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Beginning with the Workingmen's parties of the 1820s and 1830s and extending into the New Deal era of the 1930s and 1940s, American workers repeatedly organized independent labor parties to enact reforms that could not be won through the unionization of the shop floor alone. Most of these labor parties survived just a few years before being co-opted by the two-party system or collapsing as a result of internal organizational weakness. And yet, while the specific platforms and voting constituencies varied over time, all labor parties shared a common goal

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of reforming the nation's economy and society to ensure labor's access to the basic rights of American citizenship as defined by workers themselves: an honest chance for upward mobility, a guarantee of basic economic security, the preservation of the dignity of labor in an industrial economy, and meaningful participation in the democratic process. Examining the notable examples of labor party organization case by case provides a glimpse at the changes industrialization brought to both the composition of the American working class and also to American workers' understanding of the rights inherent in American citizenship. Where, when, and why did labor parties emerge? What economic, social, and political reforms did these parties champion?

The Workingmen's Parties

The first labor parties in American history were the Workingmen's parties that appeared in more than 50 cities and towns throughout the mid-Atlantic and Northeast during the late 1820s and early 1830s. The Workingmen attracted support from the ranks of artisans anxious about the downward pressure on wages and the overall threat to skilled work posed by the revolutions in transportation, commerce, and manufacturing then sweeping through the American economy. Events in Philadelphia were typical. Organized following an unsuccessful strike for the ten-hour day, Philadelphia's building tradesmen formed a Workingmen's Party in 1828 and promptly nominated labor-friendly candidates for city and county offices. Their platform clearly reflected the economic anxieties of the city's skilled tradesmen and included demands for the ten-hour day, a mechanics' lien law, and prohibitions on the use of inexpensive convict labor. But the Workingmen in Philadelphia and elsewhere also lobbied for a broad slate of civic reforms designed to ensure for themselves the ability to fully participate in nineteenth-century civic life, including demands for free, universal, tax-supported public schools and for improvements in such basic public health measures as street cleaning and water and sewage works. This approach yielded quick but ultimately short-lived electoral success. In Philadelphia, the Workingmen controlled city government as early as 1829, but by 1832, their party had collapsed. Targeted for co-optation by the major parties and dismissed as the "Dirty Shirt Party" by self-proclaimed respectable middle- and upper-class voters, the Workingmen's parties everywhere disappeared as rapidly as they emerged, and the movement collapsed entirely by the mid-1830s. The

meteoric trajectory of the Workingmen's movement foreshadowed the advantages and difficulties awaiting future labor parties: they succeeded during times of labor unrest and in regions where labor enjoyed strong organizational advantages but proved unable to sustain their electoral successes when faced with co-optation by the major parties and the hostility of middle- and upper-class voters.

Free Labor Ideology, Wage Labor Reality

The decades between the decline of the Workingmen's parties and the end of the Civil War proved inauspicious for labor party organization. This was due in part to the consolidation of the two-party system in American politics and its division of working-class voters along ethnocultural lines: the Democratic Party appealed to working-class immigrants of Irish and German descent; the emergent Republican Party attracted support from native-born workers. But above all else it was the development of what historians have labeled *free labor ideology* that curbed independent labor politics at midcentury. First articulated during the mid-1850s by the fledgling Republicans, free labor ideology emphasized the nobility of all labor in a free society, favorably juxtaposed the North's labor system with the slave labor regime in the South, and maintained that even unskilled industrial wage labor could be reconciled with traditional notions of the United States as a nation of independent producers because upward social mobility remained open to any sufficiently hard-working wage earner. For northern workers, the preservation of the Union thus became conjoined with the rhetorical defense of free labor and fealty to the Republican Party. All this discouraged the formation of independent labor parties, but no ideology could long obscure the harsh realities of industrialization during the decades following the Civil War. Free labor ideology had convinced many in the working class that their needs could be met within the two-party system, but the harsh realities of work in late-nineteenth-century industrial America led many to question that notion. Labor parties emerged during the decades following the Civil War whenever workers took measure of the distance between the promises of free labor ideology and the realities of wage labor in industrial America.

