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The Rise of Organized Labor in Nineteenth Century Connecticut Case Study: The South Norwalk Hatters

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by Susan E. Grey

Often the laborers worked in what were nearly intolerable conditions. From the reports of the state factory inspectors and the legislation regarding factory conditions, inferences can be made about the conditions that prevailed. The fact that these laws were not enacted and enforced until the last two decades of the century does not necessarily mean that these conditions had not existed earlier.

It wasn't until 1887 that a law was passed in Connecticut requiring factory inspections. Other laws passed called for better ventilation, lighting, sanitary conditions, provisions for bathrooms for the employees, fire escapes, and protection from dangerous machinery. ² From the reports of the factory inspector, it seems that most of the violations involved these very conditions. Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that by the mid—19th century many laborers in Connecticut worked in unsafe, unsanitary, poorly ventilated, ill-lit factories.

Early Stages of Labor Organizations

The earliest unions in Connecticut were formed for educational and social purposes. The first organization in Connecticut was the Mechanics' Society of New Haven, founded in 1807. (The term "mechanic" was applied at that time to any sort of skilled factory or shop worker.) Other mechanics' societies were founded after this. They generally sought to promote standardization of their products, provide opportunities for educational growth, aid younger members interested in pursuing the trade, and provide loans for members. They did not concern themselves with hours, wages, and working conditions. They were master craftsmen who took a great deal of pride in their work.

However, with increased industrialization, this attitude changed. "Instead of a price for his product, which the artisan received, he would have to accept a wage for his labor, thus selling himself rather than his handiwork."
⁵ So the concern of the workingman shifted to matters directly regarding his labor. In the 1830s, Jacksonian democracy swept the country, and Connecticut labor was caught up in its tide. Connecticut laborers became much more active and militant. They organized, for instance, The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics, and Other Workingmen. They agitated for a ten hour day, abolition of imprisonment for debt, improved working conditions, reform of the tax system, universal manhood suffrage, and abolition of banks and monopolies. These goals were not limited to the state but were part of a national reform movement.

It was during this same period that labor first became politically active. In 1830, the state's first labor

candidate was elected to the state legislature from New London. The entire slate of town officers of New London, elected in 1831, was also a labor ticket. Political involvement by labor was not widespread at this point, but there were indications that labor represented a growing interest which politicians had better heed.

The flurry of labor activity in the 1830s was brought to a quick halt by the panic of 1837. High unemployment rates decreased the size of the labor force and its effectiveness in achieving reforms. Companies could always hire other workers willing to work for lower wages.

Difficulties of Organizing

In the pre-Civil War period, labor faced either indifference or opposition from the public, the press, and the law. The opinion prevailed that owner-worker relationships were a private affair and should not be subject to any outside interference. Of course, a general laissez-faire attitude was prevalent toward all business and social conditions and this did not change until the 20th century. This gave the management free rein. Although the 1840s and 1850s were characterized by dozens of strikes throughout the nation, most resulted in victories for the managers, who could employ scabs, use blacklists, and seek court injunctions to counter the actions of labor. The rare victories for labor were isolated incidents, because there was no labor organization on a national or even state-wide basis.

From this point until the Civil War, there is little activity on the part of organized labor in Connecticut. Although manufacturing in Connecticut increased steadily, by 1845, the value of Connecticut's hay crop alone still exceeded the value of the cotton or woolen textile industries, Connecticut's two largest industries. ⁷ And by 1850, only 10% of the state's population worked in industries. ⁸ So organized labor was not a significant force at this point.

Conditions created by the Civil War provided an incentive for unionization. The War drained manpower resources, at the same time that it created a great demand for industrial labor. By 1880, 46.7% of the working population was employed in industries in Connecticut. ⁹ However, continued apathy and opposition on the part of the public, management, and the government forced labor to organize to protect its interests.

As the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics pointed out in 1885,

The individual workman does not meet his employer on equal terms. When the law assumes that he does, the law makes a mistake. Sometimes he is stronger; generally he is far weaker. It may be true that it is for the interest of the employer to consult with the interest of the employee; but when he does not do so, the individual employee has no remedy. It is for this reason, more than any other, that he resorts to combination. ¹⁰

From 1850-1877 about fifty local unions were organized in Connecticut. Once again, though, hard times impaired the effectiveness of labor organizations. The panic of 1873 and the following depression again caused a glut on the labor market. But when they recovered from this economic setback, unions became very well-organized and established clear goals.

The Goals and Functions of Unions

In 1902, the Connecticut Bureau of Labor Statistics asked each union for a statement of its purpose and function. An examination of these statements reveals that most of the unions sought the same things. In general they sought shorter hours, better pay, improved working conditions, disability and insurance benefits, high standards for their trade, minimum wages, job security, equitable conditions between employer and

employee, prohibition of child labor, equal pay for equal work by both sexes, closed shops, and others. ¹¹ It is interesting to note that although labor has made enormous gains in the 20th century, these goals are still those for which labor strives.

Connecticut and the National Labor Movement

Connecticut first became part of the national labor movement in 1878 when the initial local association of the Knights of Labor was established in New Britain. Terence Powderly came to Connecticut in the winter of 1878 and helped to establish more locals. In 1885, the whole state was chartered as District No. 95 of the Knights of Labor. At its peak, the

Knights included about 12,000 members. It was involved in a great number of strikes. The power and influence of the Knights is also seen by its involvement in politics. In 1885-86, thirty-seven members of the legislature were Knights, and it is during this time that much legislation favorable to labor was enacted. "But for the most part, the impossible was tried and the possible was relegated to the rear." ¹² Due to its idealism, national events, internal dissension, and its inability to settle many Connecticut strikes favorably, the Knights of Labor in Connecticut began to decline.

The American Federation of Labor bridged the gap left by the fall of the Knights of Labor. Founded by Samuel Gompers, it pursued the "bread and butter" issues of wages and hours. The Connecticut branch of the American Federation of Labor was founded in March, 1887. It rose in proportion to the decline of the Knights of Labor. The Connecticut Federation of Labor continued the policy of strikes and boycotts, and aimed at the same goals as the Knights. However, it was better organized on both the state and national levels. It also focused its time and energy on the passage of labor legislation. The most important difference between the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor was the organization of the A.F. of L. along trade lines. The A.F. of L. was an association of independent trade unions, so its membership was limited to skilled workers.

Connecticut Labor Legislation

It was difficult for organized labor to get favorable legislation, because it was the policy in Connecticut "not to interfere in the matter of free contract between employers and their adult male employees." ¹⁴ However, both the Knights of Labor and the Connecticut Federation of Labor were directly responsible for the passage of a great deal of labor legislation in the last twenty years of the 19th century. In 1887, a weekly payment law was passed. It had been the practice of the companies to pay their employees monthly. This often forced the workers to incur debts at the end of the month. Or employers would pay their employees early and charge them five percent for the early payment. The Knights of Labor worked for, and got, passage of the weekly payment law.

Regarding employer-employee relations, in 1899, the Connecticut Federation of Labor was instrumental in securing a piece of legislation that prohibited an employer from forcing an employee to sign a contract promising that he wouldn't join a union—the infamous "yellow dog contracts. This was a very important victory for organized labor.

A matter of great concern to the organized workers was the union label. This certified that a product was made by union workers under conditions that met union standards in a union shop. It encouraged the consumer to buy union-made goods, and thereby pressured the manufacturers to hire union workers and maintain union standards. Unscrupulous manufacturers counterfeited the union labels, but they couldn't be

prosecuted because the labels were not legally recognized as official trademarks. In 1893, the Connecticut Federation of Labor secured the passage of a law requiring the registration of union labels as official trademarks, thereby making their counterfeiting illegal. From 1893 to 1905, twenty-five such labels were registered in Connecticut.

Another important area of legislation which the C. F. of L. worked to reform was laws regarding boycotts and blacklisting. Here they were not very successful. In 1878 a law was passed which essentially prohibited employees from combining to boycott a business. This law seemed directly designed to limit the power and tools of the unions, but, despite much agitation, it remained on the books into the 20th century.

One interesting case which met a negative precedent for labor was the Danbury Hatters' case. Because of a reduction in wages, the workers boycotted the company. The company then sued them under the federal Sherman Anti-Trust Act, charging that they were a combination in restraint of trade. The union lost the case and was forced to pay the company three times the damages incurred by the boycott. This was a real setback for labor. The U.S. Supreme Court's interpretation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act restricted the use of boycott by the unions, thereby depriving them of one of their most effective weapons.

Two important court cases clarified the rights of labor unions in Connecticut.¹⁵ The decisions made it legal for unions to combine to raise wages or improve conditions and to strike if their demands were not met, but they made it illegal for workers to combine to injure the employer's business. This restricted the methods available to labor for achieving its demands. Blacklisting by the employers was more difficult to prove. By its very nature, it is secret, though one employee was successful in a suit against his employer for blacklisting. This was the only such case in Connecticut and the first of its kind in the United States.

Although organized labor was not as successful in getting all the labor legislation as it might have liked, it was very instrumental in the passage of the legislation that did occur. In fact, a student of the Connecticut scene wrote in 1907,

. . . since 1885, organized labor has been the chief factor in securing labor legislation, either by direct legislative campaigns or by agitation outside the legislature, or by both. *It is safe to say that without the influence exerted by organized labor, few of the labor laws would have been passed when they were, and , probably, many of them never would have been passed .*

On the whole, the laws have been of great benefit to the laboring classes and have improved their condition and the conditions under which they work very materially.¹⁶

Thus the purpose for which labor originally organized was, to a great extent, achieved, at least for skilled workers.

It is in the 20th century that a true recognition and support of organized labor begins, but that is outside the scope of this paper.

The second section of this paper deals with a case study of the South Norwalk Hatters' strike of 1884-85. This strike illustrates many of the problems of organized labor in Connecticut and in the United States in the 19th century.

Section II

Hatting was always an important industry in Norwalk. The first known hatter in Norwalk was Samuel Cluckston who established a business in 1709. Prior to the American Revolution, the hatting establishments were small, because Parliament's Hat Act of 1732 limited the number of apprentices to two. After the Revolution, however, this was no longer a consideration, and Norwalk's hatting businesses grew in size and number. By 1836, there were six hatting firms in Norwalk, and by 1845, it was the largest industry in the city, with eleven factories employing eighty-three people. ¹⁷ By 1885 the time of the strike, there were twelve hat manufacturers in Norwalk, employing over 2,000 people. ¹⁸ At this time, the working population of Norwalk was about 7,000 people, so the hatters comprised thirty-five percent of the population of South Norwalk. They comprised almost fifty-three percent of the population of South Norwalk, which is where all the hat manufacturers were located. ¹⁹ Thus they comprised a significant portion of the population and whatever affected them was bound to have significant impact on the whole town.

In 1860, Norwalk's first hatters' union, the Hat Finishers' Association, was organized. In 1861, Hat Makers Union No. 15 was organized. The Ladies Hatters Union was informally organized at the beginning of the strike in November of 1884, but was not officially established until the strike was over in April of 1885. However, the women walked off the job with the men and remained out until the strike was settled.

The South Norwalk hatters' strike began in November of 1884 and lasted into April of 1885. It involved four hat manufacturers and 1,250 hatters. The companies involved were the Crofut and Knapp Co., (the largest), Alden Solmans Co., Coffin, Hurlbutt, and Co., and the Adams Brothers Co. These four companies acted in concert during the strike. They claimed that severe competition had caused a drastic reduction in the price of hats. They felt that the only way to cut their losses was to cut wages, which they said were higher than those of hat workers elsewhere. Hatters in Norwalk received from \$2.50 to \$8.00 a day, depending upon the job they performed. ²⁰ The workers claimed that the wage reduction was unfair since there had been no corresponding reduction in the price of hats. They also stated that they were asked to agree to this wage cut for the coming six months. The hatter's unions forbid acceptance of this agreement, so the workers felt that they had no choice but to refuse. The manufacturers responded by declaring their shops independent (non-unionized). So the hatters walked out.

The manufacturers claimed that such wage reductions were necessary because wages ate up a disproportionate amount of their profits. They stated that they sought three aims by their actions. First, they acted together because they wanted to establish uniform wages in all their shops, and they wished to bring Norwalk wages down in line with those in other places. Their last aim was to bind the workers to wages fixed for a season, so that the manufacturers could stabilize their businesses. The manufacturers claimed that they had tried to negotiate with the unions in the past, but the unions had maintained an intractable position.

The employers issued a statement which said,

. . . finding, in short, that they (the hatters) were determined if we employed them at all it should be under conditions degrading to us and which rendered success impossible, we took the only steps really open to us, that of making our factories independent of all 'trade' rules and regulations. We wish our position in this matter to be clearly understood. We make no war upon any trade society or order. We refuse to employ no man because of his membership in any trade organization. We simply deny the right of any society to further control and injure our business. Our factories are open to any man or woman capable of doing our work and willing to do it at prices we

can afford to pay and under the conditions and rules we choose to make. ²¹

Therefore, the real issue in the strike became, not wages, but the recognition of the right of the workers to organize. This is why this strike provides such a good case study for this unit. This issue becomes apparent, as, immediately after the walkout, the employers agreed to pay the usual wages, if the workers would agree to give up their association with the unions. This was not acceptable to the workers, so the walkout became a strike according to the employers and a lockout according to the workers. ²²

The manufacturers attempted to keep their businesses running by importing non-union workers known as “foul” hatters from New York and New Jersey. However, committees of striking hatters would meet these fouts—known today as “scabs”;—at Grand Central Station in New York and persuade them to go back to their homes. The strikers were so successful that, by early December, only about fifty fouts actually made it to South Norwalk. There they were met by another committee of striking hatters who had been telegraphed by the committee from Grand Central. Many more fouts were persuaded to return home at this point, with the union paying their expenses.

The manufacturers, naturally, were upset by this, so they organized their own welcoming committee to meet the train in South Norwalk. On Friday, December 6, 1884, a train arrived in South Norwalk at 6:20 P.M., carrying ten foul hatters. Two representatives from Crofut and Knapp were there, as well as the mayor and five policemen, at the request of the manufacturers, to escort the fouts to the Crofut and Knapp factory on Water Street. About 400 to 500 striking hatters were also present. They followed the fouts to the factory, taunting and jeering at them. Just as the door to the factory closed, two stones were thrown. No one was injured, but the manufacturers were worried and angry, and sent the following telegram to the governor:

The manufacturers of South Norwalk would most respectfully call upon you for protection, the city is in the hands of a mob. Our lives and property being in danger. The mayor and sheriff are unable to give us the requisite assistance.

Governor Waller replied that he would send his representative to look into the matter. In the meantime, the strikers and the sheriff issued the following bulletin:

No riots, nor disorder, nor fires at South Norwalk. The city perfectly quiet and good order prevails. ²³

The hatters and manufacturers each met with the governor’s representative and assured him that there would be no further violence. The whole incident blew over, but it aroused a considerable stir and was reported in the New York and New Haven newspapers. The pro-union Norwalk *Gazette* attributed this violence to a rowdy and lowly element in the union and not to the union leaders. The union claimed that it was the work of outsiders who wished to discredit the union.

This issue of *The Gazette* (Dec. 9, 1884) also reports that the economy of the town was suffering as the workers had no money to spend. Since the workers comprised such a large proportion of the population, this seems to have been a natural by-product of the strike. Yet the retailers in town generally supported the hatters.

Another problem which the manufacturers faced, once they got the fouts to South Norwalk, was where to lodge them. The strikers called on the boardinghouse keepers and restaurant owners and threatened to withdraw their patronage from anyone who served the fouts. This must have been effective, because the manufacturers were forced to resort to boarding the fouts in the factories.

These tactics might have been effective, but they did serve to drive the employers and the workers farther apart. Alden Solmans, one of the owners, in an interview with *The Gazette*, said that the strike had become a question of “‘whether they (the manufacturers) were to be permitted to run their own shops or whether the union was to run them for them.’ For his part *he* proposed to run his.”²⁴

It was also reported that Mr. Austin Wilson, a foreman at the Adams Bros. shop, quit the strike and went back to work. That night all the windows in his house were broken by stones thrown at them. He also received an anonymous note, warning him not to go back to work. Although there was no proof, Mr. Wilson attributed the incident to the hatters. They again claimed that it was done by an outside element with the intent of arousing opposition toward the union.

Throughout the strike, *The Gazette* reported incidents of other unions in New England and New Jersey making donations to the hatters’ unions in South Norwalk. There were also reports of benefits being held by other unions to raise money for the striking hatters. This gave the impression that solid support existed for the hatters among union workers.

In January, 1885, the workers organized a co-operative hat factory and soon after established a second one. The co-operatives sold shares at \$100 each with members limited to five shares apiece. The co—operatives employed union members only.²⁵ On February 12, 1885, the pro-business *Sentinel* reported a fire which completely gutted Co-operative Hat Factory #1. However, the Co-operative had sufficient insurance to cover its losses and was able to re-locate in other quarters and resume production. By March, these co-operatives employed almost all of the striking workers and were turning out large numbers of hats. Later on, the striking hatters also organized a co-operative grocery store. So, to a great extent, through ingenuity, the workers were able to fend for themselves.

In the *Journal of United Labor*, it was reported that the Knights of Labor decided to send out circulars to 150 cities, asking consumers not to buy any hats made by the four South Norwalk hat manufacturers involved in the strike. They also asked their members to call on the hat sellers in their districts and persuade them to discontinue selling the hats of the South Norwalk manufacturers until the strike was settled.²⁶ So, affiliation with the national organization of the Knights of Labor was of benefit to the striking hatters.

This boycott became a very important tool for the unions. Many of the retailers in Boston and New York, as well as those in Norwalk, refused to sell the hats of the four manufacturers until the strike was ended. It would seem that this boycott was effective, because, by March, the five shops, (two run by Crofut and Knapp), only shipped 100 dozen hats in a week, while their usual output was about 2100 dozen a week. However, the *Sentinel* took another view, saying, “Hat trade is very dull, and, in some respects the turnout has proved beneficial rather than detrimental to the employers.”²⁷

Another act of violence occurred on Friday, January 16, 1885. A cartridge of explosive that had been placed on a windowsill in the Crofut and Knapp plant exploded at 10:55 p.m. It startled the fowls and two supervisors who were sleeping there, but no one was hurt. However, windows were shattered and machinery was damaged. The manufacturers and the public blamed the hatters. The hatters accused the manufacturers of planting the charge to make the hatters look bad. *The Gazette* agreed with the hatters. A reward totalling \$1400 was offered by the manufacturers, the hatters and the city, but no evidence was ever found.²⁸

Throughout February and March both sides continued to stand firm in their positions. The manufacturers continued to try to import fowls and the strikers continued to dissuade them. The union continued to receive

money and support from other unions. Other unions, *The Gazette* editorialized “consider this not simply a local strike for wages, but a battle between labor and capital, the result of which will affect the workingman everywhere.”²⁹ A few weeks later, the editors continued:

When the bosses formed their combination with the intention of breaking up the Union, they gave the challenge to every branch of organized labor in the country; and the result is that the whole system of organized labor is up in arms, and battling to maintain the very object of its existence.

Another interesting incident which reflects the support of the strike by other workers occurred in February. A woman who had been on strike got a job in the Davenport and Andrews Company which was not on strike. However, when she entered the factory, the other women put down their work and refused to resume as long as she was in the room. The company gave her a leave of absence. In this way, the workers reminded their employers that they would not tolerate any breach of the union shop agreement.

In March, the first glimpse of a possible settlement appeared. The owners requested a consultation with the strikers. Together they set up an arbitration committee, comprised of leaders from other unions not involved in the strike. This committee was unsuccessful.

Then a local committee of arbitration was appointed by the striking unions, and it met with the manufacturers. On April 14, 1885, *The Gazette* headline read, “The Strike Ended. The Bosses Recognize the Union and Turn Their Shops Fair.” The strike was over. The manufacturers agreed to recognize the unions, to pay the original wages, and to only employ union members in their shops. They also agreed to discharge all the fouts. The unions said that the deserters would have to rejoin the union in order to remain employed. The deserters would have to pay a penalty fee of \$200 to \$250 for men and \$10 for women before they could renew their union membership.

“The contest has been long and bitter, and all honor is due the hatters—ladies and gentlemen—who have won an honorable victory in a good cause, by their perseverance and pluck,” cheered *The Gazette*.³⁰ The recognition of the union and the institution of the union shop represented clear victories for the hatters; unions and of the cause of organized labor everywhere. The Norwalk struggle exemplifies the struggle and goals of organized labor in the 19th century not only in Connecticut but in the United States as well.

It is not absolutely clear why the manufacturers settled at this point, but spring trade was always their busiest time of the year, and thus a settlement was to their advantage. With the settlement of the strike, the hat companies resumed production and maintained a good business for the next several years. The industry began to decline after World War I and some of the companies consolidated or went out of business. In 1932, Crofut and Knapp was bought out by the Hat Corporation of America. This company remained in Norwalk until business declines and labor problems forced them to remove their business to Tennessee in the 1960s. Today, that building is occupied by the Factory Outlets, but pictures of the Hat Corporation can be seen there.

Conclusion

The history of organized labor in 19th century Connecticut is a story of a long struggle, characterized by conflict and turmoil. It is reflective of events throughout the United States during this period. And the events of the South Norwalk hatters' strike clearly illustrate the problems of organized labor everywhere.

Today organized labor is recognized as an extremely powerful voice in America. Organized labor represents the interests of a much larger though declining segment of the population today. The labor vote is wooed by all political parties.

The reforms enjoyed by workers today would not exist without the work of organized labor in the past. And yet the workers of today strive for the same goals as their counterparts did a century ago: shorter hours, better wages, and improved working conditions. The goals of organized labor will always be to improve the conditions of work and the quality of life for the working man.

I hope that through this study, students will have a greater understanding of the work of organized labor and will view their cause from an educated and sympathetic perspective.

Lesson 1 Students' Experiences What is a union?

I like to begin this unit in a way that will involve the students and demonstrate to them the relevance of the topic. I usually have at least one student who belongs to a union and this can spark a lively class discussion. I briefly introduce the unit and then engage the students in some of the following conversations and activities:

1. How many of you work? I compile a list of the places they work and the jobs that they do on the blackboard.
2. Do any of you belong to unions? If they do, I ask them why they do. Did they have to join in order to be employed? Do they pay dues? What does the union do? