

## Sources on the Rise of Organized Labor

1. On the Knights of Labor, see “In the Beginning...” A Knight’s Sacred Oath <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5047.html>

*The Knights of Labor, a nineteenth-century labor union, employed elaborate rituals and symbols in their local assembly meetings. The initiation ceremony for new members, for example, relied heavily on religious imagery and language. It also drew on the rituals of other fraternal organizations like the Masons and the Odd Fellows, that had many working-class members. The ceremony emphasized that all that was valuable and worthy in society derived from human labor. New Knights agreed to commit themselves to improve the conditions of all working people. Hundreds of thousands of workers in the 1880s were “baptized” in a Knights of Labor initiation ceremony that required the following promises.*

“In the beginning, God ordained that man should labor, not as a curse, but as a blessing; not as a punishment, but as means of development, physically, mentally, morally, and has set thereunto his seal of approval in the rich increase and reward. By labor is brought forward the kindly fruits of the earth in rich abundance for our sustenance and comfort; by labor (not exhaustive) is promoted health of the body and strength of mind, labor garners the priceless stores of wisdom and knowledge. It is the “Philosopher’s Stone,” everything it touches turns to wealth. “Labor is noble and holy.” To glorify God in its exercise, to defend it from degradation, to divest it of the evils to body, mind, and estate, which ignorance and greed have imposed; to rescue the toiler from the grasp of the selfish is a work worthy of the noblest and best of our race.

You have been selected from among your associates for that exalted purpose. Are you willing to accept the responsibility, and, trusting in the support of pledged true Knights, labor, with what ability you possess, for the triumph of these principles among men?”

**Source:** *Illustrated “Adelphon Kruptos”*: *The Secret Work of the Knights of Labor* as quoted in Peter J. Rachleff, *Black Labor in the South: Richmond, Virginia, 1865–1890*

2. Another view of the Knights of Labor is this excerpt from their leader Terrence Powderly after the Haymarket Affair:

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/96.html>

*The Haymarket Affair, as it is known today, began on May 1, 1886 when a labor protester threw a bomb at police, killing one officer, and ended with the arrest of eight anarchist leaders, three of whom were executed and none of whom was ever linked to the bombing. Some labor organizations saw the executed men as martyrs and tried to rally support but in the end, the hanging of the Haymarket anarchists not only emboldened capitalists, it undercut labor unity. Knights of Labor leader Terence V. Powderly was desperate to distance his organization from the accused anarchists and maintain the order’s respectability. In this excerpt from his 1890 autobiography Powderly explained*

*his decision three years earlier to keep mainstream labor out of the furor that surrounded the Haymarket Affair.*