Labor Parties during the Age of Industrialization

The depth of working-class discontent caused by industrialization can be gauged by the sheer number of labor parties to emerge during the last four decades of

the nineteenth century—the heyday of labor party organization. But the fact that many labor parties emerged during these decades demonstrated that not all workers embraced the same set of reforms and underscored the degree to which industrialization divided the American working class along lines of ethnicity and skill.

The earliest labor parties organized during this era grew out of the eight-hour movement of the late 1860s and clung to a vision of an America full of native-born, independent, republican artisans. Advocates fought to limit a legal day's work to eight hours as a way to ensure for workers enough leisure time for the self-improvement and education necessary for full republican citizenship, a message that appealed directly to northern native-born skilled workers worried that industrialization would leave no place in the American political economy for self-employed artisans. By contrast, other labor party organizers embraced the onrush of industrialization and appealed directly to immigrant wage earners then flooding into America's factories as unskilled laborers.

Founded in 1877, the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) was mainly composed of foreign-born German, Polish, and other Eastern European immigrants. Steeped in Marxist ideology, SLP organizers welcomed the development of a permanent wage-earning working class as the necessary precursor to socialism, demanded the "abolition of the wages system" and the "industrial emancipation of labor" and dismissed the eight-hour movement's idolization of the independent producer. They looked forward to the day when class-conscious wage-earners seized the means of production from their employers.

A third group of labor party activists argued that—given the long-standing agrarian discontent with railroads and eastern financial institutions—building a successful labor party meant forging an effective political coalition with the nation's disgruntled farmers. The National Labor Reform Party of 1872 marked an early attempt at a national-level alliance of farmers and labor. Its organizers tried to balance working-class demands—support for the eight-hour day and a national bureau of labor statistics—with agrarian demands for currency and land reforms.

None of these labor parties achieved much electoral success. The eight-hour movement inspired only short-lived state labor parties in 1869 and 1870. The doctrinaire SLP lasted two decades but experienced success only in immigrant-rich cities such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Chicago, failed to field a presidential ticket until 1892, and never claimed more than a few thousand members.

Abandoned by workers suspicious of aligning themselves with farmers and dominated by agrarian concerns, the Labor Reform Party mustered only 18,600 votes in the 1872 presidential election out of the more than 6 million votes cast. A credible third-party farmer-labor alliance remained elusive until the People's (Populist) Party emerged in the early 1890s.

Episodes of industrial upheaval allowed late-nineteenth-century labor parties to transcend such internal divisions, forge effective coalitions with nonlabor reform movements, and win elections. Unlike the earlier Labor Reform Party, the Greenback-Labor Party (1878–88) was a farmer-labor coalition that actually enjoyed significant working-class support—but only in 1878, when the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 remained fresh in the minds of working-class voters. Running on a platform that included demands for the eight-hour day, mandatory safety inspections for mines and factories, restrictions on the use of child labor, and a national bureau of labor statistics, the Greenback-Labor Party polled better than 50 percent throughout eastern coal-mining regions, performed well in union strongholds such as Pittsburgh, and elected a series of labor-friendly mayors in such medium-sized industrial cities as Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Utica, New York. Working-class support quickly withered, however, and agrarians dominated the party during the 1880s.

The rise of the Knights of Labor during the Great Upheaval of 1886 provided a second occasion for labor party success—this time in over 200 city-level labor parties. In Chicago, the United Labor Party emerged following a crackdown on organized labor that began with the infamous May 1886 Haymarket Square incident. In Milwaukee, the People's Party emerged after striking ironworkers were met with violence. In New York, workers joined an eclectic coalition of reformers in support of the mayoral candidacy of Henry George. These local-level labor parties articulated demands designed to protect the dignity of working-class life in the nation's industrializing cities: they demanded public ownership for transit lines; relief for the urban poor; public works programs to reduce unemployment; the establishment of public libraries, recreation centers, and parks; and improved urban sanitation systems. Enough working-class voters were drawn to the Milwaukee People's Party to elect a mayor, a congressman, and a handful of state assemblymen. Chicago's United Labor Party appeared so strong that Republicans and Democrats fielded a

