but wound up letting most of those arrested go free. The seven men they had quickly swooped up and held in custody as ringleaders of the plot—August Spies, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, Louis Lingg, Michael Schwab, Samuel Fielden, and Oscar Neebe—were all known as committed radicals. Only Fielden and Spies had been at the Haymarket when the bomb was thrown. Albert Parsons, who had left the square with his family before the explosion, had had time to evade the police dragnet. His first thought upon learning of the bombing was that it had been the work of an agent provocateur; he knew, nonetheless, that he would be among those blamed, and he left town on a midnight train to seek refuge with friends in northern Illinois. Rudolph Schnaubelt, an anarchist suspected by the police of having hurled the bomb, had likewise disappeared.

The other men in custody were deeply implicated by their participation in local anarchist or workingmen’s causes. Louis Lingg was a twenty-two-year-old German immigrant carpenter, in America only one year. “Fearfully, dangerously handsome, the image of manly health and beauty ... the lion of the ballroom,”\textsuperscript{665} Lingg was also known for being somewhat deranged, and was said to bear a grudge against authority because his father had been fired from a job after having sustained a debilitating workplace injury. Lingg had not been in the Haymarket, but he was known to tinker with bomb-making and was, according to one friend, “crazy on the labor question and wanted to kill everybody that did not agree with him.”\textsuperscript{666} Lingg struggled fiercely with the police sent to arrest him and had to be forcibly subdued.

George Engel, the owner of a toy store and an earnest Socialist, had been at the meeting held on the evening of May 3 at Greif’s Hall, where the Haymarket rally was planned, although on the night of the bombing he was at home playing cards. Adolph Fischer was a printer at Spies’s paper, the Arbeiter-Zeitung, and had also been at Greif’s. Unable to find Rudolph Schnaubelt, the police and prosecutors had made Fischer the chief suspect for having thrown or triggered the explosive.\textsuperscript{667} Oscar Neebe, an organizer with a beer-wagon drivers’ union, was a Socialist whose chief offense seemed to be that he had kept the Arbeiter-Zeitung in operation after Spies and the others had been arrested, while Michael Schwab, an associate editor of the paper, had the bad fortune to have published a rabble-rousing piece about resisting capitalism on the very day of the bombing. Nor could it have helped that the bearded, thin-faced Schwab appeared to investigators and journalists “very untidy ... his general appearance that of a fanatic, half-insane,” and that it was known he was “married to a woman in free-love fashion.”\textsuperscript{668} Schwab had been in Haymarket Square or the fateful night but had left early.

Sifting through the scant evidence and interviewing witnesses, investigators could not agree on whether the bomb had been thrown at the police from the speakers’ wagon, the sidewalk, or a window overhead. Nonetheless, over several days the outlines of a conspiracy emerged. The radicals, hungry for revenge after the killings at the McCormick factory, had met at Greif’s Hall on Monday night and laid plans to murder as many police as possible. The rally at Haymarket would begin with reasonable-sounding speeches but slowly intensify in order to lure the police from their nearby station house. When the hated “Blackjack” Bonfield and his men entered the square, the conspirators would detonate their “deadly Nihilist bomb.”\textsuperscript{669} Lost in this scenario was the question of whether Bonfield’s decision to march a large body of police into the Haymarket had been necessary, whether the alleged plotters could really have predicted it, and the possibility the bombing might have been the work of someone other than an anarchist; also disregarded was the fact that most of the policemen’s wounds had resulted not from the bomb but from shots fired by fellow officers in the first panicked moments after the explosion.\textsuperscript{670}
Official interrogations of the detained men added little new information, for with their practiced contempt for the law, the radicals easily resisted efforts to coerce their cooperation. Fischer, told by a police lieutenant that August Spies had confessed to the conspiracy and had named Fischer as the bomb thrower, replied coolly, “If Spies has really told you that, then he has lied. Either you lie or Spies does. That Spies has told an untruth I do not believe. Therefore you are the liar.” When Cook County prosecutor Julius S. Grinnell took a turn with Fischer, counseling him that “a brave man does not lie,” Fischer snapped back, “Is that so? Then you must be the greatest coward in the world, for you are a lawyer, which signifies a liar by profession.” Fischer also refused Grinnell’s offer of leniency in return for his cooperation, angering the prosecutor. “Then we’ll hang you!” Grinnell shouted. “Very well,” replied Fischer, “then hang me, but don’t degrade me with any more of your rascally propositions.”

Discussions between Grinnell and city attorney Fred Winston as to the difficulty of proceeding without proof of the bomber’s identity came to include publisher Melville Stone. “They were in trouble,” Stone recalled. “No one knew who had actually thrown the bomb, and they both felt that this was important in the conduct of the case. At once, they took the ground that the identity of the bomb thrower was of no consequence, and that, inasmuch as Spies and Parsons and Fiehler had advocated over and over again the use of violence against the police and had urged the manufacture and throwing of bombs, their culpability was clear.” The prosecutors warned at once to Stone’s idea. It would not be necessary to link the men held in custody with the bomb; their words had created the atmosphere in which the assault had taken place. They were as guilty as if they had thrown it.

Unfortunately for the accused, the trial was set to proceed within weeks, meaning it would take place in a Chicago still furious about the wanton murder of its policemen. The seven defendants (neither Parsons nor Schaubelt had been found, despite a nationwide manhunt) hired two attorneys—William Perkins Black, a Civil War hero and recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and criminal defense lawyer William A. Foster. (Black, it was said, was displaying more courage in representing the most despised men in America than he had in meeting the Confederate advance at the Battle of Pea Ridge.) The sitting judge was Joseph Eaton Gary, a twenty-year veteran of the Cook County Superior Court bench not known for his sympathy to the interests of workers or radicals. Black, citing the judge’s own known prejudices and the mob atmosphere surrounding the impending trial, asked that Gary recuse himself from the bench; he also sought a change of venue and separate trials for the defendants. All these requests were denied.

On June 27, 1886, the trial opened with a dramatic flourish when through the doors of the courtroom walked Albert Parsons. After going underground in northern Illinois, he had moved on and spent several weeks laying low at the home of a sympathizer in Waukesha, Wisconsin. When the considerable buzz in the chamber had been quieted, Parsons informed Judge Gary in a clear tone, “I have come to stand trial, your honor, with my innocent comrades.”

Attorney Black had been instrumental in convincing Lucy Parsons that Albert should return and face the charges; he was convinced the prosecution would not be able to make the case that men who gave speeches and published newspaper editorials, however inflammatory, were responsible for a bombing with which they had no physical connection, and that Parsons’s hiding out only implied his guilt. Through Lucy, Black also had gotten the sense that Albert was too honorable a man to be content to long remain a fugitive, and too committed an anarchist to pass up the opportunity to use the trial and the accusations against him to make public his beliefs.

Parsons didn’t fully share Black’s optimism about winning acquittal, and likely recognized that, even if miraculously set free, he and Spies and the others would be hunted down by vengeful police, relatives of the dead officers, or vigilante groups, some of whom had already issued warnings to that effect. Still, for a combination of reasons, some known only to himself, Parsons made a fateful decision, one consistent with how he had always lived his life, and surrendered to the judgment of the law.
The Haymarket Trial has been viewed for well over a century as a remarkable travesty of justice. With the city and the nation’s fulsome contempt for the accused at his back, Judge Gary gave himself broad latitude to bring the case to the resolution demanded. The compromises to expediency began with the jury selection. As it was virtually impossible to find potential jurors in Chicago not already convinced of the defendants’ guilt, or even willing to say they might keep an open mind about crimes allegedly committed by anarchists, the judge sought only a dubious guarantee that they would be objective in a murder trial, and then determinedly closed off the defense’s peremptory challenges. This was significant, since the trial would ultimately turn on evidence of murder, but on whether the defendants held anarchist beliefs. The result was a jury of twelve white men, not a single one of whom was a laborer or an immigrant, a few of whom even said they were friends of policemen present at Haymarket Square. Once so grossly biased a jury had been seated, Judge Gary’s denial of Black’s plea for a change of venue seemed ever more obtuse and unjust.

The trial got under way on July 15 with the county’s Julius Grinnell laying out the prosecution’s case, abetted by extensive readings from anarchist and Socialist tracts and the testimony of compensated informants. He placed August Spies at the head of a network of bomb-throwing anarchists. According to Grinnell, Spies had orchestrated the violence at the McCormick plant on May 3 as a way to provoke outrage and violence among the city’s workmen, and had then immediately issued the “Revenge!” flyer calling for violent resistance and the next night’s rally in the Haymarket. At the gathering at Greif’s Hall on the night of May 3 the conspirators had agreed to hurl bombs at the police if they made a show of force. Samuel Fielden’s speech at the Haymarket, Grinnell explained, was intended to agitate the police and bring a response; the bomb had been thrown from the vicinity of the speakers’ wagon after the police had been drawn there. The conspirators’ ultimate hope, he asserted, was that the spilling of police blood would in turn trigger a citywide uprising of workingmen and other citizens. While the state had not been able to iden-

tify the bomber, Grinnell told the jury that “It is not necessary in this kind of case . . . that the individual who commits the particular offense—for instance, the man who threw the bomb—be in court at all. He need not even be indicted. The question for you to determine is, having ascertained that a murder was committed, not only who did it, but who’s responsible for it, who abetted it, assisted it, encouraged it.”

Interestingly, a case heard in New York City the year before might have been instructive. In early 1885, Justus Schwab (the man arrested in 1874 for racing across Tompkins Square waving a red flag) had been charged with inciting to riot after an incident at an anarchist lecture in which a police captain had been crowned over the head with a chair. Dozens of police reinforcements had then rushed into the hall shouting, “Drive the loafers out!” and bludgeoning men and women audience members as they tried to flee. Schwab was an ideal target for the prosecution—a known troublemaker who ran a saloon on the Lower East Side that was a gathering place for radicals. But there was no evidence indicating Schwab had “incited” the fighting in the hall. The district attorney harped instead on the allegation that he was a Socialist, until Schwab himself demanded, “Is Socialism on trial here, or is Justus H. Schwab on trial?” In the end the charges were dismissed after the jury declined to convict a man solely on his beliefs. Few if any people associated with the Haymarket trial, however, anticipated so enlightened a verdict.

The Chicago trial carried on through the warm, humid days of summer 1886. Despite the intense heat and closeness of the courtroom, there was a daily demand for seats. The fortunate who gained entry packed their lunches, intent on sitting through every moment of the drama. The result, in the sultry atmosphere, was a courtroom “fragrant” with the smells of meat sandwiches, boiled potatoes, oranges, and bananas, and noisy at times with the crinkling of food wrappers. So desirable were good viewing places that Judge Gary opened his own riser each day to special guests, often society women of his acquaintance, who sat in chairs at his rear; the judge frequently passed personal notes to his visitors, or shared the contents of a candy dish.

As the trial progressed, the defense succeeded at presenting witnesses
who contradicted the conspiracy Grinnell had described. The meeting at Greif's Hall could hardly be characterized as a gathering to plot a bombing since it was open to the public, and Albert Parsons had not even been there, for he was in Ohio that evening making a speech. He had only learned of the Haymarket gathering upon arriving back in Chicago on May 4, and when he dropped by the rally, where he was glad to make a few remarks, he had with him his wife and children, curious behavior for someone aware a bomb was about to be exploded and a riot instigated. Louis Lingg had been neither at Greif's Hall nor at the Haymarket rally, and even though it appeared he had manufactured bombs, there was no evidence linking him to the bomb in the Haymarket. It was tempting to connect the vanished Rudolph Schnaubelt to the crime, since his flight suggested guilt, but the defense was able to show that his involvement was little more than speculation, as was the prosecution's attempt to place the bomb in the hands of either Adolph Fischer or another man, Reinhold “Big” Krueger, who could not answer for himself because he had been killed in the Haymarket.

Unionist Oscar Neebe’s connection to the other defendants and the cause of anarchy was sufficiently vague that, as one observer put it, all the accusations against him, even if true, “would not justify a five-dollar fine.” Neebe tweaked the prosecution by testifying that, yes, he had committed many crimes—the “crimes” of organizing bakers so that instead of working fourteen- and sixteen-hour days they only worked ten, and that he had committed the same “crime” for brewers and grocery clerks, many of whom now had Sundays off. “That,” he conceded, “is a great crime.”

Confronted by the state’s apparently weak case, Albert Parsons tried turning the tables on the prosecution by offering his own version of the disaster. Rather than an anarchist plot to stoke revolutionary violence, he declared, the bomber was likely a Pinkerton agent or other kind of spy dispatched to cause an incident that would license a sweeping crackdown on anarchists and labor advocates. As the labor journalist John Swinton had observed, “The bomb was a godsend to the enemies of the labor movement. They have used it as an explosive against all the objects that the working people are bent upon accomplishing, and in defense of all the evils that capital is bent on maintaining.” Parsons’s claim that the bombing had been a kind of reverse conspiracy, a deliberate provocation, was unproven but no: far-fetched; it was, to its credit, as compelling an explanation of what had occurred as the state’s largely conjectural story.

The defense also assaulted the state’s claim that the anarchists intended the rally in the Haymarket to trigger “a revolution,” since any intelligent person knew that when anarchists spoke of revolution they were referring to an ideal—a change in the economic and civic conditions of society that would someday replace government authority with greater individual autonomy. Workers might arm and prepare for that day of deliverance, but no anarchist leader was so naive as to think a single act of terrorist violence would compel it into being. “Anarchists do not make the social revolution,” as Parsons explained. “They prophesy its coming.”

Black’s closing argument begged for the jurors’ objectivity and perspective, reminding them that Jesus had also been a Socialist, in a sense no different from the defendants. Grinnell wrapped up for the state, saying there could be no place for anarchism in America’s free, egalitarian society.

On August 19, after ensuring they understood his instruction that the defendants could be found guilty of murder even though no physical evidence linked them to the victims, Judge Gary sent the jury off to deliberate on the men’s guilt as well as their sentence, as was the practice in Illinois. The culpability and punishment of all the defendants was agreed upon quickly by the jurymen—after an hour of deliberations they were glimpsed through a window relaxing and smoking cigars—the only sticking point being whether Oscar Neebe, whose role was tangential, deserved execution. The jury ultimately recommended his conviction and a sentence of fifteen years, the others were all sentenced to die on the gallows.

There was widespread approval of the verdicts, particularly in Chi-
Chicago, where shouts of celebration were heard in the streets surrounding the courthouse and the Tribune trumpeted its extensive coverage, “Nooses for the Reds.”\(^{81}\) Fearing an outbreak of anarchist protest, Inspector Bonfield sternly advised against any public demonstrations in support of the condemned, warning that “if any violence is done by the friends of these men the lamp posts of Chicago will bear fruit . . . [and] the police will be powerless to quell the popular rage.”

It is not recorded whether Bonfield appreciated the irony of his words: lynching would be tolerated if anarchists misbehaved.\(^{82}\)

The labor movement, like the rest of America, had been stunned by the Haymarket carnage, and out of concern for its image in the face of public anger it had initially condemned the attack and the men who stood accused of the crime. But the biased trial and convictions produced a slow but certain change of heart, as outrage grew that men who had been defended and championed workers were being indicted, convicted, and sentenced to death solely for their opinions. As Adolph Fischer offered, “I was tried here in this room for murder, and I was convicted of Anarchy. This verdict is a death-blow to free speech, free press and free thought in this country.”\(^{83}\) No sooner had the fatal verdicts been rendered than a process began by which the condemned were transformed into heroes, martyrs to the First Amendment and the rights of labor. Even Samuel Gompers, who detested radical influence in labor’s affairs, vowed that working people would never willingly surrender. Spies, Parsons, and the rest to the “vengeance of the common enemy.”

This trend was abetted by second-guessing over the way in which the trial had been conducted—the judicial shortcuts taken by Judge Gary, the lack of physical evidence, and the fact that under the circumstances in which the trial was held no other result was possible. The Chicago Express dared print what many people privately believed, that it was not the anarchists but Inspector Bonfield who was most directly to blame for the tragedy, as he had foolishly marched his police to disperse a nonviolent gathering that was only moments away from its peaceful conclusion.\(^{84}\)

The defendants were themselves allowed to comment on their precarious fate when, at a hearing in October, defense attorney Black’s call for a new trial was formally rejected. Spies defended his innocence and mocked the prosecution’s conceit that in hanging seven men the cause of laboring people would be quelled. “If you think you can stamp out the labor movement, then hang us!” he demanded, but the protests of dissatisfied working people would not be silenced. “Here you will tread upon a spark,” he warned, “but here, and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out. The ground is on fire upon which you stand.”\(^{85}\) Parsons criticized the judge for upholding convictions obtained in a trial that had taken place in a hostile atmosphere, calling the jury’s decision “a verdict of passion, born of passion, nurtured in passion . . . the sum total of the organized passion of the city of Chicago.” He defended anarchists as people who sought the humane goal of an egalitarian society without oppressive authority, and complained that the police, Chicago businessmen, the press, as well as the court, had conspired to muzzle the community’s true sentiments.\(^{86}\) Think you the people are blind, are asleep, are indifferent? You deceiving yourselves! I tell you, as a man of the people, and I speak for them, that your every word and act . . . are recorded.” He assured Judge Gary, “You are being weighed in the balance . . . I, a working man, stand here, and to your face, in your stronghold of oppression, denounce . . . your crimes against humanity.”\(^{87}\)

Gary’s rejection of the retrial motions led the defense to appeal the case to the Illinois Supreme Court and ultimately to the United States Supreme Court on the grounds that the trial had been conducted improperly. The Illinois court examined the issue for months before announcing it saw no procedural unfairness, while the high court in Washington in turn refused to hear the appeal, saying no federal issues were involved.

