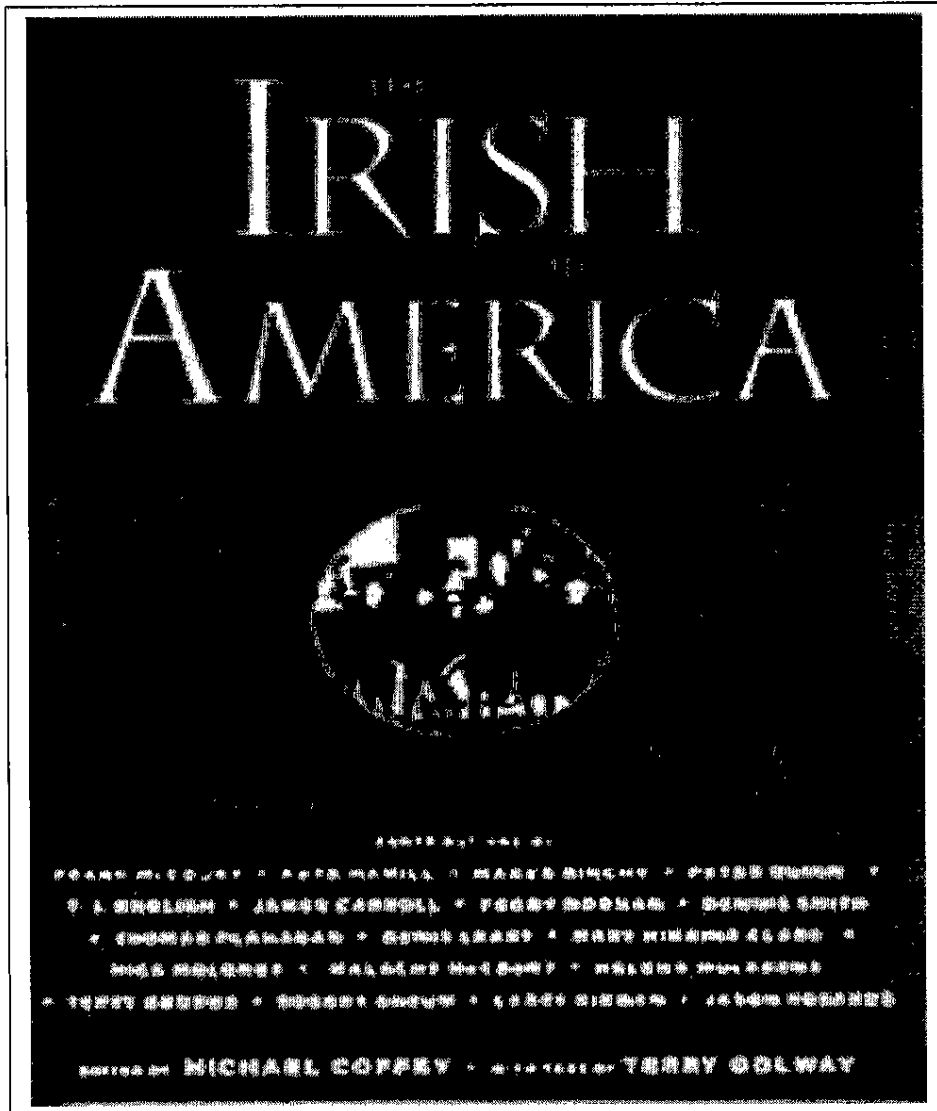


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ED O'DONNELL

UNITED FRONT: THE IRISH AND ORGANIZED LABOR

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Irish miners worked the fields of Pennsylvania, Nevada, and Montana, places that served as a proving ground for America's labor movement.

When seeking to explain the Irish contribution to the growth of America, one mid-nineteenth-century newspaper made the assertion that "America demands for her development an inexhaustible fund of physical energy, and Ireland supplies the most of it." For the most part, this referred to the fact that prior to 1860, the great majority of the Irish in America, lacking marketable skills, were forced to accept low-paying, backbreaking, often dangerous work as common laborers or domestic servants. But in the last third of the nineteenth century, Irish workers, especially the children of immigrants, began to enter every conceivable occupation. In the words of labor historian David Montgomery, Irish workers "were everywhere and into everything."