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coalition candidate to defeat it. In New York, Henry George finished an impressive second in the city's mayoral contest, ahead of the young Theodore Roosevelt, then running on the Republican ticket. These city-level parties declined quickly, however, and an effort to build a national party based on the localized successes of 1886 proved disastrous. The national United Labor Party, for example, polled fewer than 5,000 votes during the 1888 presidential election.

Conditions favored independent labor politics during the 1890s. Even by the harsh standards of the late nineteenth century, nationwide economic depression and industrial violence meant that these were years of intense suffering for workers. At the same time, moreover, many of the differences that separated previous labor parties had disappeared. Demands for the eight-hour day remained at the top of labor's agenda, for example, but gone was the eight-hour movement's desire to resurrect the era of the skilled republican artisan. By the 1890s, industrial wage labor was recognized as an entrenched reality. And socialism, once the domain of the immigrant-dominated SLP, had become "Americanized" thanks in part to the popularity of reform tracts such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, but also due to workers' own brushes with antilabor repression. The emergence of the Social Democratic Party (SDP; 1898–1901) clearly signaled the homegrown nature of labor radicalism. Led by Eugene V. Debs—a charismatic yet previously obscure Midwestern politician transformed by his experiences as a union leader during the early 1890s—the SDP argued that socialism in America could be achieved using nonviolent, democratic means, but only through the organization of an independent labor party.

And yet, just as these conditions seemed auspicious for labor party success another schism emerged within labor's ranks. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) became the dominant labor organization during the 1880s and 1890s by pursuing a strategy of "pure and simple" unionism: it organized trade unions mostly among skilled workers, focused exclusively on workplace demands for better wages and hours, avoided all alliances with political radicals, and—after a contentious 1894 convention—expressly prohibited its membership from participating in any labor party effort. This stance eliminated an important potential source of votes at a critical time. The ideological struggle between "pure and simple" trade unionism and the political socialism of Debs and other activists defined the labor party argument during the Progressive Era.

Trade Unionism and Socialism during the Progressive Era

During the Progressive Era, many middle-class Americans embraced an expanded role for the state in order to resolve the social and economic problems that accompanied industrialization. In this context, the AFL's "pure and simple" trade unionism proved neither illogical nor inflexible. The prohibition against independent labor parties continued, but AFL leaders nevertheless recognized that Progressive Era expansions in the power of government underscored the importance of politics to labor's cause. In 1906 the AFL circulated labor's "Bill of Grievances"—a list of desired reforms—to both the Republican and Democratic parties, and quickly forged informal political alliances with progressives from both parties.

This alliance between progressives and the AFL was facilitated by the fear in both camps that the Socialist Party (founded in 1901) would inspire American workers to demand even more radical reforms. The dominant labor party during the Progressive Era and also the longest-lasting, best-organized, and most successful working-class third party in U.S. history, the SP flatly declared that "pure and simple" trade unionism left the majority of semiskilled and unskilled workers in mass production industries out in the cold. True reform, SP organizers argued, required an independent labor party encompassing workers of all ethnicities and skill levels. "The socialist or cooperative system," these organizers declared in a resolution adopted at the SP's 1901 convention, "can only be brought about by the independent political organization and the united action of the wage working class." To this end, the SP adopted a flexible platform and built a diverse national coalition. SP candidates often employed radical rhetoric evocative of the earlier Socialist Labor Party, but the party platform advocated a series of incremental reforms including—public ownership of the nation's railroads, mines, oil and gas wells, and utility companies; improved hours and wages; public works programs to mitigate periods of high unemployment; and political reforms such as the initiative and referendum. The ranks of the SP, moreover, included not just doctrinaire activists but also coal miners, hard-rock miners, radical farmers, and industrial workers of all ethnicities and skill levels. Based on this diverse coalition and the appeal of its platform, the Socialists achieved a string of electoral victories. By 1912—the height of the SP's electoral fortunes—1,200 Socialists held elective office across the country. Seventy-nine socialist mayors had

been elected in such cities as Berkeley, California; Butte, Montana; Flint, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Schenectady, New York. Eugene Debs—a five-time candidate for president under the SP banner—received nearly 1 million votes (6 percent) in the 1912 presidential election.

