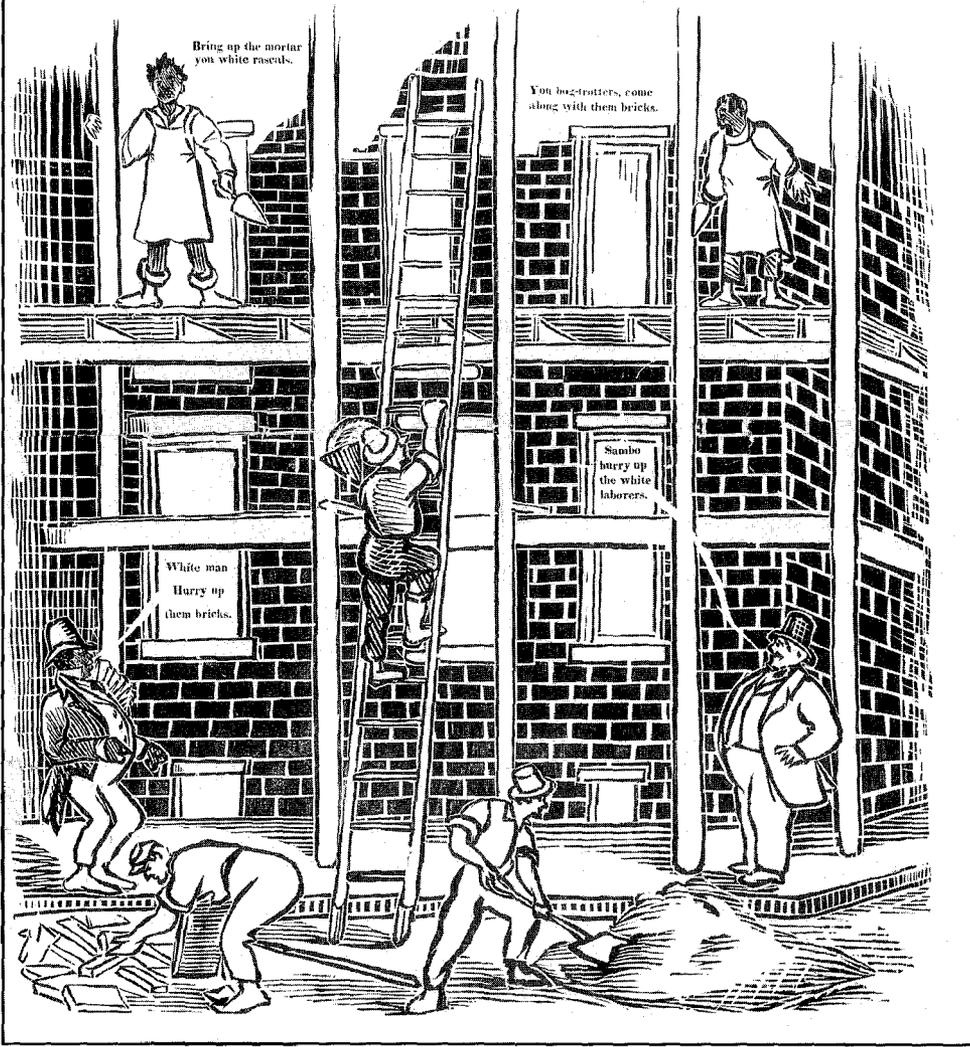


THE RESULTS OF ABOLITIONISM!



IV

THEY SWUNG THEIR PICKS

In an episode in a nineteenth-century Irish-American novel, a character named James O'Rourke lands in New York in the 1850s after a journey that began in Queenstown, County Cork. Knowing no one in the city, O'Rourke walks up Broadway gazing at the buildings, the street lined with wagons and drays, and the sidewalk crowded with people. Approaching a stranger, he asks where he may find employment. The stranger leads him through narrow streets to a man seated behind a desk, who takes all his money and sends him off with directions to a drygoods shop. The drygoods shop does not exist, and nightfall finds the greenhorn by the East River, footsore, weary, and dejected. He meets a sympathetic countryman, Terence McManus, to whom he tells his story. Expressing rage at the swindlers, McManus puts him up for the night in a third-floor room where he lives with his wife and baby. The next morning McManus, who is a longshoreman, takes O'Rourke with him to start work on the docks.¹

Although the story may seem ordinary, McManus's willingness to help O'Rourke find employment is not so natural as might at first appear. Why should he bring another jobseeker, perhaps not even from the same county, to the docks? Even granting his wish to help a countryman, how did McManus, a lowly docker, acquire the power to dispose of even one job?

The Irish tradition of labor organization goes back to the Defenders of 1641, the earliest known example of a secret society in Ireland. In the eighteenth century there appeared the Whiteboys, so called because its members wore white shirts over their clothes as a disguise. Other names

were Molly Maguires, Levellers, and Right Boys. Usually locally based and springing up in hard times, the secret societies defended the peasants against enclosure, eviction, and rent increases, using whatever means were available, including violence against landlords and their agents and destruction of fences, crops, and livestock. They were not confined to Catholics: aside from the Orangemen, Peep O'Day Boys, and other Protestant secret societies with sectarian aims, there also existed the Oak Boys, an organization of Protestant tenants in Armagh, which fought against the system of forced labor on the public highways. The most powerful secret society in the nineteenth century was the Ribbonmen, which flourished in three periods of large-scale activity, 1814–16, 1821–23, and 1831–34, each tied to a fall in grain prices. A Ribbon password of 1833 suggests a presence in America:

Q: How long is your stick?

A: Long enough to reach my enemies.

Q: To what trunk does the wood belong?

A: To a French trunk that blooms in America and whose leaves shall shelter the sons of Erin.²

Among the first flowers of the Ribbon societies in America was the 1834 outbreak near Williamsport, Maryland, along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, where 1,800 Irish immigrants were employed by agents under contract with the company.³ Laborers from Cork had organized to establish job control along the canal. On January 16, the Corkonians fatally beat a laborer from County Longford. Work along the line halted as both sides prepared for war. On January 24, 700 Longford men routed 300 Corkonians, killing at least five and wounding an unknown number. Thirty-four were arrested and order was restored by the local militia with the help of two voluntary companies and U.S. troops from Fort McHenry. Delegates from the two groups of laborers met and signed a truce, each pledging not to interfere with the other's right of employment.⁴

In November 1834, the discharge of workers led to the beating and then killing of the offending superintendent. Again the military restored order. Three hundred Irish were arrested; one man was sentenced to

death and two others to prison for eighteen years. One of the contractors who testified at the trial was later compelled to resign under threat of death.⁵

In February 1835, laborers on a section of the canal struck for higher wages. In January 1836, another clash occurred between two groups of Irish. In April 1836, Irish workers struck again, attacking a group of “Dutch and country borns” who refused to join the strike, dispersing them and halting work along that section. The strike spread through the whole line after one of the contractors fired all the strikers and contracted slaves in their place. In May and June 1837, Irish strikers drove off forty English immigrant workers who had been brought in by one of the contractors. In the Spring of 1838 Irish burned shanties of German laborers “whose presence threatened to reduce the jobs for the Irish and force down wages.” In May 1838, the withholding of wages by contractors led workers to seize the stocks of blasting powder with the aim of destroying the work they had done. On several of these occasions military force was required to suppress the disorders. Canal officials attributed the disturbances to “a regularly organized society [with] branches in all the States where internal improvements are in progress.”⁶

On August 11, 1839, the canal erupted again, as one hundred Irish laborers, armed with guns and clubs, assaulted two sections where German workers were employed. On August 27, more than two weeks after the initial outbreak, the Maryland militia restored order, in the course of which they shot at least eight laborers, seized 120 weapons, tore down shanties, and took twenty-six prisoners, of whom fourteen were sent to the penitentiary for terms from five to eighteen years.⁷

The story of construction labor unrest elsewhere is similar to that on the C&O Canal. Commons estimates that two-thirds of the “riots” of that time were in fact unorganized strikes.⁸ In 1829, laborers on the Pennsylvania canal struck for a wage increase and refused to allow others to take their place. They were quelled by the local police and militia, including cavalry. A Catholic priest, Reverend Father Curran, used “his personal influence over the rioters [to] induce them to submit to civil authority.”⁹ The same year on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, one man was killed and several wounded, a home was destroyed and railroad tracks were torn up before the militia arrived. Two years later

laborers on the same project tore up the tracks when a contractor absconded with their wages. In 1835 they did so again, provoked by the same cause. In April 1834, workers on the Boston and Providence Railroad “rioted” for higher wages. In the fall of the same year, Irish laborers were said to have murdered several contractors on the Washington Railroad.¹⁰ In the building of the Troy and Schenectady Railroad, laborers from different Irish provinces battled over jobs. One 1841 outbreak spread down the line for ten miles, and it took a sheriff’s posse to subdue the workers, who were armed with scythes, clubs, and muskets. The following year, one thousand Irish workers rioted on the Welland Canal (connecting Lake Erie to Lake Ontario), where contractors had lured them with false promises of employment. On discovering that no work was to be had, they assembled with banners and proceeded to help themselves to goods from several stores and flour from a local mill, even boarding a ship and seizing the pork it was carrying. It took three British military companies to suppress them.¹¹

One of the means the laborers employed was to send a warning notice to the offending contractor; if the notice was ignored, they followed it up by destroying equipment.¹² Although investigators sometimes saw the hand of a centrally organized conspiracy, the outbreaks were in fact responses of groups of workers to their conditions, drawing upon a tradition of secret organization, using whatever means were at hand, and passing along their experience as they followed the work on the canals and railroad projects—in short, strikes, waged without bureaucrats, treasuries, or the other tokens of formal organization available to workers more favorably situated.¹³ More than anything else, they resembled the strikes or rebellions of plantation slaves (which might have been occurring simultaneously nearby).¹⁴

As often as not, these early labor rebellions were organized along county or regional lines.¹⁵ The participants showed little awareness that being white, or immigrant, or Catholic, or even Irish, formed a basis for solidarity. When Irish workers encountered Afro-Americans, they fought with them, it is true, but they also fought with immigrants of other nationalities, with each other, and with whomever else they were thrown up against in the marketplace. For example, in 1825 Irish cartmen in New York attacked their Connecticut counterparts for carrying larger loads

than the New Yorkers. A similar incident occurred the following year at a construction project at Dandy Point, in New York.¹⁶ In New York City, where the Irish dominated cartage, the cartmen on the east side of Manhattan were rivals of the westsiders, and the dockers vied with the coal cartmen. When a new immigrant first entered a factory, he remained suspect until he revealed from what part of Ireland he had come. Clashes between Irish and Germans were frequent. In 1846, some five hundred Irish laborers at the Atlantic Dock in Brooklyn went on strike for a wage increase and a reduction of the working day from thirteen hours to ten. The contractors brought in freshly landed Germans to break the strike, ordering the Irish to leave the premises. The strikers responded militantly, occupying the shanties where they had been living and driving the Germans off, until the sheriff sent in the militia.¹⁷

To the extent color consciousness existed among newly arrived immigrants from Ireland, it was one among several ways they had of identifying themselves. To become white they had to learn to subordinate county, religious, or national animosities, not to mention any natural sympathies they may have felt for their fellow creatures, to a new solidarity based on color—a bond which, it must be remembered, was contradicted by their experience in Ireland.

America was well set up to teach new arrivals the overriding value of the white skin. Throughout the eighteenth century, the range of dependent labor relations had blurred the distinction between freedom and slavery. The Revolution led to the decline of apprenticeship, indenture, and imprisonment for debt. These changes, together with the growth of slavery as the basis of Southern society, reinforced the tendency to equate freedom with whiteness and slavery with blackness. At the same time, the spread of wage labor made white laborers anxious about losing the precarious independence they had gained from the Revolution. In response, they sought refuge in whiteness. Republican ideology became more explicitly racial than it had been during the Revolutionary era. The result was a new definition of citizenship, what Alexander Saxton has labeled the “White Republic.” Blackness was the badge of the slave, and in a perfect inversion of cause and effect, the status of the Afro-Americans was seen as a function of their color rather than of their servile

condition.¹⁸ The Connecticut Colonization Society summarized the situation in 1828:

In every part of the United States, there is a broad and impassible line of demarcation between every man who has one drop of African blood in his veins, and every other class in the community. The habits, the feelings, all the prejudices of society—prejudices which neither refinement, nor argument, nor education, nor religion itself can subdue—mark the people of colour, whether bond or free, as the subjects of a degradation inevitable and incurable. The African in this country belongs by birth to the lowest station in society; and from that station he can never rise, be his talents, his enterprise, his virtues what they may.¹⁹

The slaveholders had a special interest in maintaining the degradation of the free Negro. If the fugitive slave was the “Safety Valve of Slavery,”²⁰ the subduing of the free black population of the North was what kept the safety valve from turning into a massive tear which would allow all the power to escape from the chamber. The slaveholders were aware that the harsh conditions faced by free Negroes in the North helped keep their laborers down on the farm; hence they did their best to publicize the cold reception that awaited any slave so foolish as to run away from the security of the plantation. They did more than observe events in the North: because they had a strong interest in maintaining the free Negro there in a condition as much like slavery as possible, they sought an alliance with Northern white labor based on the defense of color caste.²¹

“It is a curious fact,” wrote John Finch, an English Owenite who traveled the United States in 1843, “that the democratic party, and particularly the poorer class of Irish immigrants in America, are greater enemies to the negro population, and greater advocates for the continuance of negro slavery, than any portion of the population in the free States.”²² Finch attributed this attitude to labor competition, noting that

ten or twelve years ago, the most menial employments, such as scavengers, porters, dock-labourers, waiters at hotels, ostlers, bootcleaners, barbers, etc., were all, or nearly all, black men, and

nearly all the maid servants, cooks, scullions, washerwomen, etc., were black women, and they used to obtain very good wages for these employments; but so great has been the influx of unskilled labourers, emigrants from Ireland, England, and other countries, within the last few years, into New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and other large towns in the eastern States, who press into these menial employments (because they can find no other), offering to labour for any wages they can obtain; that it has reduced the wages of the blacks, and deprived great numbers of them of employment, hence there is a deadly hatred engendered between them, and quarrels and fights among them are daily occurring.

Some modern scholars have joined Finch in pointing to labor competition as the cause of intergroup animosities within the working class, and in particular animosity between Irish- and Afro-Americans, who together made up the bulk of America's unskilled proletariat.²³ However, there is nothing distinctively racial in what Finch recounted of the relations among black and immigrant workers. He might have been describing conflicts between Irish and Germans, or among Irish from different counties, with no assumption of racial favoritism.

While labor competition explains some things, unless its operation is specified, identifying it as the source of intergroup tensions raises more questions than it answers. In the ideal situation, workers contracting for the sale of their labor power compete as individuals, not as groups. And this is even true to some extent in the real world: no employer ever hired "the Irish" or "the Afro-Americans"; individual persons compete to fill specific openings. Under the capitalist system, all workers compete for jobs. The competition gives rise to animosity among them; but normally it also gives rise to its opposite, unity. It is not free competition that leads to enduring animosity, but its absence. Race becomes a social fact at the moment "racial" identification begins to impose barriers to free competition among atomized and otherwise interchangeable individuals. To the extent it does so, the greatest individual competition takes place not between groups but within each group. In the period under consideration the most intense and desperate labor competition was not between Irish and free Negroes, but within each of the two groups, and no one has

ever suggested that it presented an insurmountable obstacle to the cohesion of either. If the experience of Cork and Longford men killing each other on the canal projects taught them that it was to their mutual advantage to come together, and if the rivalry among Irish and Germans eventually gave way to cooperative relations, why did the competition among Irish- and Afro-American laborers fail to lead to a mutual appreciation of the need for unity? The answer is that the competition among these two groups did not take place under normal circumstances, but was distorted by the color line, what O'Connell called something in the "atmosphere" of America.

Finch himself recognized that what was going on was more than simple labor competition. "The working people reason thus," he continued.

Competition among free white working men here is even now reducing our wages daily; but if the blacks were to be emancipated, probably hundreds of thousands of them would migrate into these northern States, and the competition for employment would consequently be so much increased, that wages would speedily be as low, or lower here, than they are in England; better, therefore, for us, that they remain slaves as they are. Hence we see why the American abolitionists of slavery are more unpopular among these parties in America, than Socialists are among the priests and upperclasses in England—hence we see why the repeal associations in Cincinnati wrote to O'Connell in defence of slavery, and why many repeal associations in the United States, particularly in the south, broke up and refused to give any more assistance to the repealers in Ireland, after receiving his denunciations of that accursed system.

Finch here located the source of the tensions between Irish immigrants and Afro-Americans in the slavery question. That is getting close, but it is necessary to be even more specific. Slavery has existed for thousands of years without prejudice of color, language, or tribe. Even the singling out of one group to be enslaved does not require that nonslave members of the designated group be branded as inferior. What distinguished nineteenth-century America was not the existence of slavery, but the way it

was enforced: In parts of the West Indies, by contrast, people who in the United States would have been identified as “black” were enlisted in the policing of the slaves. In those places color prejudice did not take the same form as in the United States, nor did free people of color commonly show solidarity toward the slaves.²⁴ Slavery in the United States was part of a bipolar system of color caste, in which even the lowliest of “whites” enjoyed a status superior in crucial respects to that of the most exalted of “blacks.”²⁵ As members of the privileged group, white workers organized to defend their caste status, even while striving to improve their condition as workers. They prohibited free Afro-Americans from competing with them for jobs, in effect curtailing their right to choose among masters (a right which contemporary labor activists declared the only essential distinction between the free worker and the slave).

During the eighteenth century, Africans and Afro-Americans in Pennsylvania had produced a substantial group of slave artisans, including bakers, blacksmiths, bricklayers, carpenters, coopers, distillers, refiners, sailmakers, shoemakers, tailors, and tanners.²⁶ “When white Philadelphians were furiously debating the Stamp Act in 1765, their city contained about 100 free blacks and 1,400 slaves.” The Revolutionary crisis contributed to the ending of slavery; by 1783 the number of slaves had fallen to 400, while the free black population had grown to more than 1,000.²⁷ For many former slaves, emancipation was followed by a period of servitude and apprenticeship, during which they continued to labor at the occupations they had pursued under slavery.²⁸

One scholar has characterized the period from 1790 to 1830 as one of “considerable advancement” for black people ended by “growing hostilities from whites in general and increased competition from immigrants in particular.”²⁹ Others believe that the decline began earlier, pointing to the increasing appearance of pauperism among them and manifestations of street violence against them.³⁰ Whatever the truth of the matter, it is universally agreed that there was “a remarkable deterioration in the socioeconomic conditions of blacks from 1830 to the Civil War.”³¹

One of the marks of the deterioration was the gradual elimination of the black artisan. A survey by the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in 1838 noted that thirty percent of the 506 male black mechanics and tradesmen in Philadelphia in 1838 did not practice their trades because

of “prejudices.”³² An 1856 survey recorded that, while the number of those claiming trades had gone up, “less than two-thirds of those who have trades follow them...on account of the unrelenting prejudice against their color.”³³ White artisans and mechanics were able to gain control of the labor market by withholding apprenticeships and training from black youth. In 1834, students from Lane Seminary, near Cincinnati, investigated the conditions of free Negroes in that city:

A respectable master mechanic stated to us...that in 1830 the President of the Mechanical Association was publicly tried by the Society for the crime of assisting a colored young man to learn a trade. Such was the feeling among the mechanics that no colored boy could learn a trade, or colored journeyman find employment. A young man of exceptional character and an excellent workman purchased his freedom and learned the cabinet making business in Kentucky. On coming to this city, he was refused work by every man to whom he applied. At last he found a shop carried on by an Englishman, who agreed to employ him—but on entering the shop, the workmen threw down their tools and declared that he should leave or they would....The unfortunate youth was accordingly dismissed.

In this extremity, having spent his last cent, he found a slaveholder who gave him employment in an iron store as a common laborer. Here he remained two years, when the gentleman finding he was a mechanic, exerted his influence and procured work for him as a rough carpenter. This man, by dint of perseverance and industry, has now become a master workman, employing at times six or eight journeymen. But, he tells us, he has not yet received a single job of work from a native born citizen of a free state.³⁴

“If a man has children,” asserted *A Colored Philadelphian* in 1830, “it is almost impossible for him to get a trade for them, as the journeymen and apprentices generally refuse to work with them, even if the master is willing, which is seldom the case.”³⁵ An 1832 Memorial from the People of Color to the State Legislature complained of “the difficulty of getting places for our sons as apprentices, to learn mechanical trades, owing to

the prejudices with which we have to contend.”³⁶ James Forten, a wealthy Afro-American sailmaker and employer of black and white labor, complained in a series of public letters of the lack of opportunities for Negroes in the trades, as shown in the difficulty he had in obtaining apprenticeships for his sons.³⁷ Frederick Douglass observed that prejudice against the free colored people had shown itself nowhere in such large proportions as among artisans and mechanics.³⁸

The artisans and mechanics of whom Douglass complained pioneered in the building of unions, and it was natural that the unions reflected their outlook. In 1822, a carpenter and thirty-four other proletarians were hanged in Charleston, South Carolina, for planning an uprising against slavery. At the same time, journeymen millwrights and machine workers, reawakening after the depression of 1819 to 1822, were meeting at a tavern in Philadelphia, plotting to establish the ten-hour day as standard for their trades.³⁹ Just as racial slavery was the distinctive feature of American growth, the distinctive feature of American labor history is that these two conspiracies of labor, instead of coming to form part of a single movement, profoundly diverged.