The thwarted appeals did succeed at least in helping to publicize the wrongs of the trial and in encouraging a worldwide movement protesting the death sentences. Pleas for Illinois governor Richard Oglesby to exercise clemency—o change the death sentences to life imprisonment—came
from former U.S. senator Lyman Trumbull, architect of the Fourteenth Amendment; former Massachusetts congressman Benjamin F. Butler; reformer Henry Demarest Lloyd; and the influential editor William Dean Howells, who thought the defendants not guilty of "anything but their opinions" and termed the convictions "the greatest wrong that ever threatened our fame as a nation."

Lucy Parsons took to the road, visiting sixteen states to plead her husband's and the others' innocence and to raise funds in support of their clemency campaign. She also conducted a one-woman letter-writing crusade, targeting notable figures in the United States and overseas. Partly as a result of her activity, petitions arrived from as far away as England bearing the signatures of Oscar Wilde, William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, William Rossetti, and Friedrich Engels.

The appeals for mercy soon overwhelmed the office of Governor Oglesby. One petition arrived bearing a hundred thousand signatures, and several delegations of prominent people trooped to the capital at downstate Springfield in an attempt to persuade the state's chief executive to delay or halt the executions. Samuel Gompers told Oglesby that if Jefferson Davis, the traitorous president of the Confederacy, could be granted amnesty, a group of anarchists whose only crime was to be labor activists were deserving of reprieve as well. Gompers also cautioned that putting men to death for their words and associations, not for a specific crime, was bound to turn them into eternal martyrs to radicalism and encourage further violence. From prison, August Spies wrote to Oglesby to suggest that the state of Illinois execute him alone, since "if legal murder there must be, let one, let mine suffice." The governor also heard from Albert Parsons, who pointed out that if he was to be hanged for coming to Haymarket Square on the evening of May 4, so should his wife and two small children, as they had also been present. "My God, this is terrible!" blurted Oglesby to an aide, upon reading the Spies and Parsons letters.

Once the convictions had been handed down and the fate of the guilty sealed, the tone of the press coverage had also changed markedly: newspapers which had gleefully vilified the accused, began to record their prison lives as if they were celebrities, noting their every visitor, guessing at their mood, and reporting extensively on their private business. Parsons's wife, Lucy, and their children were frequent visitors to the jail, while Spies and Lingg both had admiring female friends. Spies's romance took a turn for the sensational when he and Nina Van Zandt, a local woman from respectable society who'd come to know Spies only since his arrest, announced their intention to wed. The press was happy to mine this development for its compelling copy, but nonetheless feared outrage that a condemned killer of policemen would be allowed to marry a woman of decent reputation. Even Spies's attorneys advised against it, fearing it would harm any chance of appeal. But the two lovers were undeterred, Spies's brother Henry standing in as proxy for him in an exchange of vows with Van Zandt when the authorities refused to release Spies to attend his own wedding.

In Springfield the clemency decision continued to weigh upon Governor Oglesby. A decorated Civil War veteran and confidant of Abraham Lincoln (he had been at Lincoln's deathbed), Oglesby was genuinely sympathetic to the labor cause, having signed Illinois's first eight-hour law in 1867. The compromise he finally offered was that he would commute the Haymarket sentences to life in prison if Chicago's business leaders—men like retailer Marshall Field and Cyrus McCormick Jr.—approved of the measure, and if the condemned anarchists would, in turn, disavow in writing their words and actions. Schwab and Field had done so, and had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment; Parsons, Spies, Engel, Fischer, and Lingg refused, Parsons quoting Patrick Henry's famous words, "Give me liberty or give me death."

Oglesby was not alone in his prevariation. Some prominent Chicagoans, including the conservative Chicago Tribune, had begun to question the need for the executions. The paper argued that law had triumphed, convictions had been sought and won. Hanging the condemned would only create martyrs to the cause of anarchism, whereas a public recommendation for commutation coming from the city's business elite would, as a gesture, go a long way toward easing the city's persistent labor troubles. Marshall Field, however, harbored a powerful enmity toward those
who fomented labor unrest, an attitude dating from the railroad strike of 1877. Following that debacle, he had led an effort by the city’s business leaders to buy a 632-acre site for the construction of a new military base thirty miles north of Chicago on Lake Michigan (soon named Fort Sheridan), as well as the construction of a new thoroughfare linking the fort with the city (the Sheridan Road), in order to enable the rapid intervention of federal troops in strikes and riots. With the local aristocrats of commerce, led by Field, remaining unmoved by the defendants’ plight, and Oglesby hemmed in by five of the condemned’s refusal to accept his offer and apologize, it was announced that the sentences would be carried out on the morning of November 11, 1887.

As that date approached, public outcry over the impending hangings was muted somewhat by the sudden (and suspicious) “discovery” of bomb-making materials in Lingg’s jail cell. How bomb-related items got into the heavily guarded lockup was never established. Author Louis Adamic suggests a “sweetheart” of Lingg’s was responsible, but the evidence is unclear.  However, on the night before the executions Lingg managed to commit suicide by cracking a dynamite cap open in his mouth. His death left only four of the original eight defendants for the gallows—Parsons, Spies, Engel, and Fischer—all of whom remained steadfast. Fischer assured Johann Most, “I am ready to deposit my life at the altar of the good cause,” while Engel, echoing Fischer’s sentiment, reassured friends, “Any man who is a true socialist, thoroughly imbued with its glorious principles, can go bravely to the scaffold and die for them.”

Near the end Parsons was visited by Dyer Lum, his successor at the Alarm, who asked whether he now regretted returning from hiding in Wisconsin to surrender to Judge Gary’s court. “No, I still believe I did right,” Albert replied. “My comrades, like myself, were unjustly charged. They did not shirk the issue; honor demanded that I should share their fate. Even under all the experience of the year past I honestly believe I could do no otherwise today.” When Lucy Parsons and her children were denied a final visit, Parsons turned to his love of poetry to console himself during his last night on earth. He found a sympathetic listener in a jailhouse deputy, and read to him John Greenleaf Whittier’s “The Reformer”:

- Whether on the gallows high,
- Or in the battle van
- The noblest place for man to die,
- Is where he dies for man.

“‘That song,’” Parsons assured his companion, “will go ringing down the corridors of time.”

Haymarket uniquely challenged labor by forcing it to decide what long-term message to take away. There was of course great indignation at the verdicts and at the premise of the trial itself, but there was also a frustration that the eight-hour crusade that had indirectly led to the affair was now discredited, and that anarchists had so badly sullied labor’s name. The bomb-throwing radical had become a popular caricature of worker unrest, newspaper cartoons depicting “The Anarchist” as a gnomelike, bearded figure (likely modeled after Johann Most), secreting a bomb behind his back or in his coat. One entrepreneur ventured to cash in on the sensationalist interest in anarchy by exhibiting the remains of Louis Lingg, offering $10,000 for the privilege and promising to return the corpse in good condition when he was through. Labor leaders were unsure whether to defend the principles for which the men had died, strive harder to distance themselves from anarchism, or simply move on.

The Knights of Labor were an especial victim of Haymarket fallout: the group had formally offered only tepid support for the giant eight-hour rallies of May 1, and had been quick to condemn those rounded up after the May 4 bombing. “Let it be understood by all the world,” stated the group’s Chicago house organ, “that the Knights of Labor have no affiliation, association, sympathy or respect for the band of cowardly mur-
derers, cut-throats and robbers, known as anarchists. . . Better that seven times seven men hang than to have the millstone of odium around the standard of this Order in affiliating in any way with this element of destruction." When, at a national conference of the Knights in October 1886, the rank and file demanded a resolution to the effect that the Haymarket condemned were not guilty, Terence Powderly led an effort to defeat it; the meeting did, however, vote to request that those convicted receive leniency, and Powderly belatedly agreed that the court's work in the case had been hasty. Johann Most called Powderly a "scoundrel" guilty of "wretched trickery" for having withheld more full-hearted support for Spies and company. "It [was] within his power to bring the whole organization of which he is the head to declare itself against the judicial murderers," Most said. "But Powderly did the very opposite. . . . The blood of our murdered comrades sticks forever to his hands." The Master Workman felt deeply the sting of such criticisms; in October 1887 he confided his fear that anarchists were plotting to kill him.

On the scaffold, moments from death, August Spies had cried out, "The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangle today." The backlash from Haymarket. per Spies's prophecy, did prove considerable, and the ever-ambivalent Powderly was among the first to be diminished by it.

But it was in more substantial ways not a good season for the Knights. In fall 1886, twenty thousand Knights struck the Chicago meatpacking plants for an eight-hour day. Management brought in scabs and special guards under the direction of the Pinkertons. The strikers, who stayed off the job for three weeks and believed they were close to wringing concessions out of the employers, were blindsided when Powderly unexpectedly ordered the strikers back to their jobs, threatening those who disobeyed his edict with dismissal from the union. With the support of the Knights national leadership withdrawn, the strikers capitulated and returned to the plant's ten-hour regimen; but were furious at their own organization's faintheartedness.

Rank and file began to depart the Knights. It increasingly appeared that their huge membership, erratic leadership, and inability to focus on the needs of a specific trade were a poor means of carrying forward the struggle for better hours. From a membership of seven hundred thousand prior to Haymarket, the Knights lost members steadily after 1886, until it could claim only seventy-five thousand members ir 1893, the year Powderly was deposed. Unfortunately his replacement, James Sovereign, also signed on to gradual reformist programs that had come to be seen by many as chimeraical. Like Powderly, Sovereign seemed willing to ignore the fact that the Knights' remarkable growth had come not through programs involving manufacturing, cooperatives, or land reform, but from standing up to today Gould and other employers on the basics of wages and hours.

The U.S. labor cause has always been an extended conversation between ideology and pragmatism, and in the wake of Haymarket, pragmatism spoke the loudest and clearest. "No more powerful blow was ever struck for capitalism than when that bomb was thrown on Haymarket Square," lamented a Socialist journal in 1909, causing the labor movement "to come definitely under the control of its most conservative element." With the Knights in decline and Socialists and anarchists hobbled by their association with so traumatic a series of events, a new spirit asserted itself in American unionism epitomized by the 1886 founding of Gompers's American Federation of Labor (AFL). Gompers's group harbored no illusions about shaping a new world more favorable to the proletariat; it focused instead on wages, hours, and working conditions, and the effective power of trade unions fighting for these goals within the industrial status quo. It followed a philosophy that many workers found reassuring, one "based upon wage consciousness rather than class consciousness," with "no idea of trying to change the economic system, let alone seeking to overthrow it." As a federation spokesman had famously stated in testimony before Congress in 1883, "We have no ultimate er.d. . . . We are fighting only for immediate objects that can be realized in a few years. We are opposed to theorists. . . . We are practical men." While there were occasional efforts to create bridges of respect and
friendship between the Knights and Gompers’s federation, the groups became increasingly distrustful of one another, particularly as the latter surged to greater national prominence. It probably didn’t help that the organizations’ leaders were of opposite dispositions. The devout, temperance-minded Powderly took exception to Gompers’s obstreperousness, his love of saloons, stogies, and beer; he once referred to him as a “Christ-slugger.” Powderly had in turn angered Gompers with the Knights’ effort to make the Cigar Makers’ International into a group more embracing of unskilled immigrants. Gompers thought the movement was simply not ready for the large-scale organizing of immigrant workers, men and women who knew little or no English and brought alien beliefs from across the Atlantic. Unions, Gompers believed, “survived only where the public would tolerate them, in the small shops and in artisan trades where craft unions seemed to uphold American individualistic values.”

Gompers was himself an immigrant, of Dutch-Jewish heritage, born in London in 1850, and brought to America as a child, arriving with his family in 1865. As a young man he followed his father’s trade as a cigar maker, a proud craft tradition unique in that it was performed in quiet, not in the proximity of pounding machines. Cigar makers’ workrooms famously served as informal schools for workers; young Sam was often assigned the job of reading from books and newspapers to the other cigar makers as they worked. Precocious and socially adept, Gompers was groomed as a future leader in the Cigar Makers International, headed by Adolph Strasser and Karl Ferdinand Laurrell; both were Socialists who had weared of the endless bickering and dogmatism between various cells and belief systems; they impressed upon young Sam Gompers the importance of sticking to the hard business of trade unionism, with a minimum emphasis on Socialist politics. “Go to their meetings, listen to them and understand them, but do not join the Party,” Laurrell warned him. Gompers later called Laurrell “my mental guide through many of my early struggles” and all his life was fond of quoting Laurrell’s words of admonishment: “Study your union card, Sam, and if the idea does not square with that, it ain’t true.”

One can imagine how valid Laurrell’s words must have sounded to Gompers by the time he presided over the founding of the AFL. William Sylvis with his iron molders and the NLU had frittered away precious organizational resources on political causes, cooperation, monetary reform, women’s issues; Terence Powderly had offered inconsistent leadership; the Knights of St. Crispin had railed in vain to preserve skilled labor and the craft tradition. Gompers, in contrast, had absorbed these and other valuable lessons. Having once joined an unsuccessful strike against the introduction of a new-fangled cigar rolling device, he came away believing that one could not strike effectively against technological progress, one could only adapt to it, safeguarding workers’ interests in the transition as best one could. Another observation he made was that strikes against wage cuts rarely worked if carried out in tough economic times, for management simply turned to scabs and strikebreakers. Strikes had a better chance where employers were doing well and workers’ demands could be linked to overall profitability, and where work disruptions would have a more telling effect. So strongly did Gompers feel about inappropriately timed strikes that when he ran the Cigar Makers’ local in New York he was known to discipline without strikers by helping to provide employers with replacement workers. This could be perceived as a nasty bit of double-dealing, but as he liked to say in defense of his tactics, “The trade union is not a Sunday School.”

While cautious about strikes, Gompers nonetheless defended the right to withhold one’s labor; strikes were a “sign that the people are not yet willing to surrender every spark of their manhood and their honor and their independence.” He liked an analogy of a strike as a natural release of energy, like a thunderstorm. “No man would think of trying to invent some machine by which the thunderstorms could be abolished,” Gompers asserted, for they are “the result of noxious gases or different gases in the atmosphere that come together and crush, and they simply purify the atmosphere, and make us feel reinvigorated and with renewed hope.” Picking its battles carefully paid off for Gompers’s Cigar Makers’ union; it received 218 applications for strikes from its locals between 1881 and 1883 and approved 194 of them, winning about 75 percent of the time.
Gompers also placed great value on fat strike funds and the high dues required to sustain them. Once employers knew his cigar makers had ample purse and could hold out in case of a strike, they became more inclined to treat worker demands seriously. “There is not a dollar which the working man or woman pays into a labor organization,” he often said of his dues policy, “which does not come back a hundredfold.”

Gompers had joined the Federation of Organized Trades at its founding in 1881. The influence of the group remained slight until 1886, when the power of the Knights began to wane and Gompers and his allies saw their opening. At a federation gathering in Philadelphia at the end of May 1886, just after Haymarket, many of the delegates had gone out of their way to appear in conservative garb, “a silk hat and a Prince Albert coat,” Gompers later recalled, the better to emphasize their dignity and self-respect as trade workers. This conclave led to a gathering at Columbus, Ohio, that fall at which trade union representatives of 150,000 workers from the Cigar Makers, Iron Molders, Carpenters, Mine Workers, and others founded the AFL and elected Gompers its president.

Haymarket’s aftermath played a role in Gompers’s later inclination to keep electoral politics at arm’s length. In fall 1886 he backed the candidacy of Henry George for mayor of New York City on the United Labor Party ticket. George was a movement literary celebrity, having in 1879 published Progress and Poverty, a seminal account of the impact of industrialization in which he linked the growing gap between affluent and poor in America to the disproportionate ownership of land by a handful of individuals and corporations. George suggested a “single tax” that would address this imbalance. The amount of available land in America was shrinking steadily; he pointed out, an observation that had a chilling effect on readers’ faith in the ideal of land for all and of an ever-westward growing nation. Gompers campaigned hard for George, who won almost a third of the vote in a three-way race, but ultimately lost to Abram Hewitt, who as an ungracious winner had the cheek to describe Gompers and other George supporters as “anarchists.”

The next year George disappointed his followers by denouncing clemency in the Haymarket case. He had initially criticized the trial’s unfairness, but either to protect his political ambitions or out of pique at Socialist associates, he was by October 1887 recommending that the ruling of the Illinois Supreme Court rejecting the Haymarket defendants’ appeal be respected. Bitter over George’s failure at the polls and at the changeable nature of the candidate’s views, Gompers ever after tended to regard immersion in party politics as a waste of one’s efforts, efforts better directed toward the actual workday needs of labor. His federation might advance a legislative program, but tended to steer clear of any fixed alignment with political parties. It would swing support to politicians who aided its causes and deny support to those who offended it on a case-by-case basis.