The labor-friendly reforms enacted during the Progressive Era can be understood within the context of this surge in Socialist Party support, but World War I brought an abrupt end to the party's influence. Meeting the needs of a wartime economy solidified the alliance between the AFL and the administration of President Woodrow Wilson: workers received better wages and working conditions, and the administration received assurances that AFL leadership would crack down on labor radicalism. Government authorities quickly concluded that the Socialist Party's antiwar stance and its radical critiques of American society jeopardized the war effort. The U.S. Postal Service barred Socialist Party periodicals from the mail, crippling party organization in distant rural areas. Justice Department officials hurt the party everywhere else by throwing its leaders in jail and disrupting party events. Debs himself was arrested and sentenced to ten years in jail following a 1918 antiwar speech. By the end of World War I, the Socialist Party was in a state of disrepair.

Labor Parties after World War I

The same forces that crushed the Socialist Party, however, also produced the next surge in labor party organization. The wartime bargain between labor and the state enhanced workers' stature in American society and encouraged them to approach the postwar world with a sense of anticipation. Having helped the nation fight for democracy abroad, workers began to demand "industrial democracy" at home—a call for workers to have an increased say in the management of industry. But this new sense of purpose within labor's ranks was matched by a decidedly conservative turn in domestic politics that not only jeopardized labor's postwar hopes but also threatened to roll back workers' wartime gains. Labor parties emerged to fight for the workers' vision of the postwar political economy in the face of this rightward shift in American politics.

Labor parties surfaced in nearly 50 cities during 1918 and 1919—an early indication of the vigilance with which workers protected their vision for the postwar world. In November 1919, at the end of a year in which over 4 million workers struck for better wages, shorter

hours, and industrial democracy, delegates from these local-level labor parties met in Chicago to create the National Labor Party. In an attempt to capitalize on agrarian unrest stemming from the ongoing postwar agricultural depression, in mid-1920, organizers rechristened their effort the Farmer-Labor Party and wrote arguably the most militant platform in the history of U.S. labor parties. Proclaiming that "political democracy is only an empty phrase without industrial democracy," the 1920 platform explicitly connected labor's struggles with broader reform currents in American society. Farmer-Laborites called for the eight-hour day, the right to organize and bargain collectively, and the right to strike; championed government ownership of key industries; demanded the repeal of the wartime Espionage and Sedition Acts that had crippled the SP; reaffirmed the rights of free speech and assembly; supported democratic reforms such as the initiative, referendum, and recall; and demanded a federal department of education "to the end that the children of workers . . . may have maximum opportunities of training to become unafraid, well-informed citizens of a free country." This ambitious platform, though, did not spare the Farmer-Labor Party of 1920 from disaster at the ballot box. The party won just 265,000 votes in the presidential election of 1920, the result of reactionary postwar politics and yet one more illustration of the elusiveness of effective farmer-labor alliances. Only in Minnesota—a state in which movements among workers and farmers were equally strong—was the farmer-labor effort a lasting success. The state-level Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party sent elected officials to the state legislature, the Minnesota governor's mansion, and the U.S. Congress.