The first formal organization of wage earners in different trades occurred in Philadelphia in 1827, when skilled workmen, following a strike of building-trades workers for the ten-hour day, combined their craft organizations into the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations. This gave rise the following year to the Philadelphia Working Men's Party. In 1829, mechanics in New York, following the Philadelphia example, called their first general meeting and plunged into electoral politics. The early unions and Working Men's Parties sought, among other things, to prohibit chartered monopolies, regulate apprenticeship, restrict female, child, and convict labor, abolish imprisonment for debt, and establish a system of public education. Within a short time Working Men's Parties appeared up and down the east coast, and as far west as Missouri. Most folded in 1831 and 1832, but local organizations composed of associations of workers of different trades soon reappeared. At about this time, workers made their first efforts to form national unions. The depression of 1837 to 1843 wiped out these early unions, concluding that chapter in the history of labor reform.

If the conditions of the Irish laborers on the canals led them to adopt

methods similar to those of the slave, their situation as wage earners in the cities led them into contact with the organizations of workers that have conventionally been termed the labor movement. It is difficult to specify the Irish role in these early unions, partly because records are few and newspapers did not take an interest in the movement comparable to that which they showed two decades later. It is known that the Irish formed the largest portion of the immigrants during those early years and that, while most were unskilled, there were a fair number of skilled workers among them. Although there is a sprinkling of Irish surnames among the union leaders of the pre-Famine period, the Irish took part in the movement more as rank-and-file members than as leaders, forming an integral part of the unions and sharing their policies and aims.⁴⁰ The early labor unions, therefore, should be regarded not so much as Irish institutions, in the way they later became, but as institutions for assimilating the Irish into white America. The Philadelphia general strike of 1835 provides an example of how the unions aided in the assimilation process.

It has already been noted that the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations in Philadelphia grew out of a strike for the ten-hour day. Boston carpenters struck in 1825 and again in 1832 for the same demand. In 1835 they struck again. They were defeated, but their effort inspired the Philadelphia general strike of the same year, the first general strike in an American city. One sentence in the Boston strike circular, which had been written by Seth Luther, evoked a particularly enthusiastic response in Philadelphia: "We claim by the blood of our fathers, shed on our battlefields in the war of the Revolution, the rights of American citizens, and no earthly power shall resist our righteous claim with impunity."⁴¹

The strike began with a group of laborers who in fact could not claim, by the blood of their fathers, the rights of American citizens—the Irish workers on the Schuylkill River. In May 1835, coal heavers demanding the ten-hour day shut down the wharves. One contemporary account reported that "three hundred of them, headed by a man with a sword, paraded along the canal, threatening death to those who unload or transfer the cargoes to the 75 vessels waiting in the river."⁴² The press denounced the leaders of the strike as "freshly imported *foreigners*—who despise and defy the law."⁴³

On June 3, shoemakers struck for higher wages and, shouting “We are all day laborers,” marched in a procession to the docks, declaring their intention to boycott coal until the coal heavers had won the ten-hour day.⁴⁴ The carpenters joined in, followed by the bricklayers, plasterers, masons, and hod carriers. On June 10, the *Saturday Evening Post* reported twenty trades on strike for higher wages and shorter hours.⁴⁵

On June 6, the strikers held a rally at the State House, at which not only mechanics but lawyers, physicians, merchants, and politicians spoke in favor of the ten-hour day. Strike leader John Ferral wrote, “each day added thousands to our ranks. We marched to the public works, and the workmen joined with us...”⁴⁶ The Whig-controlled City Council responded quickly, instituting the ten-hour day for city employees. In the heavily Irish suburb of Southwark, the board of commissioners not only reduced the hours of labor but granted an increase in the daily wage.⁴⁷ Among private employers, the master carpenters were the first to grant the ten-hour day; on June 6, the master bricklayers agreed to it; and before the month was out, the master shoemakers had conceded the wage demands of their employees.⁴⁸

The unrest spread to nearby towns. Mechanics at Germantown won their demands without a strike, and journeymen shoemakers at Norristown gained a wage increase.⁴⁹ The movement was not confined to craftsmen. At Norristown, three or four hundred railroad workers struck successfully for the ten-hour day. The laborers and carters employed by the Borough of Reading walked off their jobs, demanding higher pay. Boatmen in the coal mining area upriver on the Schuylkill, many of them Irish immigrants, refused to allow coal to be shipped out until their wage demands were met. When several hundred of them marched into Pottsville, the sheriff and his men attacked their procession.⁵⁰ Before the movement was over as many as 20,000 workers had taken part in walkouts.⁵¹

Ferral called it a “bloodless revolution,” at which “the blood-sucking aristocracy...stood aghast.”⁵² Commons concurs that it was a revolution, declaring that the Philadelphia general strike “marked the turning point in this country from the ‘sun to sun’ agricultural system to the ‘six to six’ industrial system.” Its influence extended up and down the east coast, so that by the close of the year, ten hours was the standard day’s work

for mechanics everywhere except for Boston.⁵³

One of the reasons for the success of the movement was its rejection of anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic sentiment. As early as 1828, the *Mechanic's Free Press*, organ of the Working Men's Party, urged its readers to "LET THE SUBJECT OF RELIGION ALONE—or the death knell of our Associations will soon be sounded."⁵⁴ In 1834, John Ferral, himself Irish born, convened a meeting of Irish Americans, where he appealed to Protestant and Catholic workers in the Manayunk textile mills to recall their experiences in Ireland, where the "aristocracy" exploited religious differences in order to "keep the honest and industrious population divided, rendering them...an easy prey to their enemies."⁵⁵

The Report on the Ten-Hour Movement at the National Trades' Union Convention of 1835 recognized the Irish immigrant as the spearhead of the general strike. "Previous to that time," the report stated, "nearly all who worked by the week, were obliged to toil from sun to sun, for a bare existence. The coal heavers on the banks of the Schuylkill first began the struggle against the tremendous power of wealth and avarice. The strike was justice against oppression; and the issue, for a time, was considered doubtful." The report went on to describe the difficulties which the immigrant had to overcome. "All our enemies joined against these powerless people, and denounced them as disorderly and riotous. Merchants met in the Exchange, and offered large sums to all who would take the places of the strikers."⁵⁶ Summing up its experiences, the Philadelphia Trades' Union declared, "The Union makes no distinction between natives and foreigners. All alike are welcome to its benefits. If he is a workingman in favor of the emancipation of all who labor from the thralldom of monied capital, he is welcome to our ranks."⁵⁷

Although craftsmen had shouted "We are all day laborers" in 1835, it was not until the following year that they admitted unskilled laborers to the Trades' Union. In the spring of 1836, the coal heavers on the Schuylkill struck again, this time for higher wages. After a strike parade, Philadelphia city officials arrested several leaders; the mayor, in fixing bail at \$2,500 each, was said to have declared his determination to "lay the axe at the root of the Trades' Union." The Trades' Union responded by admitting the coal heavers as members and underwriting the cost of the trial. Following the court's dismissal of charges against

the workingmen, the Trades' Union launched a campaign to unseat Mayor Swift.⁵⁸

In the Philadelphia strike wave of 1835 and 1836, the labor movement by and large adopted the cause of the Catholic Irish laborers as its own. Not only did Philadelphia artisans admit the coal heavers to the ranks of the union, thus becoming the first skilled workers in the nation to join in the same union with the unskilled, they explicitly recognized their vanguard role in the strike. Moreover, in carrying out their campaign (unsuccessful as it happened) to unseat the mayor, they showed their commitment to solidarity with the Irish laborers. The actions of the Philadelphia artisans by no means signaled the death of nativism among the workingmen. But they were a significant early step, foreshadowing the ultimate rejection of anti-Irish, anti-Catholic sentiment in the ranks of labor.

The welcome Philadelphia artisans gave to the newcomers did not extend to a group that had been a traditional part of the local scene, free persons of color. At one of the strike processions there appeared a delegation of wood sawyers, described by one newspaper as "some ten or a dozen who claimed affinities with whites and the rest the cullings of a lot of blacks...." "The woodcutters had a regular turn out, ebonies, mulattoes and whites," reported another paper. "They raised a dust, made a good deal of noise, marched up street and down again, and 'strait were seen no more!'"⁵⁹ The tone of the reports indicates that the participation of the black laborers was viewed by all as an anomaly. A few months before the strike it will be recalled that a number of black men at work in a coal yard on the Schuylkill had been attacked and severely beaten by the coalheavers who would soon become the heroes of organized labor.⁶⁰

Universally hostile to the free Negro, many white workers nevertheless considered slavery unjust, and some went so far as to sign abolitionist petitions and join abolitionist societies as individuals.⁶¹ However, they never viewed slavery as part of the labor question.⁶² The programs of the Working Men's Parties did not mention slavery, although they addressed such questions as convict labor, imprisonment for debt, and even public lotteries. When spokesmen for white labor did talk about

slavery, it was usually to compare rhetorically the condition of the slave favorably to that of the free wage worker. The following from the *Mechanic's Free Press* is a typical example: "What is the condition of the 'free' laborer? He works more for his employer than the slave does for his master....The slave is regularly supplied with the necessaries of life—has no anxious care for the future....The free laborer, with greater toil, cannot secure to himself and children the necessaries of life....The black slave is secured from want and a necessity to crime, in lieu of which the free laborer sometimes has a choice of employers....Although the Southern master can use only the lash, yet the other has a more powerful means of enforcing servitude...."⁶³ Seth Luther, the itinerant agitator who wrote the circular that sparked the Philadelphia general strike, was fond of drawing the parallel between the free laborer and the slave, to the disadvantage of the former.⁶⁴ To those who insisted that the lot of the free white laborer was worse than that of the slave, Frederick Douglass liked to point out that his old position on the plantation had been vacant since his departure, and encouraged them to apply.

A writer for the National Trades' Union, in a review of James Kirke Paulding's book *Slavery in the United States*, criticized the abolitionists for ignoring the plight of white labor, and denounced Daniel O'Connell, who "could not bear to have his ebony brethren whipped even enough to arouse them to a sufficient degree of exertion to digest their hominy, pigs and poultry." The writer went on to praise slavery, which benefited both the slave, who was better off than he had been as a free man in Africa, and the country, because it provided people to perform the tasks that were too low for whites.⁶⁵ Among labor attacks on abolition, the review was unusual only in that it went beyond denunciations of the abolitionists to a positive defense of slavery.

In 1836, the Working Man's Association of England, parent body of the Chartist movement, addressed an appeal to American workers, urging them to launch a national campaign to abolish chattel slavery. Philadelphian Lewis G. Gunn joined in the appeal, declaring, "As long as the pulse beats in my frame the poor Negro in chains shall have my sympathy and much of my attention....Let me entreat you also never to forget the slave....Our voice should *thunder* from Maine to Georgia, and from the Atlantic to the Mississippi—the voice of a nation of *Republicans*

and *Christians* demanding with all the authority of moral power, *demanding* the immediate liberation of the bondsmen.”⁶⁶ Although his appeal was published in the *National Laborer*, it did not lead to the desired effect. A few days later the paper replied that, while it opposed “slavery in every form, either over the body, mind, color, or degree,” it was “the duty of organized labor to begin to secure to the workingmen the right of disposing his own labor at his own price, and to make that price just and equivalent to his toil.”⁶⁷

Labor activists denounced the abolitionists not for opposing slavery but for placing the cause of the slave ahead of the cause of the free worker. Luther complained, “We have the philanthropists moaning over the fate of the Southern slave when there are *thousands* of children in this State as truly slaves as the blacks in the South.”⁶⁸ Ely Moore, president of the New York General Trades’ Union and the first representative of the working men elected to Congress, declared that support for abolitionism would strengthen “the pro-Bank, anti-Jackson aristocracy.”⁶⁹ George Evans, editor of the *Workingman’s Advocate*, told his readers that abolitionists were men “actuated by a species of theological fanaticism, [who] hoped to free the slaves more for the purpose of adding them to their religious sect, than for love of liberty and justice.”⁷⁰ A number of labor papers of the day published a verse describing the death from starvation of a factory girl. The last stanza went:

That night a Chariot passed her,
While on the ground she lay;
The daughters of her master,
An evening visit pay.
Their tender hearts are sighing,
As Negroes woes are told;
While the white slave was dying,
Who gained their fathers’ gold.⁷¹

If abolitionism, in Melville’s words, “expresse[d] the fellow-feeling of slave for slave,” participation in the organized labor movement was likely to harden the hearts of working-class whites to any abolitionist sentiments they held, by providing them with arguments for why they should turn their backs on their fellow workers in chains.⁷²

In the South the slave figured prominently in both skilled and unskilled labor, and although working-class whites sought to restrict the use of slaves, the political power of the slaveholders generally prevented them from doing so.⁷³ In some cases Irish immigrants were preferred to slaves, for reasons having nothing to do with race. Frederick Law Olmsted cited an official of an Alabama stevedoring company who explained why Irish workers were employed on the docks: "The niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies are knocked overboard, or get their backs broke, nobody loses anything."⁷⁴ When the commissioners of the (New Orleans) New Basin Canal corporation began building in 1831, they knew that the mortality rate among the laborers would be high; consequently they hired Irish. A song commemorates those who died:

Ten thousand Micks, they swung their picks,
To dig the New Canal.
But the cholera was stronger 'n they.
An twice it killed them awl.

The horrible conditions did not deter a group of Corkmen from attacking other Irish in a battle over jobs in 1834, killing four. In the early 1850s, Irish were hired to build a wagon road across a swamp in southwest Louisiana, by a landowner who stated that he would not risk his slaves in the marsh.⁷⁵ Surely no one would argue that in situations like these the employment of free Irish in place of black slaves, who represented a great initial outlay of capital and who could not be easily discharged when the job was completed, was the result of racial bias.