The AFL offered well-defined independence to its individual trade unions, yet a central leadership that was run like a smart company, carefully controlling policy, benefits, dues, and the flow of funds to distressed locals. Gompers provided much of the energy for the operation of the AFL in its earliest days—writing and answering correspondence, handling the organization’s accounting, and running its headquarters with the help of his son Henry, who served as office boy for $3 a week. He was adamant about knowing personally the details of the work in which he was engaged; once, when the Cigar Makers were preparing an appeal to the state legislature about the need to regulate tenement workplaces, Gompers had gone door-to-door through the tenements of the Lower East Side pretending to be a salesman of the collected works of Charles Dickens, in order to get a firsthand view of existing household cigar factories. Where an effective labor organization succeeded, he recognized, was in such thorough awareness and control—not necessarily in bold undertakings like strikes; what mattered was the day-to-day routine of negotiating small matters with disparate unions and labor councils, examining grievances, administering benefits—actions that did not make headlines but were the real building blocks of labor justice and peace.

Gompers recognized that industrialism was not an aberration; it was rather the logical result of history’s advance. Thus, defeating industrial-
ism outright was unlikely, particularly through the pursuit of utopian fantasies. The earth was not going to revolve backward to a simpler time of small artisan businesses and the family farm. He thus shed away from visionary fixes like currency reform, land programs, and cooperation that had spellbound the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor, as he chucked aside the naive notions that laborers everywhere would rise up as one against authority or were likely even to share a single unifying national purpose. Workers might curse bosses and "property beasts," but most believed firmly in their own eventual ascendance, in property rights, and in the rule of law. Far from disrespecting capital, they were faithful to the promise of individual attainment. "There is a certain principle inborn in every man... That principle is hope," one AFL official told the Alarm. "Men must be permitted to better their condition by individual exertion or civilization will perish of dry rot."

Thus, far more effectively than groups like the NLU or the Knights or the Socialists, which were in a sense organizations devoted to labor-related ideas, the AFL appealed to its members with the targeting of fundamental and achievable goals. "It endured not because it had a blueprint for a new world, or for a return to an old one," notes Gompers's biographer Harold Livesay, "but because it best managed to protect the cherished rights of its members against the inroads of the new industrial age." It did this by confining itself "to economic and political methods sanctioned by the prevailing system."
workers' rights in America—desperate men on a hijacked train deter-
mined to cross the country to petition Congress for relief, and heavily
armed soldiers waiting in ambush to stop them, prepared to shoot and
kill their fellow citizens, if need be.

Since the onset of a severe financial crisis the year before, the nation
had entered the most precipitous economic depression in its history.
Laboring men everywhere were in despair; farm income had dried up;
the Union Pacific and Erie railways were in arrears; banks had closed, as
many as four hundred in the West and South. While no official numbers
of unemployed were kept, it was estimated there were as many as 200,000
without work in New York, 100,000 in Chicago; in Philadelphia, 62,500.
In lieu of public assistance, private charities could do only so much. Fam-
ilies slept in public parks, parents improvising each morning a way to find
food and milk for their children, while less fortunate urchins scrounged
in the streets. Husbands left home in search of work, some never to be
heard from again, joining the permanent ranks of jobless wanderers.
There is 'something wrong,' the Cleveland Plain Dealer lamented, 'when
such a large number of people are thrown up like driftwood on the shore,
out of place, out of use.'

If there was any silver lining in these troubles, it was that they reinig-
orated reform efforts under way in the cities to address the conditions of
slum dwellers, the jobless, and the poor. On the labor front, the struggles
of recent years—the 1877 railroad strikes, the Haymarket affair, and now
the 1893 economic crisis—had had the effect of honing a sharper, more
pragmatic outlook among the large national organizations. The AFL, the
Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers, and the American
Railway Union, recognizing the enormous sway of the corporations, were
coordinating thousands of members and union locals. Public and of
icial concern about the accumulating power of both capital and labor would
soon bring the federal government and the courts into the fray; there was
uncertainty as to what their role would mean for industrial society, but
none as to its potential significance.

Carnegie Steel's Homestead Works, America's largest steel-
making complex, is on the Monongahela River southeast of
Pittsburgh, occupying fifty acres and containing three separate mills, a
port, and a private railroad. Of the plant's thirty-eight hundred workers,
550 skilled laborers, most essential to the mill operations, belonged to the
Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers. They had a solid
contract and enjoyed a say, through a multitude of negotiated rules and
guidelines, in how the plant functioned and work was done. In 1889 the
Carnegie Company had set out to defeat the Amalgamated, but the work-
ers, surprising Carnegie with their degree of organization and resist-
ance, formed an impenetrable human barrier around the plant and success-
fully drove away the company's scabs and detectives. Faced with such
unexpected solidarity—as well as sympathy strikes at related Carnegie
operations, including the railroads on which Homestead relied—the firm
surrendered; it agreed to the work rules and set wages, on a sliding scale to
reflect the prevailing market price of steel products.

Although the 1889 pact—good for three years—had bought both
sides time, the company had not relinquished its aim of destroying the
union. This contradicted the public statements of its president, Andrew
Carnegie, who in two articles in Forum magazine in 1886 had expressed
sympathy for the rights of workingmen. Carnegie, himself an immigrant
to America, prided himself on knowing many of his German, Italian,
and Bohemian workers by their first names, and encouraged them to be
similarly informal toward him. "There can never be any hopeless trou-
bles ... as long as they call me 'Andy,'" he liked to tell business colleagues.
Carnegie's avowed respect for his workers extended to their right to or-
nize, and even to their distrust of scabs. "To expect that one dependent
upon his daily wage for the necessities of life will stand by peacefully and
see a new man employed in his stead is to expect too much," he'd written.
But Carnegie was known to occasionally sacrifice truth in order to appear
reasonable before the press, and in 1892, when the union contract expired
and another showdown with the Amalgamated loomed, he had conve-
niently departed on an extended vacation to Aberdeen, Scotland, where
he maintained one of his many homes. Bill Jones, a Carnegie manager who had traditionally handled employee relations and was popular with the workers—his benevolence included the introduction of eight-hour shifts at one plant—had unfortunately been killed not long before in a blast furnace accident.

The man left to assume Jones's duties, Henry Clay Frick, was fearless and empathetic. He was said to have once bodily picked up a disputatious striker and thrown him and all his belongings into a creek. Known as "the King of Coke," Frick was a millionaire in his own right. His H. C. Frick Company had been one of the nation's leading vendors of iron-smelting coke until the firm was absorbed by the Carnegie enterprise. It was Frick who had suggested to Andrew Carnegie that all the steel magnate's concerns be merged under one rubric, Carnegie Steel, of which Frick was now chairman. Frick considered Carnegie's oft-spoken solicitude for workers, whether genuine or not, to be antiquated and softheaded, and he was eager to demonstrate his own management style and willingness to trim costs.

The Amalgamated, concerned about the imminent expiration of the earlier contract, had proposed a new pact that would align the wage scale with the higher prices being had for steel products and the increased production of the Homestead mills. Henry Clay Frick paid little heed to the offer. He wanted to undo Carnegie's bonds to the Amalgamated, make Homestead a nonunion plant, and allow the firm to set wages as it saw fit, with no sliding scale. The Carnegie Company couched this desire in democratic-sounding language, saying it wished to deal with the majority of its workers, those who were unskilled and nonunion, rather than the more "elite" skilled members of the Amalgamated. But this was misleading; the unskilled employees largely supported the Amalgamated because plant conditions overall benefited from the union's success.

Carnegie later claimed that the first reports of bloodshed at his mills "came on me like a thunderbolt in a clear sky." A New York paper as early as mid-June, however, had printed the headline "A Bitter Struggle Coming" above a story about the deteriorating situation, and Frick's elaborate measures to prepare for violence as the showdown approached could not have been unknown to Carnegie, even in far-off Scotland. The King of Coke had ordered a ten-foot fence built around the plant, topped it with barbed wire, cut holes in it for rifles, and installed searchlights on a series of watchtowers. He arranged for barges to be at the ready to ferry Pinkerton agents to the site, if needed. Workers, nervously eying the extensive preparations, renamed the Homestead plant "Fort Frick."

On June 28 Frick locked out the entire workforce and announced that as of July 1, Homestead would be operated as a nonunion mill. The Amalgamated immediately went on strike, taking the nonunion workers with them. Having anticipated the company's moves, the union divided one thousand employee volunteers into watch committees to keep an eye out for scabs, spies, or other interlopers; it also rented a small boat, the Edna, to patrol the river approach to the plant. When, on July 5, Allegheny County sheriff William H. McCleary showed up with a detachment of deputies to "secure" the Homestead works, he and his entourage were intercepted by one such committee of strikers, escorted onto the Edna, and taken back to Pittsburgh. McCleary's visit was in all likelihood a bit of play-acting, the strikers' "rejection" of the sheriff and his men serving as a pretext for Frick's use of Pinkertons and armed force.

That very night, at about 2 a.m., the union was informed by telegraph that barges were on the river headed toward Homestead. The Carnegie Company had purchased two vessels for use by the Pinkertons—the Iron Mountain, which served as a floating dormitory for three hundred agents, and the Monongahela, which held a kitchen and dining area. A tugboat, the Little Bill, had been engaged to tow them into position. The crew of the union's boat, the Edna, shoved off to engage the intruders in the river, firing warning shots in the direction of the Little Bill before turning back to alert the workers. Not only strike volunteers heard the Edna's shrill whistle of alarm. The town adjacent to the mill stirred to life and its residents descended to the riverfront. Some were armed with shotguns and pistols; others had hoes, rakes, or similar implements. As the barges came within hailing distance someone in the crowd warned: "Don't step off that
boat; go back, go back, or we'll not answer for your lives!” An instant later a Pinkerton, Captain Frederick Heinde, appeared, and was told by Hugh O'Connell, one of the strike leaders, “In the name of God and humanity, don't attempt to land! Don't attempt to enter these works by force.”

“We were sent here to take possession of this property and to guard it for this company,” replied Heinde. “We don't wish to shed blood, but... if you men don't withdraw, we will mow every one of you down”—a somewhat audacious threat considering the crowd greatly outnumbered the men aboard the barges. Before you enter those mills, vowed a striker, “you will trample over the dead bodies of three thousand honest workingmen.” A few strikers moved to block any attempt by the Pinkertons to disembark. One, William Foy, lay down upon the gangplank and drew a revolver; Captain Heinde, coming toward him, swung at Foy with his baton and then, accidentally, stepped on an oar that bounced upward and struck another worker in the face. Suddenly shots were fired, wounding both Foy and Heinde. After a momentary pause there was more shooting, knocking down several Pinkertons and causing the rest to retreat belowdecks.

As the sun rose the detectives made another effort to land, which brought a second exchange of gunfire; this time it was the Pinkertons' aim that was accurate, killing and wounding several strikers. Further engaging the crowd which, having been fired upon, now appeared dangerously agitated, seemed an exceedingly poor idea, and the invaders gave up the effort to land the barges. As the Little Bill began to tow them away from shore, the tug's captain raised an American flag, perhaps thinking the mob would hesitate to shoot at the Stars and Stripes; the workers, however, opened a withering fire on the tug, injuring a crewman and sending both the captain and pilot scampering for cover. The Little Bill then steamed away, abandoning the Pinkertons' barges.

“Men of Homestead and fellow strikers,” declared a worker, “our friends have been murdered—our brothers have been shot down before our eyes by hired thugs! Yonder in those boats are hundreds of men who have murdered our friends and would ravish our homes! Men of Homestead, we must kill them! Not one must escape alive!” His listeners, requiring little urging and seizing on their sudden tactical advantage, began at once trying to oust the agents from the barges, using small skiffs to come up alongside the vessels, shooting and hurling small projectiles. The Pinkertons struggled to mount a defense. Only forty of the three hundred agents were full-time Pinkerton men; the rest were recent recruits who had signed on to stand guard duty at a steel mill, and were inadequately trained (or motivated) to suppress an armed mob. But even the veteran agents began to recognize the hopelessness of their position when a white flag they raised in surrender was blown to tatters by the strikers.

Sheriff McCleary, alerted to the detectives' predicament, wired Pennsylvania governor Robert E. Pattison at once for the militia, but Pattison, cognizant of the fact that Carnegie wanted an excuse to bring in troops and suspecting McCleary's earlier visit to the mill had been staged, hesitated to intervene. “The sheriff has employed but 12 deputies up to the present time,” Pattison replied. “If the emergency is as great as alleged, he should have employed a thousand. It is not the purpose of the militia to act as police officers.” The governor told McCleary that at Homestead he was facing a local challenge to law and order, and that as sheriff he must deputize a force to counter it.

As appeals for military help went unanswered, the Pinkertons' dilemma became grave, for some in the crowd had initiated an effort with potentially ghastly results, pouring oil on the water around the barges in an attempt to set them alight, which would surely incinerate those on board. Fortunately, senior officials of the Amalgamated had by now arrived on the scene. “Men, for God's sake and your families' sake, and for your own sake, listen to the pleadings of cool-headed men,” urged union president M. M. Garland. “We have positive assurance that these [Pinkertons] will be sent away, and all we want is a statement that you will not do any more firing.” But even as Garland spoke, workers were lighting fireworks near the barges in an attempt to ignite the oil. Hugh O'Donnell of the Amalgamated had better luck with the crowd, obtaining an agreement that would allow the Pinkertons to surrender their arms to the workers and submit to arrest by Sheriff McCleary on charges of murder.
The Pinkertons came ashore under a flag of truce. The crowd, however, ignoring the entreaties of the Amalgamated leaders, set upon the bewildered agents, beating them mercilessly with clubs, stabbing, and in some cases shooting them. Not a single Pinkerton escaped the mob’s punishment. As the agents were being roughed up, demonstrators boarded the now-abandoned barges and stripped them of beds, quilts, and cooking utensils, then set both vessels on fire.

Nor was the crowd’s fury yet spent. Even after authorities took control of the Pinkertons and attempted to lead them through the town, men, women, and children emerged from their homes to heap further beatings and indignities on the already hobbled captives, hitting them with kitchen utensils, garden tools, and whatever came to hand. Eventually, the bruised and bleeding agents were secured in the local opera house and, in the middle of the night, put aboard a special train and taken away.

There was widespread condemnation of the sadistic attack on the surrendering Pinkertons and, more generally, of the idea that a union-led mob would use deadly force against agents whose presence was legitimate in that they had been hired by the property’s management. “Men talk like anarchists or lunatics,” opined the Independent, “when they insist that the workmen at Homestead have done right.” Thus, even though a number of workers had been killed, the incident played into the company’s hands. “This outbreak settles one matter forever,” announced a Carnegie executive, “and that is that the Homestead mill hereafter will be run non-union and the Carnegie Company will never again recognize the Amalgamated Association nor any other labor organization.”

On July 12, with the strikers still occupying the site, Governor Patterson, responding to a request by Frick, finally consented to send in the militia. The Amalgamated workers welcomed the soldiers with cheers and an impromptu band concert, proudly telling commanding officer General George Snowden how they, the workers, controlled the plant by virtue of having fended off the invasion of the company’s hirelings. But Snowden rudely punctured the strikers’ mood. “Pennsylvanians can hardly appreciate the actual communism of these people,” he commented. “They [the strikers] believe the works are theirs quite as much as Carnegie’s.” His militia, eight thousand strong, easily managed where the Pinkertons had failed, taking control of the mills and safeguarding the arrival of hundreds of replacement workers. The Amalgamated countered by convincing some of the scabs to leave the plant—many, it seemed, had been lied to about the work they were accepting—but by early fall, Homestead was back in operation with two thousand new non-union workers.

In mid-November, the Amalgamated admitted defeat, those members who returned forced to accept a nonunion wage structure. While events at Homestead had played out, an equally depressing labor setback had occurred in the silver and copper-mining region of western Idaho at Coeur d’Alene, where a miners’ union violently resisted the importation of scabs, only to be crushed in turn by soldiers and a declaration of martial law. Hundreds of strikers had been rounded up and imprisoned in a crude detention camp.

The confrontations at both Homestead and Coeur d’Alene in 1892 showed corporations willing to act with ever-greater deliberation in confronting labor unions—supplanting workers with new technology, importing scabs in large numbers, and relying on the quick insertion of Pinkertons and soldiers to overwhelm local opposition. During the coming decade the Amalgamated would steadily lose membership as technology reduced the number of employees needed to run the Homestead plant, and union activism was squelched there and at other area mills by the firing or blacklisting of suspect employees. Carnegie and its corporate descendant, the United States Steel Company, would successfully inhibit labor organizing in the Pennsylvania steel mills for many years to come.

The intensity of the Homestead crisis was unsettling to anyone mindful of the precarious state of labor-industrial relations in America, although it’s probably fair to say no one responded more dramatically than two young anarchists, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Goldman, born in Russia in 1869, had emigrated in 1886 to live...
with relatives in Rochester, New York; like many young intellectuals of her generation, she had been enraged by the Haymarket trial and executions. Acting on her deepening political commitment, she left a youthful marriage and came to New York City in 1889, ingratiating herself with the Lower East Side anarchist milieu dominated by men like Johann Most and Justus Schwab. She first encountered the peculiar and excitable Berkman, a young Lithuanian Jew, wolfing down his dinner in a bohemian café. Both Goldman and Berkman became adherents of Most; Goldman briefly was his sexual partner and Berkman worked in Most’s publishing business. Like their mentor, they were intrigued with the idea of the *attentat*, the violent “propaganda by deed” of anarchist philosophy.

Poring over news accounts of the Homestead lockout and strike, they were outraged by Carnegie’s heavy-handed actions. One worker’s pregnant wife, they were horrified to learn, had been evicted from her house by sheriff’s deputies and left in the street. They resolved to go to Homestead and aid the workers in confronting so diabolical a creature as the Carnegie Company and its badge-wearing minions. They would compose an anarchist manifesto for the Homestead strikers, for while they saw in the Amalgamated’s resistance an inspiring “awakening” of anticapitalist fervor, it seemed a “blind rebellion,” one lacking “conscious revolutionary purpose.” In their view, “anarchism alone” could shape discontent into meaningful insurrectionary expression. “The dissemination of our ideas among the proletariat at Homestead,” Berkman later wrote, “would illumine the great struggle, help to clarify the issues, and point the way to complete ultimate emancipation.”

Before the two could advance their plans, however, news reached New York of the terrible battle that had taken place at Homestead with the Pinkertons. “We were stunned,” Goldman would recall. “We saw at once that the time for our manifesto had passed. Words had lost their meaning in the face of the innocent blood spilled on the banks of the Monongahela.” Berkman’s fervor was transformed immediately from the aim of educating the workers to exacting revenge on Henry Clay Frick. “Frick is the responsible factor in this crime,” he decided, “[and] must be made to stand the consequences.”

With Goldman agreeing that “a blow aimed at Frick would re-echo in the poorest hovel” and show the world “the proletariat of America had its avengers,” the couple hatched a scheme to murder the villain. Frick would be killed, and Berkman, while fully expecting to be executed for his crime, would use the opportunity of his trial to denounce the Carnegie dynasty and defend the anarchist cause. Goldman insisted she be taken along because as a woman she might have an easier time getting close to Frick without raising suspicion, but Berkman argued there was no use in two people sacrificing themselves in an *attentat* when one would suffice, and that her skills as a public speaker made it important she remain free to be able to defend and explain the purpose of the deed.

Planning an act of revolutionary terrorism, they soon discovered, did not come as easily as revolutionary thought. Having chosen a time bomb as the best way to kill Frick, Berkman purchased the raw materials, and assembled it based on information contained in Most’s guidebook, *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare*. A friend led him to an abandoned field on Staten Island where he could test the homemade device; but after several hours of trials, an exasperated Berkman returned to Manhattan to tell Golman he couldn’t get the gadget to detonate. They had wasted $40 on a nonexploding bomb.

Goldman, meanwhile, having exhausted the generosity of friends who could loan her money to pay Berkman’s train fare to Pittsburgh and other expenses, decided that if he was willing to give his life for the cause, she would not be above selling her body to raise the needed funds. Putting aside her spectacles and usual modest garb, she outfitted herself in a gauzy dress and makeup and joined the streetwalkers on Fourteenth Street. After a long while she managed to attract the attentions of an elderly man-about-town. He took her to a nearby saloon and bought her a beer, but soon sensed Goldman’s nervousness and lack of expertise. After eliciting from her the fact that she was a novice, he handed her $10 and advised her to go home. Berkman soon left New York; a portrait of Frick clipped from a newspaper in his wallet so he would know his victim on sight. Riding west alone, gazing from the window of the train and musing on the role his-
tory had allotted him, he reminded himself that "the removal of a tyrant is not merely justifiable; it is the highest duty of every true revolutionist... and what could be higher in life than to be a true revolutionist? It is to be a man, a complete MAN."

On July 23 the "complete man" was in the reception area of Frick's office on the second floor of the Chronicle-Telegraph Building on Pittsburgh's Fifth Avenue, fingering the inexpensive pistol in his pocket. According to the New York Times account, Berkman may have attempted to see Frick at least once before, showing a secretary a phony business card bearing the name "Simon Bachman," an "employment agent" seeking to know if Carnegie needed assistance arranging for replacement workers at Homestead, but had been turned away.

Now, as on the previous occasions, Berkman was told by a porter that the boss was unavailable, but this time the assassin caught a glimpse of Frick in an adjoining room. Brushing past the porter, he ran inside and "with a quick motion I drew the revolver," he later recalled. "As I raised the weapon, I saw Frick clutch with both hands the arm of the chair, and attempt to rise. I aimed at his head... With a look of horror he quickly averted his face, as I pulled the trigger." Berkman managed to fire three times at the startled executive, striking him twice in the neck, before being tackled by Carnegie vice president John G. A. Leishman, who had been in the room consulting with Frick. A crew of carpenters working nearby also responded to the gunshots and helped subdue the assassin, although during the struggle Berkman managed to break free and stab Frick. Despite his multiple wounds, Frick dragged himself to his desk chair, where he sat immobile as police swarmed into the building. "Don't shoot!" Frick is said to have called to the arriving officers, who placed Berkman under arrest. "Leave him to the law, but raise his head and let me see his face." Doctors were summoned who dressed Frick's wounds and removed several bullet fragments from his neck.

In captivity, "the foreign crank," as the newspapers called Berkman, declared he had attacked Frick because he was "an enemy of the people." The would-be assassin's clothes, soaked with Frick's blood, were removed; when stripped, the crank was five feet 3½ inches high and weighed 16 pounds," reported the police. "He was of slender frame and showed no evidence of having been engaged in a laborious occupation. His lips were thick, his nose large, and he was a typical Russian Jew in appearance."

Berkman surprised his captors by evincing a singular cool. A day after the attack "the crank" was observed passing time in his jail cell smoking cigarettes and whistling show tunes from the New York variety houses. Back in that city, however, his recent movements were being closely investigated. There were calls for the arrests of Goldman and Johann Most; police broke into Goldman's apartment and made off with some revolutionary pamphlets. But the investigators somehow failed to detect her role in the incident, so she remained free, worrying about "Sasha," her pet name for Berkman, and attempting to rally the city's anarchist community in support of the attentat.

"It is stated by Berkman's acquaintances that of late he had been the lover of a German girl named Goldman," reported the Times, misstating her nationality. "This girl attended a meeting... held at Paul Wilzig's saloon, 85 East Fourth Street, on Saturday night. The Goldman woman exulted in the deed of her lover, and made a speech to the assembly. She deplored the fact that Frick had not been instantly killed. It was evident that she had no advance knowledge of Berkman's intended deed."

To Goldman's extreme irritation, it was soon evident that Berkman's courageous revolutionary act had not particularly inspired his fellow anarchists. Berkman had, of course, failed to assassinate Frick; nor did it help that he was not highly regarded in anarchist circles, as his views were considered extreme and his behavior immature. Then, in an August 27 article in Die Freiheit came the ultimate betrayal: Johann Most, America's best-known anarchist, repudiated Berkman's assault on Frick. Goldman was livid, replying to Most with an article in the Anarchist insisting that Most explain his blatant disloyalty. When Most ignored her, Goldman showed up at Most's next public lecture with a horse whip concealed in her coat. As the speaker approached the lectern, Goldman suddenly leaped to her feet and shouted, "I came to demand proof of your insinia-
ations against Alexander Berkman, and began horsewhipping the older man. "Repeatedly I lashed him across the face and neck," she later said, "then broke the whip over my knee and threw the pieces at him. It was all done so quickly that no one had time to interfere." 21

Back in Pittsburgh Berkman's day in court did not go well. The standard sentence for attempted murder was seven years, but he received a sentence three times as long—"twenty-two years in a living tomb," as Goldman characterized it. 22 As for Frick, the "King of Coke's" brush with death at the hands of an anarchist zealot had the unintended effect of making him appear both heroic and indestructible, and served the Carnegie Company as a useful distraction from the otherwise unfavorable coverage it was getting over the Homestead Fracas; certainly it reinforced the impression that radical elements had infiltrated the forces of organized labor.

Andrew Carnegie was not so fortunate; editorials in the mainstream press noted that he had left the dirty work of ousting the Amalgamated in the hands of subordinates while he conveniently absented himself on the other side of the Atlantic, and that the extremely messy consequences had been the violence involving the Pinkertons and the assault on Frick. Even his much-vaunted philanthropy could not help him. "Ten thousand Carnegie Public Libraries" [will] not compensate the country for the direct and indirect evils resulting from the Homestead lockout," commented the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "Say what you will of Frick, he is a brave man. Say what you will of Carnegie, he is a coward. And gods and men hate cowards." 23

B y t h e 1 8 9 0 s , an era historian Rayford Logan has famously termed "the nadir" of the black experience in America, Southern state legislatures had begun the devious process of eliminating black voting across the former Confederacy. Other rights of citizenship granted African Americans by the postwar amendments were also stripped away. Meanwhile, reports of the lynching of African American men began appearing in newspapers almost every other day; magazines ran insulting caricatures of blacks and published articles of pseudoscientific nonsense about Negroes' genetic backwardness; finally, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court in Plessy v. Ferguson sanctified Jim Crow segregation as the law of the land. 24 Black inferiority appeared beyond question. As for the worker of color, now formally a second-class citizen, "separate but equal," his position had never been more precarious.

Part of the problem was demographic. Until 1900 no more than 10 percent of black Americans resided in the North, which was rapidly industrializing; the percentage in the mining and agricultural empires of the West was even smaller, less than one half of one percent. 25 At the same time the perception of the Negro as an agricultural serf, a "carrier of water and a heuer of wood," had been so firmly established by slavery and the sharecropping system, and now by law, many factory owners treated it as an article of faith that blacks were physiologically unsuited to industrial work. 26

Neither had the labor movement shown itself willing to accommodate African American workers, except under the most rigid, piecemeal terms. In the decades after the Civil War all three major federations—the National Labor Union, the Knights of Labor, and to a lesser degree the American Federation of Labor—gave lip service to the idea of creating and maintaining a biracial labor coalition. Of the three, the Knights were probably the most committed to a program of inclusiveness. That they did make occasional strides toward black organizing in the South is perhaps best revealed in the ferocity with which the Knights were targeted by white vigilantes, including the Ku-Klux Klan. As the Knights faltered in the late 1880s, however, so did their outreach to African American members. The Populist urge that swept the South and West in the 1890s, was nominally dedicated to a biracial coalition of workers and farmers, but it was undone, in part, by an inability to achieve biracial trust and parity within its own ranks, and to put its enlightened ideals into practice.

It was apparent: to the AFL, Sam Gompers, as it had been to William Sylvis, that keeping blacks out of unions had the effect of creating an
available pool of cheap labor that industry could and did exploit using blacks as replacement workers and strikebreakers. It was equally clear that only unity across racial lines would guarantee labor the fullest bargaining power. "Wage-workers like many others may not care to socially meet colored people," Gompers said, "but as working men we are not justified in refusing them the right of the opportunity to organize for their common protection.... If organizations do, we will only make enemies of them, and of necessity they will be antagonistic to our interests."27 Four delegates from black workers' organizations attended the founding convention of the AFL in 1886; there, attendees resolved that the new federation would include "the whole laboring element of this country, no matter of what calling," and vowed "never to discriminate against a fellow worker on account of color, creed or nationality."28

Gompers, however, was limited in how much he could do to dictate policy to unions within his federation, and the AFL response remained inconsistent. An 1890 AFL convention passed a resolution expressing the federation's displeasure with unions that excluded members due to their race, but many locals refused to desegregate under any terms. Some opted for parallel unions—white and black butchers, white and black plumbers, white and black miners—although even when working side by side at the same location and for the same employer, white union locals frequently shrugged off opportunities for joint labor bargaining. White-controlled unions were often unwilling to allow black locals to be represented on central labor councils, the local committees that coordinated strategy and were often the liaison to the national federation's leadership.

By 1895 Gompers appeared to weary of the fight. The decline in the nation's economy had placed greater pressure on workers to find and retain employment. Whites were, if anything, less inclined to elevate blacks—whom they perceived as competition willing to accept lower wages—onto an equal platform from which they could negotiate with employers. At the same time the AFL itself became more lenient toward those unions that barred black membership. As a half-measure, Gompers asked unions to at least not carry exclusionary "whites-only" language in their constitutions. This condition received a test of sorts in the mid-1890s when the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen considered joining the AFL. The railroad brotherhoods tended to be of such strong social and fraternal character that the inclusion of blacks was unlikely and in some instances explicitly denied. When Gompers suggested that the AFL's only stipulation was that no statements of racial bias appear in the union's documents,29 the firemen decried the condition as unacceptable tempering. "The brotherhood protested that it did not want its 'honour' compromised by affiliation with a labor federation that pretended to oppose the exclusion of nonwhites," relates scholar Herbert Hill, "but in reality would allow Negro exclusion to be practiced discreetly as a reward for new members."30 Several nationally prominent unions, including the Cigar Makers, the International Typographical Union, the Bricklayers, and the Carpenters and Joiners, were, in contrast to the AFL, open in their stated exclusion of blacks.

Interestingly, and as a sign of what might have been, AFL locals—white and black, skilled and unskilled—came together in 1892 to mount a historic action in New Orleans. A walkout by streetcar drivers demanding a twelve-hour day (instead of being made to work sixteen-hour shifts) had been resolved by arbitration in the drivers' favor; other local workers, inspired by the breakthrough, began pursuing further possibilities for labor reform. Thirty new AFL locals were chartered and a Workingmen's Amalgamated Council was established that included both black and white workers from the teamsters and warehouse industries. On October 24, 1892, this biracial force struck their industries for a ten-hour day, overtime wages, and exclusive union bargaining authority. The town's conservative Board of Trade retaliated with calls for the militia and court injunctions, and commercial leaders and the press used race-baiting and warnings of "Negro domination" to try to split the coalition, but the biracial coalition held firm and called a general strike. On November 8 an estimated twenty-five thousand people halted work, bringing the city to a four-day standstill as even nonindustrial workers such as musicians, store clerks, printers, and utility workers went out in sympathy. "I am sorry you are not down here to take a hand in it," one organizer enthused in a letter to Gompers. "It is a strike that will go down in history."31
Ultimately, Louisiana governor Murphy J. Foster’s threats to deploys the militia and declare martial law brought the strike to an end, but the wage and hour demands of the biracial shipping unions were met, although businesses refused to recognize them as sole representatives of the workers. The Board of Trade, furious that union solidarity had led to such a widespread stoppage, saw to it that numerous strike leaders were indicted for violating an injunction under the Sherman Antitrust Act, setting a controversial precedent.

That the two races could unite as wage earners to present a strong front to employers in a major Southern city spoke volumes about how worker bargaining power might, under ideal circumstances, be multiplied; however, New Orleans would remain a tantalizing exception. Gompers saw the strike as “a very bright ray of hope for the future of organized labor” and often mentioned it in later years as proof positive of what worker unity could achieve, but in the main he and other AFL leaders had little choice but to adhere to the existing policy of informal acquiescence to individual unions’ racial bias. While sticking to its policy of not chartering unions that had discriminatory language in their constitutions, the federation began recommending that such restrictions simply be transferred to other membership rituals, and locals found their own methods of keeping blacks away—requiring skills that few had had an opportunity to acquire, or charging exorbitant dues. In many Southern communities, maintaining a “lily-white” local was perceived as a sign of strength and regional loyalty, and was an inducement to employers who thought likewise and wished to retain a “preferred” body of able workers.

“The history of the labor movement from 1886 to 1902 so far as the Negro is concerned,” W. E. B. Du Bois observed, “has been a gradual receding from the righteous declaration of earlier years.” Of course, given the reality of race relations in the country at the time, which were essentially nonexistent, and black citizenship rights, which had become invisible, labor’s success at cracking so intractable a problem would have been remarkable, if not miraculous. As Philip Foner points out, labor’s inability to achieve integration was more truly a national failure. Gompers could thus with a clear conscience relinquish the effort when it became evident it was impractical; he had even begun to fear that too persistent a devotion to black labor would likely doom his own federation, the survival of which was his primary obligation. “We cannot overcome prejudice in a day,” he concluded, and seemingly oblivious to the fact they had no other options, took to lashing out at black workers for their willingness to serve as strikebreakers.