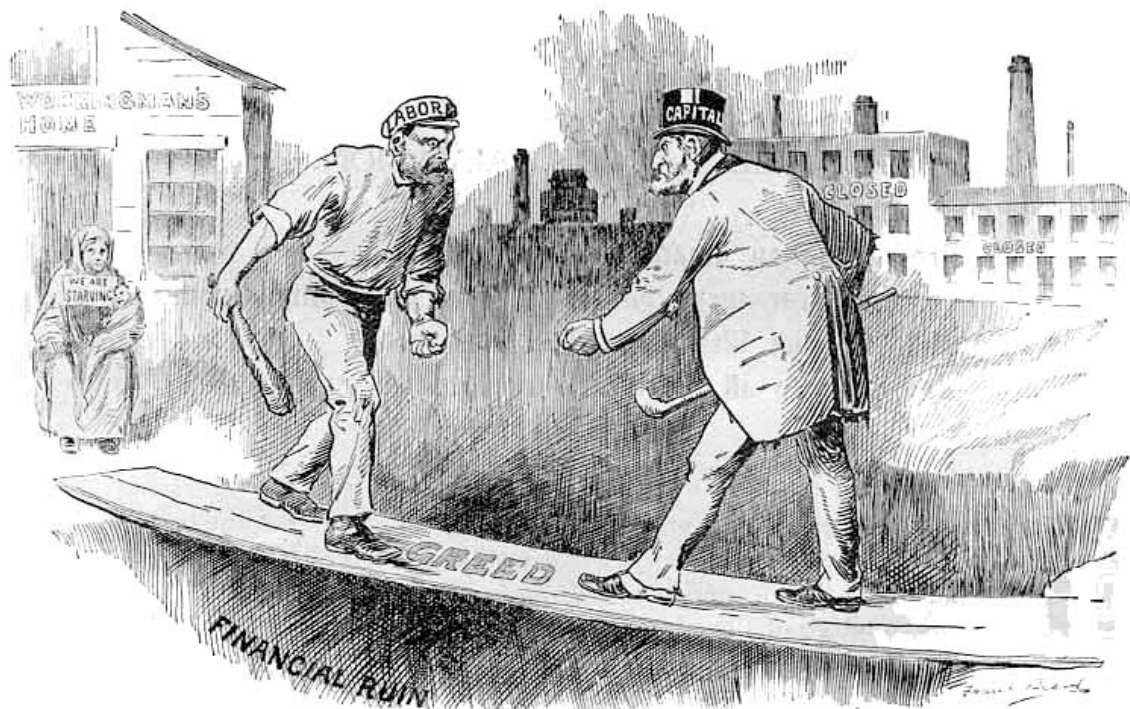
“This organization, among other things, is endeavoring to create a healthy public opinion on the subject of labor. Each member is pledged to do that very thing. How can you go back to your homes and say that you have elevated the Order in the eyes of the public by catering to an element that defies public opinion and attempts to dragoon us into doing the same thing? The eyes of the world are turned toward this convention. For evil or good will the vote you are to cast on this question affect the entire Order, and extreme caution must characterize your action. The Richmond session passed a vote in favor of clemency, but in such a way that the Order could not be identified with the society to which these men belong, and yet thousands have gone from the Order because of it. I tell you the day has come for us to stamp anarchy out of the Order, root and branch. It has no abiding place among us, and we may as well face the issue here and now as later on and at another place. Every device known to the devil and his imps has been resorted to throttle this Order in the hope that on its ruins would rise the strength of anarchy. “

3. See the Labor Question for the cartoon “A Perilous Situation” (1912) about the conflict between labor and capital.

<http://history.osu.edu/projects/1912/labor>

*The “labor question” was a major concern of Americans in 1912.*

*Each of the political parties that competed in the election of 1912 developed its own, often very different, position on the question: how to solve the problems of the worker in an industrial society?*



**A PERILOUS SITUATION.**

*Labor:* "I won't go back!"

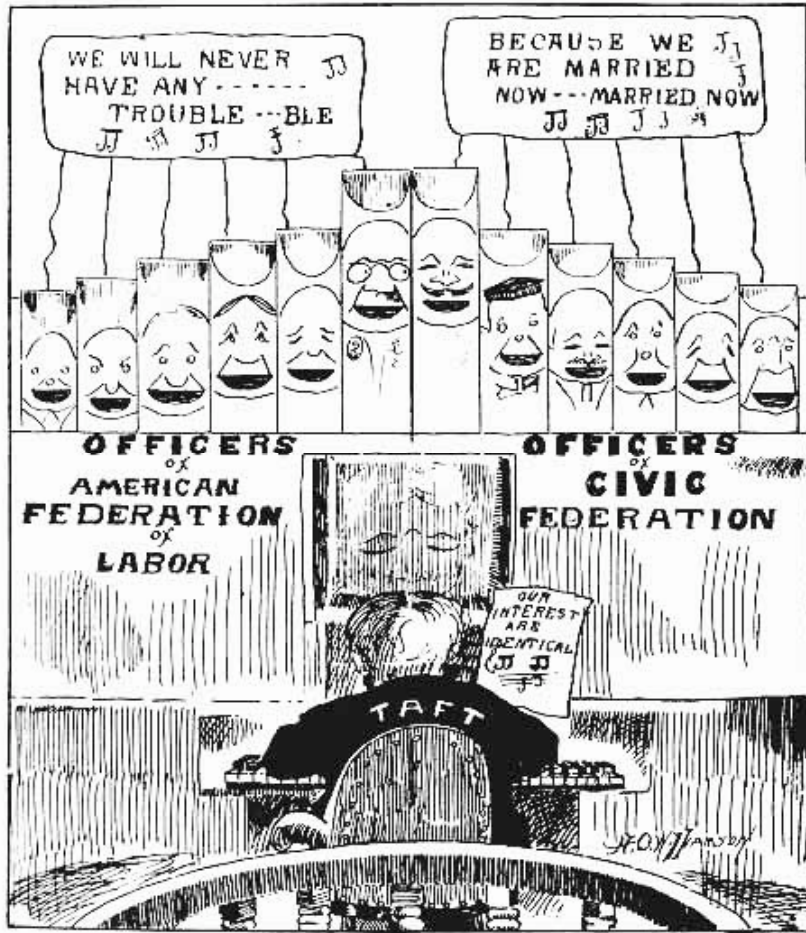
*Capital:* "I will not give way!"