The largest industries in the second half of the nineteenth century—mining, railroads, and manufacturing—attracted vast numbers of Irish workers. Irish labor built, operated, and serviced much of the nation's emerging railroad network, including the construction (along with the Chinese) of the Transcontinental Railroad (1867). Irish miners took on the perilous work of extracting from deep mines the raw materials of the Industrial Revolution—coal (in Pennsylvania and Illinois), copper (in Montana), and silver (in Nevada). In manufacturing centers as large as Pittsburgh, New York, and Chicago, and as small as Troy, New York, and Fall

River, Massachusetts, Irish men and women tended the machines that would propel America toward industrial supremacy by century's end. In port cities from Newport to New Orleans, from Savannah to San Francisco, Irish longshoremen loaded and off-loaded the nation's imports and exports, while Irish teamsters and transport workers moved people and goods to their appointed destinations.

One crucial area of occupational growth was in the public sector. The Irish took advantage of their family and ethnic networks, familiarity with English, universal white male suffrage, and the sweeping expansion of cities and municipal governments to achieve political empowerment. They soon translated that into economic opportunity. In a word, while no more than a few dozen Irishmen held elective office at any given moment in an American city, thousands, even tens of thousands of Irish men and women derived direct economic benefit, principally in the form of jobs. As early as 1855, one-fourth of New York City's police force was Irish-born. By the 1880s, American cities had ever growing payrolls of inspectors, clerks, experts, teachers, and secretaries. Even allowing for the possibility of a modest amount of "honest graft," few of these jobs offered much money. They did, however, provide something that appealed to countless Irish workers seeking to avoid the harsh and quixotic realities of the industrial economy: security.

An equally important economic benefit of political power were the tens of thousands of construction jobs generated by the rapid growth of American cities. One of the principal forms of Irish entrepreneurship was contracting, owing to the large numbers of Irish in the building trades and the fact that it required only small amounts of capital. With Irish friends and family in office, Irish contractors received the lion's share of municipal contracts for laying out streets, building mass transit systems, erecting public buildings, and constructing sewer, water, and gas lines. Irish politicians rewarded Irish contractors, who in turn employed thousands of Irish workers of every rank and skill.

Patrick Murphy, an Irish immigrant, captured this spirit in a letter to his family in 1885:

New York is a grand handsome city. But you would hardly know you had left Ireland, there are so many Irish people here. Some of them are become rich. Some of them are big men in government. For most of us it is hard work, but there is plenty of it and the pay is all right. They are always building things here. Tom worked on the great bridge they made over the river to Brooklyn a year or two ago. Now he has got me a job working with him on the new streets they are making in this city. There is always something going on if a man wants work.

Indeed there was. The bridge he wrote of was the Brooklyn Bridge, an epic fourteen-year project presided over by Irish-born contractor William Kingsley and built with the labor of both skilled Irish workers (bricklayers, masons, and carpenters) and unskilled laborers. Of the latter, dozens died in the excavation of the foundation under the East River while earning 12.5 cents per hour. Such an example reminds us that while Irish contractors provided many Irish workers with jobs, they also were not above exploiting them.

In exchange for lucrative city contracts, contractors gave lavishly to politicians and the organizations that placed them in office. Undoubtedly the finest symbol of this system is the mansion of Boston mayor James Michael Curley, built for him gratis by the city's contractors, replete with shamrock cutouts in the window shutters.

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The Knights of Labor made a special effort to organize women in the work force. Here, women delegates (including one new mother) gather for the union's convention in 1886.

As Irish workers spread throughout the workforce, they quickly assumed an important role in organized labor. Historian Carl Wittke noted that "the same qualities that made the Irish successful organizers and leaders in politics and the Church, helped them to become successful labor leaders." Among those qualities was the ability to speak English and strong traditions of ethnic solidarity and neighborhood cohesion.

The prime example of this was the Knights of Labor, the foremost labor organization in the nineteenth century. Key to its rise to prominence in the 1880s was Terence Powderly, son of Irish immigrants and a mechanic, who became the Knights leader, or Grand Master Workman, in 1879. Under his stewardship, the Knights were transformed from an obscure, secret labor society of Philadelphia tailors in 1869 to the first national industrial union with more than seven hundred thousand members at its peak in 1886. Powderly's decision to lift the Order's vow of secrecy in 1881 and a subsequent victory by Knights railroad workers against industrial giant Jay Gould were instrumental in enlisting more members. So, too, was the organization's willingness to welcome unskilled women and black workers (anathema to skilled trade organizations) and its ideology of mutuality: "An injury to one is an injury to all" was its motto.