Even in the free North, the initial turnover from black to Irish labor does not imply racial discrimination; many of the newly arrived Irish, hungry and desperate, were willing to work for less than free persons of color, and it was no more than good capitalist sense to hire them. In domestic service the shift began fairly early: the New York Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domesticity reported that between 1826 and 1830, it had received applications for employment from 3,601 Americans, 8,346 Irish, 2,574 Negroes, 642 English, and 377 foreigners from other countries.⁷⁶ By 1849, only 156 of 4,249 black women, and none of the men, were listed as living with white families.⁷⁷ A Negro newspaper, the *Colored*

American, wrote that “these impoverished and desperate beings—transported from the transatlantic shores, are crowding themselves into every place of business and of labor, and driving the poor colored American citizen out. Along the wharves, where the colored man once done [*sic*] the whole business of shipping and unshipping—in stores where his services were once rendered, and in families where the chief places were filled by him, in all these situations there are substituted foreigners or white Americans.”⁷⁸ By 1855, Irish immigrants made up eighty-seven percent of New York City’s 23,300 unskilled laborers, while Negroes accounted for three percent.⁷⁹ In Philadelphia, “P.O.,” in an 1849 letter to a local newspaper, wrote

That there may be, and undoubtedly is, a direct competition between them (the blacks and Irish) as to labor we all know. The wharves and new buildings attest this fact, in the person of our stevedores and hod-carriers as does all places of labor; and when a few years ago we saw none but blacks, we now see nothing but Irish.⁸⁰

The 1850 U.S. Census listed a total of twenty-eight black hod carriers and twenty-seven stevedores in the city, a drop in both cases of more than half in only three years.⁸¹ One of the consequences of the closing off of occupations to black men was the rise to prominence of the Negro washerwoman, who became in many instances the principal wage earner of the family, washing and ironing while her husband brought in and carried the clothes to the homes. Nearly half of all black female adults in Philadelphia in 1849 worked as washerwomen.⁸²

One black writer, looking back in 1860, explained the changes he had witnessed:

Fifteen or twenty years ago, a Catholic priest in Philadelphia said to the Irish people in that city, “You are all poor, and chiefly laborers; the blacks are poor laborers, many of the native whites are laborers; now, if you wish to succeed, you must do everything that they do, no matter how degrading, and do it for less than they can afford to do it for.” The Irish adopted this plan; they lived on less than the Americans could live upon, and worked for less, and the

result is, that nearly all the menial employments are monopolized by the Irish, who now get as good prices as anybody. There were other avenues open to American white men, and though they have suffered much, the chief support of the Irish has come from the places from which we have been crowded.⁸³

All the information on displacement of Afro-Americans (except for the artisan trades) can be read without the slightest reference to race. The race question comes up *after* the Irish have replaced the Afro-Americans in the jobs. Now it was the black workers who were hungry and desperate, willing to work for the lowest wage. Why, then, were they not hired to undercut the wages of the Irish, as sound business principles would dictate? Why did the thrifty Yankee employers, always on the lookout for a bargain, fail to take advantage of the cheapest labor power available regardless of color? It is here that the organization of labor along race lines makes itself felt.

In 1851, the *African Repository* reported

In New York and other eastern cities, the influx of white laborers has expelled the Negro almost en masse from the exercise of the ordinary branches of labor. You no longer see him work upon buildings, and rarely is he allowed to drive a cart of public conveyance. White men will not work with him.⁸⁴

“White men will not work with him”—the magic formula of American trade unionism! Before it could do the Irish any good, however, it was necessary to establish that they were white. In 1853 Frederick Douglass noted, “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room for some newly-arrived emigrant from the Emerald Isle, whose hunger and color entitle him to special favor. These white men are becoming houseservants, cooks, stewards, waiters, and flunkies. For aught I see they adjust themselves to their stations with all proper humility. If they cannot rise to the dignity of white men, they show that they can fall to the degradation of black men.” “In assuming our avocation,” warned Douglass, the Irishman “has also assumed our degradation.”⁸⁵

Douglass’s words pointed to the difficulty the Irish faced: it was not always clear on which side of the color line they fell. How to determine

their status? In American history, “white” has not meant all scrambled together without regard to religion, language, or country of origin. At every period, however, the “white race” has included only groups that did “white man’s work.” But what was “white man’s work?” In the case of the Irish, “white man’s work” could not be defined as work they did, when it was precisely their status as “whites” that was in question.⁸⁶ Since “white” was not a physical description but one term of a social relation which could not exist without its opposite, “white man’s work” was, simply, work from which Afro-Americans were excluded. Conversely, “black man’s work” was work monopolized by Afro-Americans.⁸⁷ The distinction was entirely arbitrary: many of the occupations from which free black laborers were excluded were those which slaves had performed earlier in the free states and were still performing in those parts of the country where slavery existed.⁸⁸

To be acknowledged as white, it was not enough for the Irish to have a competitive advantage over Afro-Americans in the labor market; in order for them to avoid the taint of blackness it was necessary that no Negro be allowed to work in occupations where Irish were to be found. Still better was to erase the memory that Afro-Americans had ever done those jobs.⁸⁹ Charles H. Wesley described their reasoning: “While the foreigners were willing to take the menial places which Negroes had been filling, they were unwilling, as a rule, in the North as well as in the South, to work at the same occupations with Negroes...and through the operation of this racial attitude the Negroes were excluded very gradually from many occupations.”⁹⁰

In antebellum Philadelphia neither the artisanal nor service trades nor outdoor labor would prove decisive in establishing the place of the Irish. That was fixed only through access to the new industries which were then growing up in the city.

These new industries were principally represented by the large textile mills along the banks of the Schuylkill. “In the 1820s, Philadelphia’s textile industry, which had long resisted mechanization, made the move into the water-powered mill and the era of industrial factory production. This process, unfolding rapidly, took place along a recently completed section of the Schuylkill Navigation Canal in the township of Roxborough.

By 1828, the newly named mill town of Manayunk was being likened to Lowell and Manchester." By 1840, Manayunk's eight mills operated forty-four percent of the spindles in Philadelphia county, employing over a quarter of the whole country's textile operatives, more than 1,000 women, children, and men.⁹¹

Unlike the labor force in the New England textile mills, the bulk of Manayunk's workers were immigrants from Germany, Ireland, and England (many of the latter Irish), particularly from areas where the transition from handloom to powerloom weaving had led to distress. "The experienced and skilled positions in the Manayunk mills were generally filled by British (and sometimes German) workers, whereas the native and Irish groups were more commonly present in lower-skilled jobs."⁹² Some came directly to Manayunk after disembarking from the middle passage, while others underwent additional seasoning in other Philadelphia mills, in neighboring counties, or in the New England textile districts. The family system prevailed, with women and children comprising a majority of loom tenders, while the men were concentrated in the more skilled occupations.⁹³

The wages and hours of work in the textile mills were typical of those in newly industrializing societies, and hardly need recounting here.⁹⁴ Of special interest to this study are the labor recruitment practices. The mills relied entirely upon immigrant labor. Possible explanations for this pattern fall into several categories: 1) employer prejudice; 2) rational decisions by employers, made in response to pure market considerations; 3) choices by various groups of potential employees; and 4) extra-market pressures from workers or other sectors of the public.⁹⁵

No record has been found to indicate that Manayunk textile manufacturers were motivated in their hiring practices by color prejudice. This absence is especially significant given, for example, the remarks by numerous contemporary observers that pressure from white laborers played an important role in driving free persons of color out of artisanal and service trades and certain branches of common labor, or the abundant documentation of explicit race discrimination in the Southern textile mills a half-century later.⁹⁶ While it is difficult to prove a negative proposition, the failure to discover a single statement by anyone in a responsible position that he allowed his personal feelings toward one or

another group to govern his hiring policies, from a time when neither government commissions nor public opinion would have inhibited anyone from making such statements, suggests that color prejudice as such on the part of the employers simply did not play any important part in determining the mill work force.