The New Deal Era and Beyond

Labor party politics changed decisively as a result of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Just as the free labor ideology of the mid-nineteenth century preempted the emergence of labor parties for a generation, the New Deal coalition built by Franklin D. Roosevelt curbed independent labor politics and channeled labor's political energies into the Democratic Party from the 1930s onward. Although revisionist scholars often dismiss labor's alliance with the Democratic Party since the 1930s as a "barren marriage," in fact this partnership proved a productive one: the New Deal guaranteed to working Americans the right to organize and collectively bargain for higher wages and better conditions, enacted a broad

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set of economic reforms designed to make working- and middle-class life more secure, and—like the free labor ideology before it—affirmed the dignity of work in America by offering a full-throated rhetorical veneration of labor's place in society. With the advent of the New Deal, labor moved closer than ever before to the center of American politics. It did so as an appendage of the Democratic Party.

The fortunes of independent labor parties during the long New Deal era—from the 1930s through the 1960s—demonstrates the power of this alliance between labor and the Democratic Party. Labor parties did emerge during this time, but they ultimately *contributed* to the hold that the Democratic Party and the New Deal came to have on working-class voters. A series of grassroots labor parties, for example, sprung up during 1934 and 1935 in cities hit hard by the Great Depression and labor unrest. Each of these parties demanded workers' right to unionize and each pleaded for economic relief. But in so doing, they underscored the enormity of the economic problems caused by the Depression, drove Roosevelt's New Deal to the left, and therefore helped to cement the New Deal–labor alliance. The history of the one major independent labor party to emerge during the New Deal era—New York's American Labor Party (ALP; 1936–56)—is emblematic of the fate of labor parties during these decades. Composed of left-wing activists, radical unionists, African Americans, Hispanics, and Italian Americans, the ALP was created in July 1936 expressly as a way for Socialists and other radicals to cast a ballot *supporting* Franklin Roosevelt's reelection. Although the ALP platform included specific demands for the municipal ownership of utilities and price controls for key food commodities, in effect, the party offered a blanket endorsement of the New Deal. Roosevelt gave the ALP his tacit blessing and in 1936, he received 275,000 on the party's ballot line. The ALP was in this sense not an independent labor party. Its electoral success depended in large part on its support for the Democrats' New Deal.

During the late 1940s, ALP activists—dismayed by what they considered to be President Harry Truman's abandonment of the liberal housing, health care, education, and social security programs called for by Roosevelt in his 1944 “economic bill of rights”—attempted to organize a new national labor party. But this independent effort only showcased the continuing strength of the New Deal–labor alliance. When the ALP supported Henry A. Wallace's third-party challenge to Truman in 1948, both

the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations sanctioned neither Wallace's candidacy nor the calls for an independent labor party—a clear indication that organized labor believed that the reelection of New Deal–style Democrats must not be jeopardized by third-party activity. Given Wallace's anemic showing, the collapse of the ALP shortly thereafter, and the lack of significant labor parties since, it appears that working-class voters received the message. The election of 1948 arguably marked the end of independent labor party politics for a generation. Only with the waning of the New Deal order and the rise of the New Right during the 1980s and 1990s did labor activists begin to question their alliance with the Democratic Party and revisit the idea of independent labor politics. A new generation of labor party activists did emerge during the mid-1990s to argue that centrist Democrats had abandoned workers and that a new labor party effort was needed to push for issues such as the living wage, universal health care, and environmental protection. But these labor party advocates ultimately balked when it came to running candidates, a testament to their own acknowledgement of the dim outlook for independent labor politics at the end of the twentieth century.

The Labor Party: An Enduring but Elusive Goal

In every era, the emergence of independent labor parties reflected the desire among workers to win not just better wages and working conditions but also a broader set of reforms designed to ensure access to the full benefits of American citizenship. But while a distinguishing feature of the labor party impulse, this pursuit of reform outside of the workplace paradoxically hindered labor party success. During much of the nineteenth century, labor party activists articulated wildly different visions of what kind of laborer belonged in a labor party; this reflected the heterogeneity of the working class and made political consensus elusive. At other times, the pursuit of broad reforms made labor parties readily susceptible to co-optation by the major parties, particularly when the parties made direct overtures to labor in the form of free labor ideology and New Deal liberalism.

See also Greenback-Labor Party; labor movement and politics; populism; socialism.

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