Many Americans in 1912 feared that their society was coming apart in a brutal conflict between "capital" and "labor," leaving the "public" out of the picture. A voter who was forty years of age in 1912 had grown up in a nation where spectacular strikes had disturbed production and often led to violence. This cartoon drawn by Frank Beard in the 1890s captured the widely held perception that while the two sides were fighting on the plank of greed and threatening financial ruin, other persons were suffering poverty as a result.

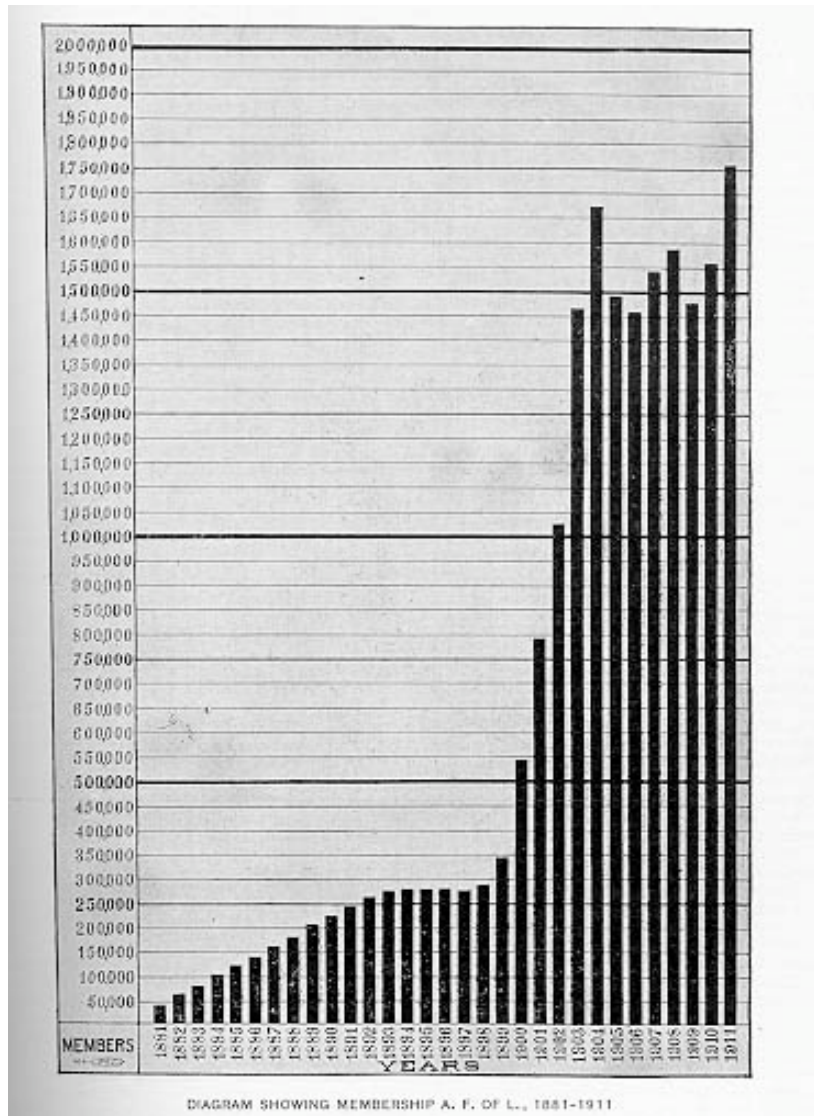
**4. The American Federation of Labor (AFL)**

See the cartoon below about the AFL.

# The Employers' Pipe Organ



*Solidarity*, November 5, 1910.



The American Federation of Labor was a “union of unions.” Founded in 1886, the A.F. of L. was the largest labor organization in the United States in 1912. Its president was Samuel Gompers (a Dutch-Jewish immigrant who was a cigar maker by trade). Gompers sought to strengthen the union movement more generally by winning “bread and butter” gains--better hours--especially the 8 hour day and the 48 hour work week--better wages, and better working conditions.

- The excerpt below provides a look at the beliefs of Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL: “Certain Fundamental Truths”: The AFL Protests Unemployment.  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5310.html>

The spreading economic depression of 1893 stirred the American Federation of Labor

(AFL), which was sometimes guilty of focusing primarily on the needs of its own members, to call for broad measures that would benefit all working people. The AFL urged the unemployed to hold mass demonstrations. The federation also organized “federal labor unions” of the jobless. New York’s organized labor movement also protested, as seen in this September 1893 appeal signed by local and national labor leaders, including Samuel Gompers. Although the resolution primarily called on the city to provide “immediate relief and public employment,” it also suggested that the state and federal governments should provide for the unemployed. This claim was part of a long-term shift in which working people and others came to see the needs of the jobless as more than a local obligation (in the manner of traditional poor relief). Only with the New Deal of the 1930s were such demands realized.

“A hundred thousand men, women, and children are nearing the verge of starvation in this rich metropolis of these free United States. Hundreds of thousands of others are within but a short distance from want and its attendant suffering, misery and crime. From all the manufacturing and commercial centres there comes the anxious demand for work, soon we fear to be followed by the despairing cry for bread.

The fields of our matchless domain have blossomed with promise of an abundant harvest and beneath our feet is stored the wealth of ages, of metals and of minerals for the needs of men. The cattle reed upon a thousand hills and our forests covering empires of states crown the earth with glory. All nature smiles with the abundance of prosperous peace. The sword of war is sheathed and pestilence has withdrawn its destroying hand. Invention has quickened production and lessened cost. Electricity and steam have conquered time and space. The North and South, the East and remotest West are one, a grand indissoluble union of independent states. The hands of labor, skilled in every craft, answer the will of an intelligent, industrious, peace-loving people. The untaught, foreign born, oppressed for ages beneath the heel of usurping power, have come to these shores, as our fathers came, to seek a higher and a happier life. The forces of nature and the right good will of millions of workers on farm and sea, in mill and mine, and in all the enterprises of this new world of free men, are united to make this country the home of plenty—the garden and forum of the world.

A few thousand men and women enjoy the opulence of eastern potentates, while abject millions grovel in the dust begging for work and bread. This is the industrial and social exhibit of our Columbian year.

Against these conditions and their inevitable results and against the underlying causes that make poverty the normal condition of the wage-laborer, we, the organized workers of the city of New York, voicing as we do believe the organized labor of the world, enter our serious and determined protest and warning....

We believe that the organization of wage-workers in trade unions is the purest guarantee of a peaceful solution of the world-wide problem: “How to abolish poverty.”