The absence of color prejudice as an operative factor does not mean that no preferences existed in hiring. It must not be forgotten that not only were Afro-Americans absent from the mill labor force, but native whites as well. It is possible that immigrants brought with them skills at the handloom or at old-fashioned weaving, skills possessed by no other group, but since the majority of the operatives were children or women lacking those skills, their importance in the new mechanized operations was questionable. Moreover, since children or women with no previous experience in mechanized production formed the basis of the industry, the lack of specific skills could not have posed any serious barrier to employment.

The need for specific skills in textile making would not have been the only possible reason why the mill owners preferred immigrant labor. Their preference may have resulted from the recognition that the immigrants, coming from areas where capitalist production was firmly established, had already acquired habits of work discipline that would enable them to adjust to the mills; they had already learned to submit to the long hours, strict supervision, and uninterrupted pace characteristic of the new mode of production. This explanation, though, while it is plausible for the early period of industrialization, breaks down for the period of the Famine and after, when the majority of the immigrants were fleeing from rural areas, with no more experience in the capitalist factory than native Americans, black or white.

Choices made by potential workers would reflect the history of capitalist development from the other side. The composition of the work force may have resulted from the unwillingness of any but immigrants to work in the new mills. Could native blacks as well as whites have shared a similar reluctance to do so, notwithstanding the very different scope of the alternatives open to them? The possibility should not be discounted, although the extent to which it operated is probably unmeasurable, and must therefore be left to speculation.

Unlike the situation in artisanal or service trades, or in various spheres of common labor, where persons of color had made up a large portion of the traditional labor force before they were ousted by prejudice, it is not likely that the racial attitudes of the laborers played any significant part in shaping the employment policies of the textile mills—at least not initially. In the first place, before their arrival in America, the immigrant laborers were not able to form any definite ideas of the proper place for black and white labor; and in the second place, as impoverished newcomers they were in no position to impose their views on employers.

The textile mills of Manayunk were representative of industry generally: in 1847 less than one-half of one percent of the black male work force of Philadelphia was employed in factories.⁹⁷ While no single factor by itself accounts for the racial contours of the mill labor force of antebellum Philadelphia, it is possible to combine a couple to provide a logical story of cause and effect. I would suggest that, in the formative period, the factory owners hired immigrants from the industrial districts of Britain and Ireland because they were most suitable to their needs, both in their experience with the sort of regime that prevailed in the factories and their willingness to work for low wages.⁹⁸ Later on, after the immigrants had established their place in America, they were able to exert enough pressure on the employers to maintain the factories as “white” preserves.⁹⁹ In this second stage, organizations of laborers, including unions, played a considerable part.

Whatever the origins of the employment practices of the new industries, they had different consequences for Afro-Americans, Irish, and native whites. Black workers, already being driven out of artisanal trades by prejudice, and squeezed out of service trades and common labor by competition, could find no refuge in the manufacturing area, and hence were pushed down below the waged proletariat, into the ranks of the destitute self-employed: ragpickers, bootblacks, chimneysweeps, sawyers, fish and oyster mongers, washerwomen, and hucksters of various kinds. In contrast, native-born whites and Irish immigrants, coming, to be sure, from different social backgrounds and by no means perfectly homogenized, were being transformed into the waged labor force of industry. The distinction between those who did and those who did not have access to the most dynamic area of the economy became a

principal element defining “race” in the North.¹⁰⁰

The depression that followed the panic of 1837 brought to an end the early period of labor organization. It took the discovery of gold in California in 1849 to lift the country out of protracted hard times and allow unions and other forms of workers’ organization to revive. The new unions came into existence during a period of major recomposition of the working class: from 1840 to 1849 there were 1,400,000 immigrants; from 1850 to 1859 the total was 2,700,000. Of these, the Irish formed the largest group, 41.4 percent of the total immigration. If the unions of the 1830s, headed largely by native-born and British Protestants, functioned at that time as schools for teaching the Irish the meaning of whiteness, the unions later were to become to a considerable extent Irish institutions.¹⁰¹

New York was the capital of labor unionism. By the 1850s, the Irish were well on their way to establishing their prominence in the labor movement there: all the officers of the New York Tailors’ and Laborers’ Unions were Irish in 1854, and Irish dominated the unions of boilermakers, boot and shoe workers, bricklayers and plasterers, cordwainers, masons and bricklayers, quarrymen, and stone cutters, in addition to holding important posts or making up a large share of the membership in the unions of bakers, cartmen, cigarmakers, coachmen, coopers, longshoremens, painters, piano makers, plumbers, printers, porters, smiths, and waiters. In fact, of 229 antebellum labor leaders in New York City whose ethnicity could be unambiguously determined, 106 were Irish.¹⁰²

One scholar comments, “In examining these unions it will be seen that they are exactly the same as those of the American workers, for a history of the Irish immigrant in the labor movement reduces itself to a history of the American labor movement.”¹⁰³ To reverse the order of the phrases in her formulation would hardly be an exaggeration.

What stands out in the above list of Irish-dominated and -influenced unions is that, with the exception of the laborers, longshoremens, porters, and coachmen associations, all represented workers in the mechanic trades. This is not surprising to those familiar with the unionism of that era, which was largely a phenomenon of the mechanic trades, but it shows that, while the Irish made up the majority of laborers, they were also a strong presence in many trades with large populations of native-

born whites and English and German immigrants. “We venture to say,” wrote the editor of the (New York) *Irish American* in 1852, “that One-Half (at least) of the mechanics of New York—machinists, turners, shipwrights, carpenters, cabinet-makers, smiths of all kinds, practical engineers &c., &c., &c., are Irish.”¹⁰⁴

That the Irish were disproportionately concentrated as laborers and servants is well known. In New York in 1855, servants formed a quarter of the Irish working population, exceeding the number of laborers by one-fourth.¹⁰⁵ In Boston in 1850, forty-eight percent of the Irish working population worked as laborers, compared to eleven percent for the German and less than five percent for the U.S. born. Another fifteen percent were servants, compared to four percent for U.S. born. At the same time, there were a total of 362 occupations listed among them, higher than the number for any group except those born in New England, who were more than twice as numerous.¹⁰⁶ In Philadelphia in 1840, four out of ten Irish workers were hod carriers, laborers, draymen, and stevedores.¹⁰⁷ Ten years later, thirty percent were day laborers, and another eleven percent worked as sweated handloom weavers; at the same time, nearly a third were employed in skilled trades.¹⁰⁸

Kerby Miller has written that “Often without capital or skills, unaccustomed to work practices in their adopted country, the Famine Irish usually entered the American work force at the very bottom, competing only with free Negroes or—in the South—with slave labor for the dirty, backbreaking, poorly paid jobs that white native Americans and emigrants from elsewhere disdained to perform. Even if they aspired to higher status, most Irish males probably worked at least part of their lives in North America as canal, railroad, building construction, or dock laborers. Those who rose later to more remunerative or respectable employment remembered bitterly that as ‘Labouring men’ they were ‘thought nothing of more than *dogs*... despised and kicked about’ in the supposed land of equality.”¹⁰⁹

Miller is right overall. Yet in spite of the misery to which the Irish immigrants were subjected—misery so severe that it was estimated that their average length of life after arrival was six years¹¹⁰—no system of caste confined them to the pick and shovel in the way color discrimination kept black workers as “hewers of wood and drawers of water.”

An 1857 novel depicts a scene in an engraver's shop in Philadelphia on the first day a newly employed colored lad appears on the job.

Charlie...found some dozen or more journeymen assembled in the workroom; and noticed upon his entrance there was an exchange of significant glances, and once or twice he overheard the whisper of "nigger."

...Mr. Blatchford, noticing Charlie, said, "Ah! you have come, and in good time, too. Wheeler," he continued, turning to one of the workmen, "I want you to take this boy under your especial charge: give him a seat at your window, and overlook his work."

At this there was a general uprising of the workmen, who commenced throwing off their caps and aprons....

"We won't work with niggers!" cried one; "No nigger apprentices!" cried another; and "No niggers—no niggers!" was echoed from all parts of the room.

... "What is the occasion of all this tumult—what does it mean?" [asked Mr. Blatchford].

"Why, sir, it means just this: the men and boys discovered that you intended to take a nigger apprentice, and have made up their minds if you do they will quit in a body."

"It cannot be possible," exclaimed the employer... "Come, let me persuade you—the boy is well-behaved and educated!"

"Damn his behaviour and education!" responded a burly fellow; "let him be a barber or shoe-black—that is all niggers are good for. If he comes, we go—that's so, ain't it, boys?"

There was a general response of approval....

In the novel, the employer accedes to the demands of his employees, and discharges the Negro.¹¹¹ Another novel, written a decade later and set in New York on the eve of the Civil War, depicts a similar scene, in which seven hundred workmen threaten to walk off the job in protest against the presence of a black clerk. "You can't get an Irishman, and,

what's more, a free-born American citizen, to put himself on a level with a nigger," says one of the characters. The result is the same: the black man is dismissed. "The contest would have been not merely with seven hundred men," explains the employer, "but with every machinist in the city." The writer appended a note stating, "almost every scene in this book is copied from life."¹¹²

When Frederick Douglass, a caulker, sought to board a ship in New Bedford to work, he was told that "every white man would leave the ship in her unfinished condition if I struck a blow at my trade upon her."¹¹³ In Baltimore in 1858 and 1859, mobs of whites rioted against Negroes working as caulkers, and succeeded in having whites hired in their places; the *American* reported that "until the riot Baltimoreans were not aware that any white caulkers even existed in [the city]."¹¹⁴

In August 1862, a largely Irish mob in Brooklyn attacked the black employees, chiefly women and children, who were working in a tobacco factory. The mob, having driven the black employees to the upper stories of the building, then set fire to the first floor. The factory was allowed to reopen only when the employer promised to dismiss the Negroes and hire Irish.¹¹⁵

It would be possible to extend almost indefinitely the list of examples of organized white labor hostility to the black worker, without even citing any cases where it might be said that the black workers were acting as strikebreakers (although by that time, at the insistence of white labor, almost the only employment open to Negroes was to take the places of whites during strikes). To white labor, black people were, by definition, a race of strikebreakers. One British traveler, who spent three years working in America, reported on working-class attitudes toward the Negro:

the strongly expressed opinion of the majority was, that they are a soulless race, and I am satisfied that some of these people would shoot a black man with as little regard to moral consequences as they would a wild hog.

He went on to note that "it is in the Irish residents that [the men of colour] have, and will continue to have, their most formidable enemies."¹¹⁶

In 1853, black waiters in New York, who had just won a wage increase that lifted their wages above the standard for whites, attended, at the invitation of a white waiters' union, two mass meetings called by the white union to prepare for a strike for higher wages. Philip S. Foner, who probably has done as much research as anybody living on the relations between the black worker and organized labor in the nineteenth century, has called it the only known example of a white union before the Civil War asking a union of black workers to take part in a joint meeting. Even in that case, though, the Negroes were not invited to join the white union.¹¹⁷

To what extent did the unions speak for working-class whites? Most workers did not belong to unions, and black workers were excluded from places that did not have unions as well as from places that did. It seems reasonable, therefore, to view unions in the period under consideration more as a gauge of working-class white attitudes than a significant shaper of them.¹¹⁸

On the docks, the Irish effort to gain the rights of white men collided with the black struggle to maintain the right to work; the result was perpetual warfare. Black workers had traditionally been an important part of the waterfront work force in New York, Philadelphia, and other Northern cities, as well as Baltimore, Charleston, New Orleans, and other Southern ports. By the 1850s the New York waterfront had become an Irish preserve; few black men could find work on the docks except during strikes under police protection, and even Germans were unwelcome. In 1850, Irish laborers had struck demanding the dismissal of a black laborer who was working alongside them. During the strike of 1852, and again in 1855, 1862, and 1863, Irish longshoremen battled black workers who had been brought in to take their places. The Longshoremen's United Benevolent Society, formed in 1852, was exclusively Irish, even marching annually in the Saint Patrick's Day parade. It is significant, however, that at no time did the Society declare its commitment to an Irish monopoly of jobs, stating instead that it sought to ensure only that "work upon the docks...shall be attended to solely and absolutely by members of the 'Longshoremen's Association,' and such white laborers as they see fit to permit upon the premises." In fact, the banner of the Society was decorated with flags of France, Germany, the

Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland, Denmark, Hungary, and Italy, under the American flag and the word “unity.” At the top of the banner was the inscription: “We know no distinction but that of merit.”¹¹⁹ These Irish showed they had learned well the lesson that they would make their way in the U.S. not as Irishmen but as whites.

In Philadelphia, as in New York, “Irish gangs not only drove Blacks out of jobs, they also served as surrogate unions.”¹²⁰ There, the race riot of 1849 and the longshore strike of 1851 were simply different tactical phases of the same struggle. As one historian, apparently unaware of the irony, has remarked, “Ethnic identity was a shaping force for labor solidarity.”¹²¹

The wars along the docks led directly to the so-called draft riots of 1863 in New York. The riots were the coda to the theme with which this chapter began—and the most dramatic illustration of how the laborer McManus acquired the will and power to help the newcomer O’Rourke find employment in the new country.