Irish workers by the hundreds of thousands joined the Knights for these reasons and one more: the close association between the Irish struggle for independence and the workingmen's struggle for justice in the 1880s. A substantial number of Irish labor activists were also members of the Land League, the nationalist movement led by Charles Stewart Parnell that promised both independence for Ireland and land reform to relieve its oppressed farmers. Powderly himself was an active Land Leaguer and a leader in Clan na Gael, a secret militant

nationalist organization. Another prominent labor leader who drew inspiration from the struggle for Irish independence was P. J. McGuire. Born of Irish parents in New York City, McGuire rose to become the secretary of the International Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and later a cofounder of the American Federation of Labor with Sam Gompers, as well as an ardent Land Leaguer. The leading Irish-American newspaper in the late nineteenth century was Patrick Ford's *Irish World*, which devoted so much attention to labor issues that he changed the name in 1878 to *Irish World and Industrial Liberator*. For these and countless Irish workers and labor leaders, the connection between Irish nationalism and the American labor movement was clear. "The struggle in Ireland," declared Ford, "is radically and essentially the same as the struggle in America." P. J. McGuire concurred, "It is no longer an Irish question. . . We [Americans] have known of people driven from their homes at the point of a bayonet. The railroad companies have repeatedly turned out workmen from their homes." In their minds, American robber barons were cut from the same cloth as British landlords.

One powerful vestige of this Irish-labor connection remains a key element of American protest strategy today: the boycott. Begun as a practice of social ostracization of oppressive landlords by Irish tenant farmers, it was transformed by Irish workers in industrial America into a potent form of economic shunning. Another vestige is Labor Day, the first celebration of which took place in 1882 in New York City at the suggestion of P. J. McGuire. At the head of the parade making its way up Broadway was William McCabe of the International Typographers Union. On the reviewing stand in Union Square were Terence Powderly and Patrick Ford.

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America entered the twentieth century with its industrial power ranked first in the world and its unions ever more firmly in the control of Irish leaders. By 1910 nearly half the IIO member unions of the AFL were led by Irish-born or Irish-American men. Overwhelmingly they represented a constituency that was non-Irish, reflecting both Irish upward mobility and vast immigration from eastern and southern Europe. Though buffeted by war, depression, and antiunion policies of employers, union membership rose from nearly 1 million in 1900 to more than 5 million in 1920. Irish union leaders were known for their oratory, organizing skills, and tough negotiating tactics, but also for pursuing the moderate ideological course laid down by AFL founder Sam Gompers. Known as "pure and simple" unionism, it shunned radicalism and stressed high wages, shorter hours, and job security. Such a policy often ran afoul of the interests and outlook of more radical Jewish, Italian, and Slavic workers.

And yet, some of the most outspoken radicals of the day were Irish. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, born in the Bronx to immigrant parents, joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905 and rallied workers in the massive strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and Paterson and Passaic, New Jersey. Two of her compatriots in New York were the exiled Irish socialists James Connolly and James Larkin. Another of her contemporaries was Kate Richards O'Hare, known as the "First Lady" of American socialism. Mary Harris "Mother" Jones was one of the most revered orators and organizers in the nation's coal mining districts. In 1903 she led a dramatic march of stunted and injured children from the Pennsylvania coalfields to the New York home of President Theodore Roosevelt. Also active in organizing Jewish and Italian garment workers was Leonora O'Reilly. William Z. Foster, a former IWW leader and Communist, led a successful drive to organize the Chicago meatpackers in 1918. Later that year, he and John Fitzpatrick organized thousands of steelworkers, few of whom were Irish, who in late 1919 would engage in the largest industrial strike to that time.

The Catholic Church remained staunchly antiradical and antisocialist, but the rights of Catholic workers

George Meany presided over the AFL-CIO in the years just before America's labor movement began losing members and political clout.



to organize into unions was firmly established. So, too, was the right of priests to speak more freely on social and labor issues. Father John A. Ryan emerged as a leading spokesman for economic justice with the publication in 1906 of *A Living Wage*. In this and subsequent works he summoned the authority of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* and other teachings to call for Social Security, a living minimum wage, public housing, and a more equitable tax system. In 1911 he authored Minnesota's minimum wage bill, which became law in 1913.

American labor and its Irish aspect entered a new phase with the stock market crash of 1929. Many of the gains of the last two decades, both material and institutional, were swept aside by the economic earthquake known as the Great Depression. With massive job losses, noted Pulp and Paper Workers Union president John Burke, "The only thing the unions can do during these times is hang on and . . . try to save our organization."

But the crisis of the depression turned out to be a moment of opportunity for American labor. In Washington D.C., New York senator Robert Wagner successfully pushed for landmark labor legislation granting workers the right to organize, elect their representatives, and strike, boycott, and picket, as well as prohibiting unfair practices by employers, such as blacklisting. This led to a flurry of labor union activity and the reemergence of the industrial union movement that had died with the Knights of Labor in the 1880s. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) committed itself to unionizing mass-production workers in key industries such as automobile, appliance, and rubber manufacturing. When it broke from the AFL in 1936, it was led by Irish Americans John Brophy as Director and James B. Carey as secretary-treasurer. One of the CIO's vice presidents was Mike Quill, a radical Irish immigrant and former IRA member who founded the heavily Irish Transport Workers Union in 1934.

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The combination of federal protections for organized labor in the 1930s and the economic boom brought on by World War II produced a period of unprecedented worker prosperity and union growth. The massive strikes in 1946 were as much a sign of worker discontent as they were of strong worker organization. Irish leadership in organized labor remained strong and highly visible. Maurice J. Tobin, son of an Irish carpenter in Boston, embodied this prominence when he was selected by President Truman to serve as secretary of labor.

The forties, however, witnessed the onset of the cold war and a fear of Communism that culminated in the improbable rise to national prominence of an obscure first-term Irish-American senator from Wisconsin named Joseph McCarthy. While McCarthy's targets were primarily officials in government and Hollywood, organized labor felt the sting of the Red Scare, too. Many Irish-American union leaders, either out of personal anti-Communism or public pressure, purged radicals from their ranks and supported similar purges of radical unions from the AFL and CIO. Mike Quill, for example, who had allied himself with the Communists in

the CIO, shocked the organization in 1948 when he adopted an outspoken anti-Communist position. For this Quill and others earned praise from the Catholic Church and the American middle class, but also the derision of many more radical union leaders.

While some Irish-American labor leaders became negatively associated with union conservatism, others came to symbolize growing union corruption. In 1953 the AFL suspended the International Longshoremen's Association, headed by Joseph P. Ryan, for its corruption and links to organized crime. Tony Boyle, who succeeded John Lewis as president of the United Mine Workers, was also accused of corrupt activities.

These questions aside, American labor was in its heyday in the 1950s. Wages were high, strikes were rare, and union membership reached its historic highpoint with 39 percent of the American workforce enrolled. The AFL and CIO reconciled their differences and joined forces once again.

And yet the harmony, strength, and Irish leadership of American labor would quickly begin to erode. In the coming decades union membership declined steadily, especially among groups like the Irish, who occupied many of the traditional trades most affected by American deindustrialization. By 1990, about 12 percent of the American workforce was in a union. Moreover, the one area of the economy where union organization was growing—public sector jobs such as teaching—was no longer the province of the Irish.

More telling than the fate of organized labor was the new status of Irish America. Irish Americans, by the

1970s and 1980s, were far removed from the world of their parents and even further removed from their grandparents. On the whole, they were more suburban, better educated, more cosmopolitan, more wealthy, and, dare it be said, more Republican. Whether there are more Irish-American heads of Fortune 500 companies than major unions is anybody's guess.

This is not to say that organized labor, Irish-American or otherwise, is destined for oblivion. In the early 1990s Ron Carey was elected president of the Teamsters Union on a pledge to root out corruption and restore its dwindling ranks. John Sweeney, a building services veteran from the Bronx, bested Tom Donahue, another Irish American, for the top spot at the AFL, which in 1996 posted its first gain in membership in decades.

Yet even if the Irish were to disappear completely from the American labor movement (an unlikely possibility), their contributions to America as workers will endure. ♦

Irish America no longer dominates the labor movement, but when John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, unions began to show signs of resurgence.