Confounded by their own inhibition and intolerance from realizing what should have been a natural alliance, white unionists could only rage at blacks for undercutting union bargaining, for being, in Logan’s phrase, “cheap men.” Black workers, angry at being shunned and refusing to be blamed for the situation thrust upon them, understandably became cynical about organized labor generally. There may be no better examples of the mounting disillusionment than Tuskegee educator Booker T. Washington, a former member of the Knights of Labor, who in 1895 delivered his famous Atlanta Compromise address in which he advised black Americans to relinquish their efforts to attain the constitutional promises of Emancipation and Reconstruction and focus on becoming dependable workers. By 1897 he was criticizing the AFL openly, warning that the federation’s racial policies left him no choice but to side with employers against labor unions. He pointed to factory owners the benefits of hiring the black worker, who, unlike a white unionist, was “almost a stranger to strikes, lock-outs, and labor wars . . . is law-abiding, peaceable, teachable . . . and has never been tempted to follow the red flag of anarchy.” Washington, upon the death of Frederick Douglass in 1895, had become America’s most influential spokesman on race, and his counsel on the union racial divide resonated widely, in black newspapers and among employers happy to justify their use of black nonunion labor.

When the railroad innovator George Mortimer Pullman introduced his elegant new sleeping car in the 1870s, advisers called it impractical: travelers, they feared, would never respect such opulent furnishings. Pullman, however, maintained that his insistence on
quality would be appreciated, and that the very behavior of passengers would be transformed by the experience of riding in a luxurious railroad car. His faith in what he termed "the commercial value of beauty" soon proved correct: consumers were grateful for the Pullman cars, and didn't mind paying more to ride in comfort. In 1889 he applied a similar philosophy to his employees, creating a model community for them near Chicago meant to alleviate the hardship and insecurity in the lives of workers and their dependents. The Pullman sleeper would become synonymous with the indulgence of superior rail travel; the model town of Pullman, Illinois, was destined to be the source of one of the most infamous labor disputes in American history.

Born in upstate New York in 1831, Pullman left high school to become a cabinetmaker, and soon entered the employ of his father, Lewis, a mechanic who specialized in hoisting and moving buildings and who had patented a device for rolling a lifted structure on wheels. George proved an adept and diligent apprentice, the first to volunteer to crawl into the tight places beneath lifted buildings to remove impeding stones. Upon Lewis Pullman's death in 1853, George assumed control of the enterprise, supervising a contract to move twenty warehouses along the Erie Canal.

In 1859 he was hired to relocate the five-story Matteson House, a prominent Chicago hotel whose foundation was threatened by water seepage from Lake Michigan. It was the largest building ever raised by mechanical means. Additional work of this kind was offered him, crowned by a unique challenge the following year in which Pullman lifted an entire city block of buildings and stores, a feat brought off with the coordinated help of six hundred workers. Chicagoans considered it such a marvel of technology, a popular lithograph was struck of the achievement, in another impressive lift, he directed an army of twelve hundred men in moving a four-story hotel, the Tremont House, without breaking a single pane of window glass.

Pullman's abundant ingenuity was soon drawn to the technical challenges confronting America's railroads. Train travel over great distances was still something of a marvel, but the trip between New York and Chi-

cago took three and a half days and followed a roundabout route that added five hundred miles to the journey. Passengers were forced to purchase tickets on several connecting railroads and endured layoffs for hours in small junction towns; once aboard, they sat on hard wooden benches and often breathed soot from the locomotive blowing in through open windows. Carriages were too hot in summer, too cold in winter; sleep was near impossible due to the train's vibration. Pullman knew firsthand the suffering of the long-distance rail passenger, and became intrigued by the idea of building a workable sleeping car, or "land barge," as some called it, that would offer greater comfort. Working with cast-off cars that he refurbished, he produced several prototypes, one of which, the "Pioneer," was used in May 1865 as part of the funeral train carrying the remains of President Lincoln from Chicago to Springfield, Illinois.

Pullman shrewdly saw opportunity in the westward expansion of railroads. Transcontinental rail travel, a reality after 1869, required trains that could serve as self-contained communities, offering amenities for sleeping, eating, and leisure. In addition to his sleepers, Pullman introduced the first successful rail dining cars, the "Démonico," as well as the first parlor car, which was touted as "a hotel lobby on wheels." Because Pullman retained ownership of and operated the sleeping cars that were leased by the railroads, he was able to maintain his own high standards for quality and cleanliness. The Pullman Palace Car Company quickly became the gold standard for railroad car construction, while George Pullman was hailed as a rising star of engineering and industry, a levelheaded young corporate visionary who "refers his speech to his mind before he utters it."

He also soon displayed a social conscience. Like many, Pullman had been stunned by the upheaval of the 1877 railroad strikes, and perceived the poverty and deprivation of city slums to be not only a blot on America, but a potential breeding ground for anarchists and other unwanted influences. On a transatlantic voyage, he had read and been impressed by a novel titled *Put Yourself in His Place* by Charles Reade, in which a skilled inventor applies scientific thought to the problems of production,
increasing profits while simultaneously bettering working conditions and hours. The idea of humane reforms acting in tandem with sound business principles appealed to him, and he became intrigued by the possibility of ameliorating the workingman’s environment. He was about to open new car shops south of Chicago and began making plans to build a factory town for the workers who would be drawn there.

“Seeing nothing wrong in a society oriented toward the profit motive,” writes historian Steven Buder, “his intention was only to apply principles of business efficiency to meet the needs of his own workers. These ideas were promoted with the same verve as earlier had been lavished on the sleeping car.”

Pullman had also taken an interest in what was known as the Model Tenement Movement, championed by Alfred P. White, an affluent Brooklynite who in 1879 published a pamphlet entitled Improved Dwellings for the Laboring Classes: The Need, and the Way to Meet It on Strict Commercial Principles. White, who erected two model housing compounds, was convinced that many of the social hardships afflicting urban workers could be alleviated by freeing them from predatory landlords. Clean, well-ventilated, affordable housing would help stabilize workers’ lives and inculcate virtues of thrift, for a key aspect of White’s movement, and one that appealed greatly to the conservative Pullman, was that all hint of charity was avoided; tenants were expected to keep their apartments in good condition and pay a reasonable but not discounted rent, on which the landlord realized a 7 to 10 percent income.

To create the model town and a new site for his car works, Pullman purchased four thousand acres of former marshland along the shores of Lake Calumet, about twelve miles south of the Chicago business district. The town, completed in 1889, offered in addition to worker housing numerous amenities such as schools, a theater, a shopping arcade, and a man-made lake. To honor the community’s place in the vanguard of industrial development and provide power for his factories, Pullman purchased the huge Corliss engine, which had been exhibited at the Philadelphia exhibition of 1876. He mounted the great machine in a glass case, where workers and visitors could admire its muscular churning.

Rents in the company town were no bargain—they were slightly higher than what was charged for comparable housing outside the community—and many of the residents were forced to share WCs and bathtubs. Pullman also charged for conveniences such as use of the town library, to which he donated his own collection of five thousand books. But his “workers’ city,” with its parklike atmosphere, its planned streets bearing the names of great inventors—Fulton, Stephenson, Watt, and Pullman himself—became a popular side attraction for the crowds drawn to the Columbian Exposition, the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893. After a day viewing the fair’s futuristic exhibits, the curious could take a fifteen-minute interurban ride to what must have seemed like the future itself—a functioning corporate town, with neatly trimmed hedges, a village square, and seemingly contented residents. Nearly thirteen thousand people lived in Pullman, roughly five thousand workers and their dependents.

The development of the Chicago World’s Fair and the need to transport fairgoers to Chicago—27 million visitors were drawn to the fair during its six-month run—had brought an increased demand for Pullman railcars. This delayed the effect of the national economic downturn of 1893 on the Pullman works, but by late summer, orders for sleepers had diminished. The firm let go more than three thousand workers and reduced the hours and wages of those who remained, although it managed to reemploy two thousand of those dismissed by spring 1894, albeit at lower pay. The wage reductions averaged 25 to 30 percent, and in some cases 50 percent; for example, a carpenter’s pay per piece fell from $3.00 to $1.50, a pattern maker’s from $2.25 to $1.00, a seat maker’s from $1.25 to $0.75. This economic adjustment might have allowed Pullman and his employees to endure the downturn together, but his strong ethical views about charity led him to insist that the workers continue to pay a competitive rent for their housing. This was ruinous for the employees, as their rents were no longer near commensurate with their reduced pay. The company had cut all the extended and the costs of utilities like water and illuminating gas from workers’ paychecks; now, because rents remained the same even as pay levels dipped, many workers were left a pittance in weekly salary. “The wages he pays out with one
hand, the Pullman Palace Car Company," stated a formal grievance issued by the employees, "[but] he takes back with the other, the Pullman Land Association." 47

Philosophically unsympathetic to unionization, Pullman had joined other major Chicago employers in the aftermath of Haymarket to demand that the alleged perpetrators be held to the fullest account. This group, which also consisted of meatpacker Philip Armour, retailer Marshall Field, and farm equipment manufacturer Cyrus McCormick Jr., gave $100,000 to aid the families of policemen hurt or killed in the terror explosion, funds that were redirected in subsequent years to assisting local authorities to suppress radicals. Pullman's anxiety about labor strife and his identification with the concerns of big business tended to distance him from his own rank-and-file workers, a trend that intensified as his wealth and influence grew. Increasingly, he relied on foremen and department heads to deal with employees. These intermediaries, knowing of Pullman's perfectionism and bouts of temper, often chose not to impart to him the actual difficulties experienced on the shop floor. When he did choose to intervene, the results were often harsh, as when he banned meetings by workers in his town who had joined the Knights of Labor and arranged to fire those men he considered organizers of the movement. 48 He had become confident of his ability to keep the "chronic kickers," as he called labor activists, in check.

Pullman's control over what types of associations might gather in the town was just one aspect of the village's feudal character. He had imposed strict sanitary regulations, banned alcohol and prostitution, imposed a curfew, and restricted the consumption of tobacco. A legion of spies and informers kept him abreast of residents' activities and made sure rules were obeyed. All structures including workers' homes were subject to company-only maintenance and inspection. No one, not even a group that approached him wanting to form a church, was allowed to buy property. "Just as no man or woman of our 4,000 toilers has ever felt the friendly pressure of George M. Pullman's hand," the workers reported, "so no man or woman of us all has ever owned or can ever hope to own one inch of George M. Pullman's land." 49 This controlling governance had become unwieldy, as the town increasingly was home to immigrant workers who didn't share Pullman's personal ideas about drinking beer or how they spent their leisure time. "We are born in a Pullman house, fed in the Pullman shop, taught in the Pullman school, catechized in the Pullman church, and when we die we shall be buried in the Pullman cemetery and go to the Pullman hell," one worker protested. 50

With the firm demanding rent (and back rent) from the very workers whose pay had been cut, the cruelest aspect of the town's organization was made apparent. As work and paychecks diminished over the cold winter of 1893-1894, families suffered from want of basic necessities such as coal for heating. The desperation and lack of solutions were especially acute, as historian Ray Ginger points out, because "the town had no mechanisms for public relief," for such would have been "contrary to the owner's ideas of individual self-help." 51 The city of Chicago could be of little assistance, as it was facing its own crisis of homeless unemployed. Hordes had been drawn to the glittering Columbian Exposition by the possibility of work, and failing to obtain it had become something akin to a large refugee population, shuffling from church to relief agency in hope of a hot meal, sleeping in doorways, police stations, and saloons.

By spring 1894 some Pullman workers and their families were meeting outside the town in order to discuss their predicament, away from the ears of company spies. Compounding their concern was the report that Pullman, while slashing workers' pay, had not reduced his own or his top executives' salaries, and had maintained the high level of dividends paid to the firm's stockholders. On May 7 they sent representatives to meet with company vice president Thomas H. Wickes, who asked them to submit their grievances in writing and return for another conversation on May 9, at which George Pullman would be present. In that meeting—one of the first in years Pullman had had with his employees—Pullman explained that he had cut wages because orders were down and that he was attempting to manage the amount of work available so as to limit layoffs; he asserted that the firm had agreed to several low-bid work con-
tracts expressly to maintain employment levels. He offered to let workers examine the company’s financial records to verify this, and vowed that there would be no reprisals against the workers’ representatives who had come forward with grievances.

Due to an apparent misunderstanding or extremely poor timing, however, three of the men who had conferred with Pullman and Wickes were let go the very next day in what the company cited as previously ordered staff reductions. Whatever the intent behind the firings, the word among Pullman employees was that the men had been discharged for daring to lead a potential strike committee, and that George Pullman himself had gone back on his word. Two days later Pullman employees, fed up with the sleeping car magnate’s greed, obstinacy, and apparent double-dealing, set their tools down.

The crisis at the nation’s leading sleeping car manufacturer was not the only labor-related headline of spring 1894. Only a few months earlier an uprising had begun the likes of which had never occurred in the United States, as armies of unemployed citizens—emanating from dozens of cities, villages, mines, and lumber camps—commenced a march on Washington to demand work.

The instigator was Jacob S. Coxey, owner of a quarry in Massillon, Ohio. For several years he had lobbied Congress to enact legislation that would assist the unemployed by creating jobs to build roads and other public infrastructure. In promoting a public works program that would put an economically depressed America back to work, Coxey was anticipating elements of the New Deal, still half a century away, but this being the 1890s, such a broad-ranging plan of direct government aid was decried as wishful, if not eccentric. Another man might have filed away the last rejection letter from Congress and let the matter rest, but Coxey, convinced that the solons in faraway Washington simply required stronger convincing, announced a plan to walk in protest from Ohio to the nation’s capital, with one hundred thousand of his fellow citizens—a petition in boots,” he called it—in order to demonstrate both the need and the available manpower for his program of federal jobs.

The march departed Massillon on March 25, 1894, with five hundred participants, far fewer than the tens of thousands Coxey had imagined, but raising enough dust to bring out crowds in every hamlet through which it passed. Coxey and his coleader, Carl Browne, had an innate sense of spectacle that worked in their favor. Browne resembled, and had garbed himself, like the star of a Wild West show. Coxey, a mild-looking fellow in a suit and glasses whom no one would mistake for a revolutionary, dressed his seventeen-year-old daughter, Mamie, in red, white, and blue and named her the “Goddess of Peace.” His eighteen-year-old son, Jesse, was adorned in an outfit that combined equal amounts of Confederate gray and Union blue—a sartorial expression of the sectional reconciliation that was another of Coxey’s pet aims. His two-month-old son, Legal Tender, named in honor of monetary reform, was also along for the march, and was at each stop held aloft by Coxey’s wife to cheers and applause.

Press and public at first doubted whether such a ragtag bunch would really cover by foot the four hundred miles from Ohio to Washington, but as the little army approached the Potomac on April 30 curiosity turned to concern; authorities declared a full alert, for no one could be sure what angry, unemployed people who had trekked hundreds of miles would do. The result was decidedly anticlimactic; Coxey and his fellow leaders were arrested within hours of their arrival for trespassing on the lawn of the Capitol, but not before he had managed to give to reporters a statement he’d intended to read from the building’s portico.

Up these steps the lobbyists of trusts and corporations have passed unchallenged on their way to the committee rooms, access to which we, the representatives of the toiling wealth producers, have been denied. We stand here today in behalf of millions of toilers whose petitions have been buried in committee rooms, whose prayers have been unresponded to, and whose opportunities for honest, remunerative labor have been taken away from them by unjust legislation, which protects idlers, speculators and gamblers.
Though technically a failure, the strange pilgrimage had succeeded in garnering at least the momentary attention of elected officials. It also inspired the launching of dozens of other "armies" of the unemployed, sometimes known as "industrials," that began walking or riding east toward the capital during the late spring and summer of 1894 from as far west as San Francisco. This sudden, mobile crusade, self-generated from countless locales, was startling in its determination. One departed from Portland, Oregon, and made it as far as Cokernot, Wyoming; a Polish American "army" stepped off from Chicago; others began in St. Louis, Boston, Omaha, Reno, Fargo, Los Angeles, and Seattle. Some Coxey loyalists in Montana hammered rafts together and floated down the Missouri River. Author Jack London joined a group out of California and traveled with it into the nation’s heartland, while fellow West Coast writer Ambrose Bierce derided the “pickpocket civilization” that America had become, a society in which the affluent few exploited the labor of the many and the kind of useful public policy Coxey advocated was throttled by the stranglehold of laissez-faire.

The most alarming were the hijacked trains. In Montana, a state hard hit by a mining industry collapse that had thrown twenty thousand men out of work, as many as five hundred followers of an unemployed teamster named William Hogan seized a Northern Pacific freight train in Butte on April 24 for the journey east. Federal marshals attempted to halt the stolen train and take Hogan into custody, but Butte citizens rallied to the hijackers’ defense. Similar scenes were enacted at Bozeman, Livingston, and Columbus, as local crowds that turned out in support of the Hoganites proved too great for lawmen to overcome. At Billings on the morning of April 25 guns blazed between marshals and Hogan’s followers; one bystander was killed and several people wounded before the authorities withdrew and allowed the train to steam out of the depot under the hijackers’ control. Hogan and his comrades, having escaped Billings, the last sizable town in Montana, assumed they had cleared the last obstacle on the way to Washington. But just west of the present-day town of Forsyth in Rosebud County they found the tracks barricaded by federal troops. U.S. attorney general Richard Olney, having learned from Montana’s governor by urgent telegram of the shooting at Billings, had called out the army stationed at Fort Keogh to block the track. "General" Hogan and his men were forced from the train and arrested.

"Coxeyism teaches a sad lesson," one newspaper concluded, "the most dangerous lesson indeed that can be taught to the American people—the lesson of dependence on the Federal government." It was particularly disturbing that many "industrials" had originated in the West, the part of the country long identified with the creed of individual reward won through determination and hard work.

The phenomenon of legions of jobless people traipsing across the land was in itself unnerving, for America had developed a particular distaste for tramps, the term used generally to refer to the wandering unemployed. Lounging in public parks, riding the rails, appearing at the outskirts of small towns, begging for work or for food, the "tramp" was the national bogeyman of the late nineteenth century, an object of both scorn and fear. Newspapers carried cautionary tales of alleged "tramp mischief," from chicken-stealing to the snatching of pies left on windowsills.

The actual risk tramps posed was no doubt exaggerated, but the public’s disdain—expressed in anti vagrancy laws and vigilantism—could not have been more genuine. "War on the Tramps," as one headline stated. No one wanted tramps passing through their community; no one wished them to stay. Some towns fought the affliction by giving food and shelter to passing jobless "armies" on the condition they move on; but many citizens would have concurred with the simpler solution offered by Chicago reformer Mary A. Livermore, "The sooner they are dead and buried the better for society."

At heart, the critics of Coxey’s Army, and of tramps generally, seemed bothered not so much by the real threat of lawlessness, as by the reality that there were large numbers of dispossessed people in the first place, and that, in the case of the Coxey industrials, they appeared to want something they had not earned. Their demands implied that poverty and
unemployment did not stem from laziness or even bad luck, but rather from larger, systemic problems: in the economy, in society—factors that were beyond any one person's control.27 Such a claim raised vexing questions. Self-reliance, resourcefulness, individual initiative—these traits were intrinsic to the ideal of what it meant to be American. Americans always made do. If government took greater responsibility for people's well-being, would that not alter the very essence of the United States, seduce and possibly corrupt its character? Was that not the aim of those foreign theories spread in workers' enclaves in the big cities—anarchism, Communism, Socialism?

Coxey's sympathizers couldn't help note the irony that government largesse was acceptable to manufacturers protected by high tariffs, to railway corporations receiving massive land grants, to homesteaders, to black voters protected from the Ku Klux Klan, to governors who called in federal soldiers to quell labor unrest. Why then shouldn't workers, the people, enjoy the same deference and concern, and be comforted in knowing that those in authority saw the hardships they endured and would act to ameliorate them?60

Such questions were for: the moment unanswerable; the government's response to the demands of the Coxeyites had been muted, to say the least, although federal authorities had not hesitated to call out the army to confront "General" Hogan and his railroad mutineers. The Pullman Strike, however, was about to draw Washington more fully and irrevocably into the nation's deepening labor conflict.

Builders of Luxury Pullman Cars were not railroad workers, but because there was a short railroad track at the Pullman shops south of Chicago, they were deemed eligible for membership in the American Railway Union (ARU), the country's newest and most innovative labor organization. Founded in 1893, the ARU was national in scope and inclusive of all railroad workers; its unification across all crafts was meant to break the tradition of solitary railway brotherhoods that had long complicated effective worker representation, and better equip rail

workers to meet the expanding power of the major railroads. Its founder and president, Eugene V. Debs, was a veteran trainman, an officer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, and the well-regarded editor of its magazine. Intimately familiar with the virtues and shortcomings of craft orientation, he had championed the need for an industrial railroad union.

A grocer's son from Terre Haute, Indiana, Debs seems to have been destined from childhood for a life in the public arena. He was smitten as a youngster by the power of the spoken word, the fierce oratory of Patrick Henry and John Brown; while still in his teens he began organizing visiting lectures by men of national stature such as Wendell Phillips and the freethinker Robert Ingersoll. As if in coordination with his promising intellect, Debs's body sprouted like an Indiana beanstalk; he emerged into adulthood gangly and storklike, six and a half feet in height, a Lincoln-esque combination of sinew and brains, hardened by years of physical labor on the railroad. Bald at an early age, with a distinctive egg-shaped head, he was unmistakable in appearance, with a kindly face and warmth of character that made him seem more seminary graduate than railroad.
and he heartily disliked the idea of strikes and the vandalism and carnage that too often accompanied them. He was a student of the railroad upheavals of 1877, and saw in that terrible uprising little practical gain. But over the years he’d become disabused of the assumption that capitalists were willing to be instructed by judicious argument and transformed by reason; he’d also learned that rank-and-file workers expected their union to be comfortable with the strike as an ultimate weapon, and to be ready for its use. It was a failed 1888 strike by a brother union, the locomotive engineers, against the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, that first suggested to Debs the need for one large rail workers’ union; his hunch was confirmed in 1892 when a strike by railroad switchmen in Buffalo fell flat because other rail-brotherhoods withheld support. By fall of that year Debs was urging the nation’s six hundred thousand rail workers to make better use of their collective might.

The response to the birth of the ARU was favorable, thousands seeking membership, including unskilled laborers previously excluded by the brotherhoods.62 “There was never a time in the history of labor when it was so enlightened, so defiant, and so courageous as now,” Debs wrote. “It is organizing and every lodge is a school and an army post. These schools are educating and sending forth leaders and champions of labor. They are voices in the wilderness, and they are blazing a new pathway.”63

A second surge of interest came in spring 1894, after the ARU in the first flexing of its strength, struck successfully against the St. Paul-based Great Northern Railroad. Workers shut down the road for two weeks, leading the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce to pressure the company and its powerful owner, James J. Hill, into arbitration. The strikers won nearly all of their demands, including a pay hike. There had been no violence, no bloodshed, only a disciplined and coordinated strike action. Even Hill wound up congratulating Debs and the other ARU leaders for their principled handling of the affair. At the strike’s conclusion, Debs glanced from a window as his train departed St. Paul to return him to Indiana and saw hundreds of track workers doffing their hats in his honor; it was a “tribute,” he would later recall, “more precious to me than all the banquets in the world.”64

The ARU victory over the Great Northern had a galvanizing effect on the labor movement much as had the Knights of Labor in 1885, when the momentarily brilliant Terence Powderly stayed the mercenary hand of rail baron Jay Gould. “The unskilled workers had been unprotected, underpaid, exploited,” wrote biographer Ray Ginger of Debs and the ARU’s accomplishment. “Now the dikes snapped and a reservoir of bitterness and hope drove men pell-mell into the ARU. . . . The union’s officials did not have to coax or persuade; their main job was to sign cards and issue charters.”65 An ebullient Debs posed the question of the hour: “What can we do for labor?” It is the old, old query repeated all along the centuries, heard wherever a master wielded a whip above the bowed forms of the slaves . . . but [now] our ears are regaled by a more manly query . . . “What can labor do for itself?”66 Encompassing all white rail workers, skilled and unskilled, with an active membership of 125,000, the ARU was soon larger than the four existing rail brotherhoods combined.

On June 12, 1894, exactly a year after its founding, the ARU opened a two-week convention at Chicago’s Uhlich’s Hall. Pullman workers, having joined the ARU in March, appeared before the gathering of four hundred delegates on June 15 to urgently request the union’s help. As of May 11, all but 10 percent of Pullman’s thirty-eight hundred workers had walked out. “We joined the American Railway Union because it gave us a glimmer of hope,” their spokesman told the conclave. “Twenty thousand souls, men, women, and little ones, have their eyes turned toward this convention today.”67 One disgruntled Pullman worker, a father of four, rose before the gathering. “I think that when a man is sober and steady, and has a saving wife, and after working two and a half years for a company he finds himself in debt for a common living,” he said, “something must be wrong.”68 Most affecting were the words of seamstress Jennie Curtis, the youthful head of a women’s local at the Pullman works, who told the convention that after her father, a thirteen-year Pullman employee, had passed away, she had been made to pay the $60 in back rent he had owed the company at his death. Her story elicited oaths from the ARU men as to how “the bloodsucker” George Pullman had mistreated and robbed “a girl.”69 It was another blatant example, all too familiar to workers of the 1890s, of what
Samuel Gompers had termed "the barbarity of capitalism. Debs left the convention to tour the Pullman village and came away distressed by what he saw—a model town meant to reveal the future, sadly revealing all too much about the present. "The paternalism of Pullman is the same as the self-interest of a slaveholder in his human chattels," he assured the strikers. "You are striking to avert slavery and degradation." On behalf of the workers, the ARU appealed to Pullman to submit its issues with the employees to arbitration. When the company refused, Debs faced a dilemma: he detested Pullman's arrogance, but was unsure how deeply to involve the ARU and hesitated to make strike threats in its name. Despite the Great Northern victory his organization was still new and unproven, and had little money on hand. Yet the more George Pullman remained unwilling to compromise the more he became the object of intense worker resentment, an evil assailing the life of young Jennie Curtis and thousands like her. The nation's railroad men were spoiling for a fight with the "management" of America; unlike 1877, now they were not only angry but organized, and in Eugene Debs they saw their crusader.

On June 21 the convention voted that its members who were switchmen would not handle Pullman cars after June 26 unless the company agreed to arbitration. Pullman again refused, and with the switchmen's work stoppage the great Pullman Strike began. The sides quickly formed, the big railroads aligning with Pullman and, as a deliberate provocation to labor, declining to remove his sleeper cars from their trains. The once-splintered rail brotherhoods gathered for the fight, while friendly unions of carpenters, mechanics, and warehousemen signaled their intended support. "The sons of toil must stand together, shoulder to shoulder," urged Knights leader James Sovereign, and for once reality appeared ready to match labor's hopeful rhetoric.

The ARU boycott of Pullman's railcars and, by extension, America's railroads, was, in the eyes of commerce, a far more reprehensible act than a run-of-the-mill trade union strike. Because it engaged diverse groups of train workers across occupational boundaries, as well as sympathetic backing from other unions, it had more the feel of a full-fledged rebellion. The potential harm to business and the economy as a whole, which was now reliant on rail transport even more than it had been at the time of the 1877 troubles, was almost beyond measure, "a particularly flagrant intrusion by society into the hallowed preserve of the market." And while 1877 had been frightening for its violence and destruction, that insurrection had been spontaneous; the threat that now loomed appeared darker for its being coordinated by centralized leadership.

The switchmen's refusal to handle trains with Pullman cars multiplied swiftly over the next few days, as rail workers in twenty-seven states and U.S. territories joined the action. One hundred thousand men had voluntarily stopped work nationwide. Soon both freight and passenger train traffic in and out of Chicago was at a standstill, and had slowed to a crawl as far west as San Francisco. News bulletins from Chicago reported that the Illinois Central, Wisconsin Central, Chicago Great Western, Baltimore & Ohio, Chicago and Northern Pacific, and the lines interested in the Western Indiana System are tied up completely. Seventy-five cars of perishable freight tonight lie side-tracked. One hundred carloads of bananas are between New Orleans and Chicago, and it is not thought they can be delivered.

"The railroads were paralyzed," reported Eugene Debs. "The people demanded of the railroads that they operate their trains. They could not do it. Not a man would serve them." The complications quickly spread to the major cities of the East, with the New York Times relating on July 4 that the big ice companies have been making almost superhuman efforts today to avoid suspending operations, but they gave up tonight, and thousands of sick and suffering in hospitals, public institutions, and private homes, will be added to the already
gigantic roster of innocent victims of the strike. Just outside the city there are miles of loaded cars with their contents rotting in the sun. 76

Editorial pages lost no time in naming the villain responsible for the tie-up. “King Debs,” he was dubbed—the would-be “dictator” who sought to grind the nation to a halt, deny families their meat and coal, children their milk, all in the name of making false promises to several hundred disgruntled Pullman workers. He was “a lawbreaker,” certainly, averred one paper, but also “an enemy of the human race.” To the Chicago Herald he was a “reckless, ranting, contumacious, impudent braggadocio.” A much-reprinted cartoon pictured Debs as a misbehaved man-child, wearing a cheap crown, straddling the Chicago rail yards. 77 The Times was so agitated it abandoned its usual journalistic standards, and stunned readers, with a 210-word lead sentence:

Eugene V. Debs, who within one week has sprung from obscurity to a position of the most absolute and potential power over all classes, millionaires, merchants, and mechanics, who by a mere nod controls and closes the business of great railway systems as if these were but his toys, who commands a fairly well disciplined and blindly obedient army of about 1,000,000 desperate and determined men, who now controls all the traffic of fourteen states, and coolly notifies the railway officials of all other states that he will attend to their cases unless they are very careful how they behave themselves, who has halted and sidetracked upward of 200 railway trains at various points of a territory far greater than all of Europe, who has crippled the commerce and manufactures of twenty great cities, who has halted the United States mail in hundreds of places and defied the federal government even to molest him, who spends $400 a day in telegraphic orders to his subordinates, who commands all of his great army of followers to cease all labor and to give up all their daily wages, who is costing the great railways and cities a loss in trade and traffic of fully $10,000,000 each day, is yet a young man. 78

The paper went on to scrutinize Debs’s personal life, publishing an account by a physician who claimed to have treated the ARU president for alcoholism. 79 “Those who knew Debs well while he was in this city,” the Times reported, “believe that his personal conduct is in large measure, if not wholly, due to the disordered condition of his mind and body, brought about by the liquor habit. . . . Indeed, serious doubts are expressed by them as to his responsibility as a rational individual.” 80 The confidence that intemperance was at fault formed the basis for a sermon titled “The Strike and Its Terrors,” which was delivered from one prominent New York pulpit, lamenting the passing of labor’s reins from the moderate Terence V. Powderly to the “saloon-trained men of the Debs pattern.”

The assault on Debs’s character was one thing; more harmful was the press’s willingness to exaggerate the strike’s impact. “Mob Is in Control, Law Is Trampled On, Strike Is Now War,” blared the headlines of the Chicago Tribune, while a Washington Post article, “Chicago Is at the Mercy of the Incendiary’s Torch,” fed a rumor that the entire city of Chicago, not just its rail yards, was under siege. 82 “Meat Famine Near at Hand,” the Times threw in for good measure, ratcheting up public fear. 83

While press and pulpit thrashed Debs and his union, the railroads were also taking concerted action against the embargo. Much as the ARU represented an unprecedented coalition of rail workers, the rail corporations had their own consortium—the General Managers Association (GMA), founded in 1886—which consisted of all twenty-six railroads that served Chicago. The GMA had in recent days transformed itself into an antistrike task force. Deciding that the ARU had entered the Pullman standoff somewhat recklessly and that it was not truly capable of administering a sustained national labor stoppage, the GMA resolved to crush the adolescent organization to do this, it quickly settled on a strategy to bring the federal government into the fray.
Washington, it was clear, shared the country's outrage at the crisis Debs and the ARU had made. As William Howard Taft, judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit, denounced "the gigantic character of the conspiracy of the American Railway Union" for "the starvation of a nation," Attorney General Richard Olney moved to take back control of the railroads. He had spent the spring of 1894 dealing with the outlandish "borrowing" of trains by the misfit soldiers of Coxeys Army, and had played a decisive role in stopping the freight train-stealing Hoganes in Montana. Olney was determined that such abuse of the nation's railroads would not be again tolerated and that "the ragged edge of anarchy" would be trimmed promptly and completely. He believed it essential that the government make its stand in Chicago, "the origin and center of the demonstration," in order to "make it a failure everywhere else, and to prevent its spread over the entire country." Himself a veteran railroad lawyer, he quickly appointed a former colleague, Chicago attorney Edwin Walker, to the position of special federal attorney in Chicago. Walker, after receiving instructions from Olney, sought a court injunction against the ARU based on the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, as well as the law against interfering with the U.S. mail.

The defense of the mail's sanctity was based on the fact that it was handled by a federal agency using federal equipment and employees, as well as the assumption that the contents of any given mailbag likely contained missives involving government business, any interference with it potentially threatened the ability of the government to function. President Grover Cleveland bought wholly into this construction, vowing, "If it takes every dollar in the Treasury and every soldier in the United States Army to deliver a postal card in Chicago, that postal card shall be delivered." Debs and the ARU saw this for the trap that it was—turning the mail into a sacred cow whose defense could justify strong reactive measures—and expressly informed its members everywhere not to impede the movement of mail cars.

As for injunctions under the Sherman Act, the government's intended use of the antitrust law, which had been designed to curb the excesses of corporations, not labor unions, offered a convenient end run around ordinary rights of due process. It gave the government a convenient lever with which it might hold individuals in contempt, and perhaps put them in jail, without having to meet the higher bar of indicting them for specific criminal acts. The violated court injunctions could also serve as an argument for federal military involvement. The success of the army in halting "General" Hogan's hijacked train of unemployed miners in Montana that spring, when all attempts by local lawmen had failed, had helped convince Olney of the efficacy of deploying federal soldiers. Such extreme measures were justified, the attorney general and the GMA contended, because the ARU boycott was not simply a labor action against a specific employer, but an assault on the nation's business, "an exercise of tyrannical power by a labor union," as the Times wrote, "such as would not be tolerated on the part of public authority in any civilized country."

Debs naturally saw the crisis through a different lens. To him the unprecedented extent of the boycott was an impressive act of solidarity and goodwill by labor's rank and file; he had only praise for the ARU members and trainmen across far-flung regions and state boundaries who had thrown their lot in with the Pullman workers. Rejecting the charge that he had assumed dictatorial powers over the nation's railroads, he warned President Cleveland by telegram that a "deep-seated conviction is fast becoming prevalent that this Government is soon to be declared a military despotism." Cleveland heard similar protests from Illinois governor John Peter Altgeld. Citing Article IV of the Constitution, which permits federal troops to enter a state only if a condition of insurrection exists and the state's executive specifically requests such aid, Altgeld explained that reports of strike-related violence had been greatly overstated and warned against sending soldiers. As for the city of Chicago being under siege, Altgeld reassured the president that news reports to that effect were barefaced lies. Chicago mayor John P. Hopkins, it so happened, had given $1,500 to a fund to benefit the families of Pullman workers, and had been seen conducting the city's business with a white strike ribbon in his lapel.
Altgeld echoed Debs in warning that real violence would begin if and when soldiers were introduced, reminding Cleveland that “local self-government is a fundamental principle of our Constitution. Each community shall govern itself so long as it can and is ready and able to enforce the law.” He also took the opportunity to upbraid the president on his attorney general’s misuse of court injunctions under the Sherman Act “This decision marks a turning point in our history,” the governor stated, “for it establishes a new form of government never before heard of among men; that is government by injunction. … Under this new order of things a federal judge becomes at once a legislator, court and executioner.” Cleveland was said to be furious—fed up with the Pullman workers, who, on what seemed to him little foundation, had joined with the ARU, but also with the resistance of a troublesome Illinois reform governor whose thinking appeared to be in step with “Dictator Debs.”

John Peter Altgeld’s name is synonymous with the dawn of the Progressive era. Like his hero Abraham Lincoln, he saw resilience and character in the American people, believed some of their better qualities too often went untapped, and wished for all a greater say and a role in the life of their country. Because a society based on the idea of “the survival of the fittest” was, in Altgeld’s view, inherently unjust, the so-called lower classes must be lifted up and educated in the values of cleanliness, good health, and temperance, as well as the virtues of citizenship. Labor unions had a vital role in this transformation, he believed, providing a counterforce to big business and giving workers a foothold on democracy, a means to organize, to seek redress and a fair wage.

Immersion in the problems of the Pullman Strike came naturally for the governor, for after arriving in the Midwest from Germany as a young man, he, too, had swung a hammer on a track crew before going on to work as a teacher and lawyer. He had been on hand for the building boom that followed the Chicago Fire of 1871, diverting part of his income into the purchase of real estate. In 1884 he came out as a public man, winning a seat in Congress and publishing a small but incisive tract on penal reform, Our Penal Machinery and Its Victims. Altgeld’s essay argued that rather than reform youthful first offenders, incarceration was turning them into hardened criminals. He suggested that the well behaved be permitted to work outside of the prison each day, railed against the system of paying fees to police based on the number of arrests they made, and decried as unjust the practice of holding indigent prisoners for long periods before trial because they lacked the means to make bail.

Through his efforts on behalf of prison reform, Altgeld met and befriended Clarence Darrow, a young criminal attorney from Ohio whose family had roots in the abolition movement. With Altgeld’s help, Darrow became corporation counsel for the city of Chicago. Among the advice that Darrow gave his friend when Altgeld won the Illinois governorship in 1892 was the recommendation that Altgeld alleviate the shame still hanging over the state from the Haymarket case and free the men still in custody—Oscar Neebe, Samuel Fielden, and Michael Schwab. August Spies, in his last words upon the gallows, had declared, “The time will come when our silence will be more powerful than the voices you strangers today.” Darrow and Altgeld were among those who still “heard” that silence, and were troubled by it.

Since the trapdoors had opened beneath the condemned Haymarket martyrs on November 11, 1887, it had become widely recognized that the convictions had been unfair and the executions a gross mistake. With an Amnesty Association active on behalf of the prisoners, countless briefs and petitions had been submitted to Springfield, and such influential men as former U.S. senator Lyman Trumbull and banker E. S. Dreyer, who had been foreman of the grand jury that had originally indicted the Haymarket defendants, had demanded a pardon on the grounds that the three men still imprisoned were either innocent or had by now been sufficiently punished. Darrow reminded Altgeld that, unlike most people who resented this awful blemish on American justice, he had the power to actually do something about it. Both men understood, of course, the tremendous potential cost to the governor of any act of commutation or pardon. “If I do it I will be a dead man politically,” Altgeld acknowledged. Yet, he vowed, “By God, if I decide that these men are innocent I will pardon them if I never hold office for another day.”
Altgeld proceeded carefully. Although already familiar with the case, he took a hard second look, researching it closely and writing his own detailed legal analysis; he reviewed the method of jury selection, Judge Gary's rulings against defense motions, and the possibility that incriminating evidence had been obtained through bribery and threats. He also questioned the trial's essential premise that men could be convicted of murder for their words, when no physical connection had been made between them and the crime. One insight, Altgeld offered, was that even if sentiments published by Parsons, Spies, and the others were inflammatory, there was no evidence that the bomb thrower, whoever that person was, had read those words or acted upon them. Finally, Altgeld excoriated Judge Gary for conducting the trial "with malicious ferocity" for his numerous prejudicial remarks against the defendants, and for his general disregard for fairness and the law. The governor's not unexpected conclusion was that those executed and those remaining behind bars had been convicted solely for their political beliefs, and that the means used to convict them represented "a greater menace to the republic" than anything the accused may have actually done.93

Full pardons were granted by Altgeld on June 26, 1893. The timing of their issuance was symbolic, for only the day before, eight thousand people had gathered in Chicago's Waldheim Cemetery for the unveiling and dedication of a heroic "martyrs" monument at the executed men's graves.94 At Joliet State Prison, Neebe, Fielden, and Schwab, who had had no advance warning of Altgeld's possible ruling, were suddenly notified of their good fortune and summoned to the office of Warden R. L. Allen. There they were given new clothes along with envelopes containing a railroad ticket and "a snug bundle of crisp bills." After a brief sit-down supper with the warden, who distributed cigars and offered to vouch for their characters if they should ever require job references, the three men, still in a state of stunned disbelief, were chauffeured to the depot to catch the evening train for Chicago.95

Altgeld's act, as expected, stirred a fierce reaction. By issuing the pardons and offering explicit official acknowledgment of the fraudulent nature of the Haymarket convictions, the governor had "insulted" the memory of the policemen killed in the bombing, undermined the leverage the courts had grown accustomed to using against labor unions, and punctured, at least for a moment, the public's reflexive attitude toward anarchists and other radicals.96 "In every street car, in every place of public meeting, and on sidewalks as people hurried homeward," it was reported, "could be heard expressions of intense disgust with the governor."97 Newspapers questioned Altgeld's patriotism, reminding readers the governor was not American-born; he was an alien much like the men he'd set free. But Altgeld, knowing he had acted in good conscience, managed to remain stoic in the face of such criticism. "Let them pitch in and give me the devil if they want to," Altgeld confided to a friend. "They could not cut through my hide in three weeks with an axe."98

Altgeld's reputation clearly suffered, however, complicating his stance with the ARU against federal intervention the following summer in the Pullman Strike. "Having pardoned Anarchists who murdered the police of that city," observed a Philadelphia paper, "it is only reasonable to assume that he is wholly in sympathy with the mob that now rules Chicago and shames his great state."99 Some writers went so far as to link both Altgeld and Debs with Alexander Berkman, the would-be assassin of Frick, who was still in prison in Pennsylvania.100 Thankfully, the Baltimore Sun assured readers, even if the governor of Illinois was a fool and the plaything of radicals, the country could still rely on President Grover Cleveland, "the big, strong man and sturdy patriot whom the people have placed in the White House."101

The government's legalistic trap designed by President Cleveland's attorney general, Richard Olney, was set to close on the ARU. The railroads of the GMA had begun placing both Pullman sleepers and mail cars strategically in regular trains in order to provoke a violation. The union did make a good-faith effort to allow the U.S. mail through, as the ARU sent hundreds of telegrams to far-flung locals with instructions not to disrupt the mail; at one point it proposed to the rail-
roads that crews might be assembled for special "all mail" trains, an idea that would have sounded reasonable to the railroads if their actual concern was the transmittal of the mail. Instead the railroads ignored the offer and, inevitably, mail cars were delayed in the strike.

On July 2 federal district court judge Peter J. Grosscup issued an injunction banning the ARU from interfering with the mails or other rail movement in interstate commerce, or from attempting to convince railroad workers to stop work. The invoking of the interstate commerce law was a perversion of its original intent, which had been to protect small businesses and farmers from price manipulations by the railroads, and the injunction was so broadly written as to disallow Debs and his colleagues from having anything to do with the maintenance of the boycott. Under threat of arrest and incarceration, they were not to send telegrams or respond to questions about the labor action, or to encourage others who were involved in the boycott. "A Gatling gun on paper," one newspaper termed the edict from Grosscup's pen.102

On July 3, "a mob of from two to three thousand" surrounded U.S. marshal J. W. Arnold in the Chicago rail yards as he read the injunction aloud; at one point he was interrupted by a voice that shouted, "To hell with the United States court!"103 Afterward Arnold wired Olney:

The reading of the writ met with no response except jeers and hoots. Shortly after, the mob threw a number of baggage-cars across the track, since when no mail train has been able to move. I am unable to disperse the mob, clear the tracks, or arrest the men who were engaged in the acts named, and believe that no force less than the regular troops of the United States can procure the passage of the mail trains or enforce the orders of the courts.104

Soldiers arrived later that day from nearby Fort Sheridan, the outpost created in the aftermath of Haymarket to have federal troops available "not so much to quell a riot as to crush labor unions," in the view of Detroit mayor Hazen S. Pingree, who had hurried to Chicago bearing telegrams from the mayors of more than fifty U.S. cities urging an arbitrated settlement to the Pullman Strike.105 The army troops—eight companies of infantry, one troop of cavalry, and an artillery battalion, constituting a federal force of about two thousand—spread out along the railroad tracks leading into Chicago and encamped by the lakefront near the business district.

The next day, July 4, as both Debs and Altgeld had warned, the federal troops' presence sparked violence. "All the bitterness, the hoodlumism, the despair, stored up at the bottom of Chicago's soul...boiled over into the railroad yards," notes a popular history of the city. "Here and there engines were crippled, capsized on tracks; whole trains of standing freight cars were overturned, tower-men were dragged from switch-towers."106 As in 1877, the main antagonists were not so much Pullman strikers or even rail workers, but large crowds of belligerent citizens—the poor, the unemployed, families of railroad men, other sympathizers—provoked by the appearance of federal uniforms and "inflamed by passion and frequent draughts from the neighboring saloons." They call and cursed at the soldiers, and hurled brickbats, stones, and rail spikes. So determined and numerous were they, the rioters even managed to uncouple the cars of an army troop train.107

Hopelessly worsening the situation was the introduction of two thousand "special deputies" hired by the federal marshals. As was often the case with men enlisted as last-minute enforcers in strike disputes, the deputies were for the most part untrained toughs, who despite their muscular physiques tended to be the first to panic when confronted with large groups of protestors. Police chief John Brennan described them as "thugs, thieves, and ex-convicts" willing to trade their brawn for some quick cash, and criticized "their careless use of pistols."108 In the chaos at the rail yards they were also not above helping themselves to the contents of some of the stalled freight cars.109

The following day a mob estimated at ten thousand men and women advanced from the packinghouse district to the rail yards, destroying property and setting railroad cars afire. After roughing up a railroad offi-
cial and pushing freight cars off the tracks, one group of protesters entered the World’s Fair site and attempted to vandalize buildings. More volatile crises arose on July 6, when a trigger-happy Illinois Central manager shot two rioters, inspiring numerous acts of revenge, including arson. Seven hundred freight cars were put to the torch, as well as bridges and railroad buildings. Telegraph lines were cut. On the outskirts of Chicago, crowds gathered on the tracks to temporarily halt passenger trains from entering the city. By sunset thirteen people had been killed and fifty-three injured. Similar scenes were reported at rail yards across the country.

Chicago’s organized labor movement did not sit idly by as these developments occurred; talk of a general strike in support of the rail workers had been bandied about for days, and intensified once the president committed the troops from Fort Sheridan. In an urgent call, two dozen national labor leaders including Samuel Gompers were summoned to an emergency conference at Chicago’s Briggs House hotel to help steer labor’s course. Representatives of the nation’s labor press, the so-called knights of the notebook, gathered downstairs in the lobby, ready to transmit the conclave’s decision. Many of the Chicago unions continued to back the idea of a general strike, as did Eugene Debs; AFL locals from across the country advised Gompers that they stood ready to join any such action at his word. Had the order for it emanated from the conference, there’s little doubt a general strike on a national scale would have been attempted.

While Gompers had joined Debs and Governor Altgeld in cautioning President Cleveland about the government’s improper use of the courts and the military, he had been convinced by the reversals at Homestead and in the Coeur d’Alene two years earlier that labor could not launch successful actions against the combined might of industry and government. Particularly now that federal injunctions had been issued and troops put in place in the Pullman Strike, Gompers believed the cause was lost. The conference passed a resolution that damned George Pullman as “a public enemy,” praised the ARU boycott as a “vigorous protest against the gathering, growing forces of plutocratic power and corporation rule,” and applauded the nation’s trainmen for exposing “the hollow shams of Pullman’s pharisaical paradise,” but noted with regret that

the present conflict has become surrounded and beset with complications so grave in their nature that we cannot consistently advise a course which would but add to the general confusion. . . . The public press, ever alive to the interests of corporate wealth, have . . . so maliciously misrepresented matters that in the public mind the working classes are now arrayed in open hostility to federal authority. This is a position we do not wish to be placed in.

The document concluded: “We declare it to be the sense of this conference that a general strike at this time is inexpedient, unwise, and contrary to the best interests of the working people.”

Gompers’s role at the gathering would become as controversial as the resolution produced there. Surely a nationwide general strike would have been a momentous act of war on the part of labor against both the government and private capital, and it’s not clear what strategies its advocates were considering that would have avoided further mass arrests of protesters or greater physical upheaval. Gompers’s opposition to the general strike, nonetheless, became to some critics part of a larger pattern of compromise, even betrayal, unforgivable to many in the left wing of the movement. It was known that Gompers had questioned the ARU’s wisdom in rushing into so major an undertaking as a national rail boycott so soon after its own founding, and rumored that as he had boarded a train to attend the Briggs House meeting he had told an aide, “I am going to the funeral of the ARU.”

The labor movement had stepped back from the precipice, but the federal government had no such hesitation. On July 10, it arrested Debs and three of his top aides on a charge of interfering with the U.S. mail and obstructing interstate commerce. Released on bail, they were rearrested a week later on the more serious charge of contempt of court for
disregarding the sweeping injunction against the ARU sympathy strike Judge Grosscup had issued under the Sherman Act. In protest Debs and his lieutenants refused to offer bail and were detained indefinitely behind bars. “If I happen to go to jail don’t worry,” Debs had written to his parents back in Terre Haute. “I would rather a thousand times be a man in prison than a free poltroon. Thousands of the world’s best and noblest have occupied prison cells. After all, I shall go into history right.”

The use of the Sherman Act of 1890 to restrict the actions of organized labor in the Pullman Strike was a hugely contentious issue, since to many people’s understanding the law’s avowed purpose was to curb trusts and monopolies. The legislation’s namesake, Ohio senator John Sherman, had in fact once offered the Pullman Palace Car Company, with its vast market influence, as an example of why such a law was necessary. Samuel Gompers later recalled having had numerous meetings with members of Congress while the act was being discussed, and that the restriction of illegal trusts was its object, not labor unions. But in 1892, Senator George F. Edmunds, who was credited with having provided the act’s wording, insisted it was meant to cover every form of combination that seeks to in any way interfere or restrain free competition, whether it be capital in the form of trusts, combinations, railroad pools or agreements, or labor through the form of boycotting organizations that say a man shall not earn his bread unless he joins this or that society. Both are wrong. Both are crimes, and indictable under the antitrust law.

Its initial use against labor appears to have come at New Orleans in March 1892, in a case resulting from that city’s biracial general strike the previous fall. The defendants in United States v. Workingmen’s Amalgamated Council asserted that the Sherman Act involved only capital trusts, but a federal court established a precedent disastrous to organized labor by concluding that while the statute “had its origin in the evil of missed capital,” the subject had so broadened in the minds of the legislators by the time the law was passed, its restrictions were understood to include excesses of labor. An opposing definition of the law, however, was rendered that same year in a Massachusetts case, United States v. Patterson, involving the marketing of cash registers, where the court ruled that the “restraint of trade” clause in the Sherman Act referred to monopolies, and warned against its “careless or inapt construction” to include labor strikes or boycotts. But it was the New Orleans ruling that served as the commonly used precedent.

In December 1894 hearings related to the Pullman Strike, an Illinois federal judge ruled that while Congress had discussed but not acted on a provision to exempt farmers and laborers from the antitrust law, the only logical interpretation was that Congress did not countenance any such exemption. This argument was a reference to the so-called Sherman Amendment, a proposed addition to the bill crafted by the legislation’s namesake that pointedly exempted labor unions; the amendment was left off the final draft of the bill, suggesting to some that Congress did mean for the legislation to reach labor unions. But others insisted it had been left off because the final draft of the bill was so written as to make any such amendment superfluous.

The confusion about the proper application of Sherman stemmed in part from the fact that the law had been conceived initially more as a sop to public concern than as an actual weapon to be deployed. “Trust-busting” was a nice-sounding term, but capital had sufficient control over the press, the legislatures, and the courts to keep it from becoming the fearsome instrument of anticorporate reform its advocates envisioned. Several prominent legal cases of the period demonstrate why. One was the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in United States v. F. C. Knight Co., known as the “Sugar Trust” case. In 1892 the American Sugar Refining Company had taken over F. C. Knight and other sugar refining firms, giving it a near monopoly over the nation’s production of sugar. The Cleveland administration asked for a government suit against Knight under the Sherman
Act. In a questionable opinion issued in January 1895, the Supreme Court ruled that Sherman had been intended to address the activities of corporations only as they pertained to interstate commerce, and that issues relating strictly to the behavior of large manufacturers were more properly the responsibility of the states. Coming at a time when Sherman was being misused against labor unions, the court’s willingness to nitpick the act’s language in this manner to protect big business was especially maddening. 117 It was, quipped one observer, a decision “based upon Webster’s Dictionary rather than upon economic reality.” 118

Another revealing history was that of Standard Oil, which dominated the U.S. oil trade through its methods of buying up smaller companies, fixing rail rates, monopolizing oil pipelines, and corporate spying. In 1890 the Ohio Supreme Court ordered the Standard Oil Trust dissolved. Instead it “retained its character,” notes historian Patrick Renshaw, “and in 1899 reincorporated under the laws of New Jersey as a holding company. In 1907 it was fined almost $50 million (which was reversed on appeal) and in 1911, in Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey v. United States, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered its dissolution.” But in doing so the high court set new limits on the Sherman Act, saying its restrictions must be interpreted with an eye for only those violations that constituted “undue restraints” against commerce, thussoftening the act’s initial thrust and creating an invisible bar of what might be termed a “reasonable” monopoly or an “unreasonable” restraint of trade. 119 This left only a marginal possibility that misbehaved trusts would actually be brought to heel.

In a separate opinion in Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey, Justice John Marshall Harlan alleged that the new flexible criteria amounted to “judicial legislation,” that is, the court’s succumbing to pressures from the business community to reverse laws that duly elected legislators had put in place. “By mere interpretation,” Harlan wrote, the Court had “modified the act of Congress, and deprived it of practical value as a defensive measure against the evils to be remedied.” He went on to warn against “aggregations of capital in the hands of a few individuals and corporations controlling, for their own profit and advantage exclusively, the entire business of the country, including the production and sale of the necessities of life.” 120

To say the use of antitrust injunctions against labor unions remained controversial would be an understatement; it became a major preoccupation, figuring in hundreds of labor cases in the coming years. In the Pullman affair there was never a doubt that the government had wielded it to devastating effect, validating the fear Gompers had expressed at Briggs House that labor risked being overwhelmed by the mix of judicial and executive powers the railroad interests had arrayed against the ARU. The injunctions that allowed the government to arrest Debs and other strike leaders and hold them behind bars, depriving the insurrection of its guidance, and the introduction of soldiers to disrupt the roving crowds and in some cases help man trains, had had the effect of breaking both the Pullman Strike and the ARU boycott. Two hundred rank-and-file strikers had also been arrested under the injunctions, joining several hundred ordinary citizens rounded up for rioting in the rail yards. “I have broken the backbone of this strike,” reporters quoted General Nelson Miles of the U.S. Army. 121 As the mobs dispersed, train lines gradually reopened, troops safeguarding locomotives and ridership on trains exiting big-city yards.

George Pullman had stayed largely out of public sight for most of the strike, only emerging once the Debs forces had been routed. “The public should not permit the real question which has been before it to be obscured,” he advised. “That question was as to the possibility of the creation and duration of a dictatorship which could make all the industries of the United States and the daily comfort of millions dependent upon them, hostages for the granting of the fantastic whim of such a dictator.” 122

Pullman was correct in implying that the strike that bore his name had been a defining moment for American labor. The movement learned decisively that it had no friends in Washington, and that the federal government would not hesitate to send soldiers to confront workers expressing legitimate grievances. Most disturbing was the government's
use of an antitrust law to halt union organizing and even gag communication from a union's leaders to its members, a throwback to the supposedly discarded notion that routine labor union activity represented a "combination" or "conspiracy" dangerous to society. Not unexpectedly, the business community and the conservative press widely praised President Cleveland's firmness in putting down "Debs' Rebellion" and setting organized labor in its place.

Far from convincing workers of the error of their ways, the means the authorities had used had the effect of radicalizing many unionists. As Debs acknowledged:

We have no power of the government behind us... no recognized influence in society on our side... On the other side the corporations are in perfect alliance; they have all of the things that money can command, and that means a subsidized press... the clergy almost steadily united in thundering their denunciations, then the courts, then the state militia, then the federal troops.122

Among moderate laborites like Gompers, of course, the Pullman experience reinforced cautious attitudes about the efficacy of boycotts and strikes; the ARU's fate was proof that, given the opposition's strength, a more judicious advocacy might be preferable for securing functioning agreements with capital.

If it was any solace to the whipped ARU, Pullman and his company did not emerge unscathed. The events of summer 1894 brought criticism of the very notion of company towns, most prominently Pullman's. One Chicago cleric, the Reverend William H. Carwardine, denounced the model community as so thoroughly undemocratic as to be un-American, as well as an affront to God, since Pullman himself, not God, ruled the community and the lives of its inhabitants. Within a decade the town, many of its once-impressive amenities grown shabby with neglect, was declared by the Illinois State Supreme Court to exist in opposition "to good public policy and incompatible with the theory and spirit of our institutions." The court cited the Pullman Company's ownership of it as being in violation of the community's own articles of incorporation, and the state ordered the firm to relinquish all parts of it not essential to manufacturing. Pullman Illinois ceased to exist, some of its structures were altered or disassembled, and what remained was incorporated within the city of Chicago.124 Although company towns would not cease to spring up, as they often did in mining regions, the term increasingly took on a pejorative meaning, and the Pullman experience had the effect of dissuading the wiser planners of such communities from assuming absolute control over their residents. Many corporations in the Progressive Era and beyond, guided by the unhappy fate of Pullman, turned the responsibility for company housing of workers and other employer-employee relations over to an emerging class of sociologists and industrial relations experts who could serve as "buffers between capital and labor."123

While the press continued to belittle Debs, and wipe its collective brow that a "dictator" of labor had been stymied in his harmful ambition, a more considered appraisal of the Pullman Strike came, ironically, from a commission of inquiry set to work by President Cleveland. George Pullman, Eugene Debs, and numerous others testified before the panel. The commission's report bemoaned the fact that both capital and labor had become so concentrated that they were capable in times of strife of wreaking great havoc with the entire economy; it noted that the strike had caused the deaths of thirty people, engaged fourteen thousand soldiers and police, and had cost railroads $4 million in revenues and workingmen $1.6 million in lost wages. While challenging the wisdom of the ARU's decision to allow Pullman factory employees into a railroad union, the report saved some of its strongest criticism for George Pullman for assuming the dual role of employer and landlord and for his refusal to submit disputed issues to arbitration. Most surprising, it scolded the rail barons and their GMA for scheming to destroy the ARU as an illegitimate labor combination when it was itself a combination, albeit one of business. It also held the government responsible "for not adequately control-
ling monopolies and corporations, and for failing to reasonably protect
the rights of labor and redress its wrongs." As Debs testified, employers
would reduce workers to a state of near slavery if no one ever stood up to
them. "If it were not for resistance to degrading conditions," he offered,
"the tendency of our whole civilization would be downward." 126

In its challenge to management's reflexive hostility toward organized
labor, the commission pointed out that "capital abroad prefers to deal
with these [labor] unions rather than with individuals or mobs, and from
their joint efforts in good faith at conciliation and arbitration much good
and many peaceful days have resulted." It pondered whether in America
it would not also be "wise to recognize them by law, to admit their
necessity as labor guild protectors, to conserve their usefulness, increase
their responsibility and to prevent their follies and aggressions by confer-
ing upon them the privileges enjoyed by corporations, with like proper
restrictions and regulations." 127

Such rumination pointed toward a question that would become cen-
tral in the post-Pullman decades: What was the proper role of govern-
ment in labor disputes? In the eyes of the ARU, governmental interference
of the wrong kind had been the grievous error of the Pullman Strike. Debs
was convinced that had his union been left alone to deal with manage-
ment, it could have wrought concessions peacefully and in a way far less
disruptive to commerce and public convenience. Reformers would soon
argue that government's obligation in industrial relations should not be
to rush to aid private enterprise, but would best be directed toward pass-
ing legislation and creating enforcement agencies to safeguard employee
rights, improve conditions, and ameliorate labor abuses. If a third party
was to be involved in resolving labor strife, it should take the forms of
neutral government boards of mediation or similar entities made up of
nongovernmental actors. One of the Cleveland commission's recommen-
dations was that a permanent three-person U.S. strike commission be
created to intervene in and mediate future railroad strikes. 128

Pullman was a deeply patriotic man who cherished his image as a
benevolent giver of convenience and value to society, so he was wounded
by the perception that his actions had in any way endangered the country,
or that he was to blame for the strike. Usually meticulous at managing
his own image and that of his business—he was known for the lavish
junkets for reporters and VIPs who attended the formal rollouts of his
new railroad cars—he seemed to not have appreciated the bad press that
could adhere to a company or an individual as the result of poorly han-
dled labor relations. He had "won" the strike but lost the public's favor; no
longer was he the admired innovator and knight of commerce. For a per-
fectionist of his bent this was maddening, humiliating even in that he had
been taken down, exposed as cold and self-interested, by his own lowly
shop workers; they had "found the chink in his armor," as one historian
suggests, and for the first time in a career largely triumphant, "opened
him to criticism, something he could not abide." Pullman tried to recover
his reputation through various charitable works, with limited success.
That the shock of the strike had disoriented him and vanquished some
of his habitual confidence was evident to leading company stockholders,
who briefly considered asking for his resignation as head of the firm. 129

In fall 1895 there were two amateurish, easily foiled attempts on Pull-
man's life. Already in poor health (he suffered from a heart ailment), he
became convinced that his former employees were behind the assassi-
nation plots. He likely knew the rumors about Franklin B. Gowen, the
onetime president of the Reading Railroad and titan of the Pennsylvania
anthracite fields, who had been found dead in a Washington hotel room
in 1889, an apparent suicide, although it was whispered he'd met his end at
the hands of vengeful Molly Maguires. 130 Pullman eventually became prey
to an even more macabre obsession—that upon his death, ex-employees
of the Pullman Palace Car Company would steal or desecrate his remains.
Wealthy enough to act on such fears, however irrational, he left strict
orders regarding his anticipated internment in Graceland Cemetery in
Chicago, designing a burial vault fortified to resist all forms of forced
entry. Drawing one last time on his passion for innovative engineering,
the man who had hoisted whole city blocks and redefined American rail
travel arranged for his coffin to be lined in lead, set in concrete, covered
with asphalt, then protected from any attempt at excavation by a set of heavy iron bars laid across the top of the vault.\footnote{131}

A far more important product of the Pullman Strike was the political evolution of Eugene Debs. As president of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, Debs had disdained strikes; he believed the purpose of unions to be largely benevolent, providing hospitalization and death benefits for men in a dangerous occupation. Even the staid Gompers was initially more "radical" than Debs, insisting on unions’ right to strike and bargain, a power Debs had only slowly come to accept. What the Pullman debacle had shown him was that not only corporations were capable of wrongful, unprincipled actions; the government and its federal judges, the "ermined sycophants," as Debs called them; President Cleveland, for whom he'd campaigned in 1892; as well as the military and powerful newspapers—all, in their disdain for workers' just demands, were willing to twist facts, to scheme, and to employ blunt force.

Like George Pullman, he, too, had been personally wounded by events. Turning his back on mainstream politics, he denounced all but the Populists’ People's Party, which had called for a number of labor-related reforms, including the enforcement of the eight-hour day in government jobs and the suppression of the "hiring army" known as the Pinkertons; to this list of objectives the party would soon add the demand for an end to the use of court injunctions against labor unions. "I have been a Democrat all my life and I am ashamed to admit it," he said at the last ARU gathering he addressed before beginning a six-month jail term for contempt. "I want every one of you to go to the polls and vote the People's ticket."\footnote{132}

Debs had to deal with two separate legal proceedings against him. His six-month prison sentence arose from his violation of the July 2 antitrust injunction (his codefendants were each sentenced to three months). All appealed their conviction to the U.S. Supreme Court. While awaiting the high court’s ruling, they also had to answer to charges of conspiracy emanating from the ARU’s alleged blocking of a mail train on the Rock Island Railroad. That trial began in January 1895 and was presided over by none other than Judge Peter Grosscup, who had issued the original edict against the ARU. Clarence Darrow, defending Debs, tried to put the GMA’s lawyers on trial, accusing them of “persecution not prosecution,” and pointing out that there was not a scintilla of evidence that Debs or any other ARU official had conspired to halt mail traffic. The executives of the GMA were vague and seemed forgetful, no doubt because a true accounting of their actions would reveal their conspiratorial intent to defeat the labor organization; notably, George Pullman left the state so as to be unavailable to testify. The case dragged on for a month, and many observers felt Darrow was getting the better of the government, but then a juror fell ill—mysteriously, in Debs’s opinion—and Judge Grosscup discharged the jury and continued the case, but it was never reopened. Debs later wrote that he members of the jury had privately assured him of their intent to acquit.

The July 2 injunction case eventually did get a hearing before the Supreme Court in spring 1895, and for Debs’s forces the Court’s ruling was a disappointment. In In re Debs, the Court essentially dodged the critical issue of whether the federal government had the right to issue an injunction based on the Sherman Act against a labor union, and instead reaffirmed unanimously that a federal injunction was valid where interstate commerce and the U.S. mails were disrupted. The Supreme Court’s consideration of the validity of antitrust injunctions against labor would not be resolved, and then unfavorably for labor, until the Court’s decision in Loewe v. Lawlor in 1908.\footnote{133}

Debs’s six-month incarceration at a jail in rural Woodstock, Illinois, has become a legendary chapter in the story of his long progress from railroad unionist to Socialist Party presidential candidate. “My imprisonment is very much to arouse the public conscience,” Debs wrote to his father,\footnote{134} but the time also proved to be one of self-discovery and reevaluation. Debs exercised, received visitors, made friends of the sheriff and his family, and charmed the small town’s residents, many of whom took the opportunity to stop by to meet and befriend the celebrity prisoner. He told stories of his days on the railroad. He read a great deal in Socialist and Marxist texts sent to him, and was particularly taken by a book called
The Cooperative Commonwealth by Laurence Gronlund, who as "Peter Lofgren" had been active in the St. Louis Workingmen's Party at the time of the 1877 general strike in that city.

By the time he completed his term in November 1895, Debs had developed a keen interest in Socialism. He was convinced that what was required was not more of the labor struggle's give-and-take with management, or largely futile opposition to government hirelings, but a reordering of American society on the scale of the revolution that had toppled chattel slavery. Returning to Chicago, he received a hero's welcome. "Go Wild over Debs," the Tribune headlined its coverage. 135 Hatless, somewhat thinner, he was borne along by a throng of one hundred thousand from the depot to a speakers' stand. "That's our boy, Gene!" "Tell the bosses now!" urged the workingmen who pressed in from all sides, as Debs, touched by the adulation, accepted telegrams of congratulation from Western Union boys who had to be lifted over the crowd.

His ARU had lost its boycott (and would not recover any meaningful semblance of organization), but the power of an industrial union had been demonstrated. Armies and bogus court rulings could not repress it. "They might as well try to stop Niagara with a feather as to crush the spirit of organization in this country," Eugene Debs believed with all his heart. "It may not come up in the form of the American Railway Union, but this spirit of resistance to wrong is there, it is growing stronger constantly." 136

Chapter Five
INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

The Pullman Strike had deepened understanding on both sides of the labor-management divide. Labor perceived that even well-run work stoppages would face not only corporate might and determination, but industry's powerful handmaidens—the anti-labor bias of the courts, as well as military force. As for capital, it had learned that successfully breaking a strike could prove a hollow victory, in that it still meant consequential financial loss and inconvenience. As the economic desperation of the 1890s lifted and relative prosperity returned, there arose a constructive impatience with the status quo in industrial relations and its by-now visible shortcomings, while technological progress and the rise in living standards that accompanied the dawn of the new century helped spawn a desire for more workable solutions. Persistent unemployment and urban poverty, the inability to peacefully resolve labor-management issues, the intractability of business barons—might not all such issues be enabled by society's willingness to grant them greater empathy and closer, wiser analysis?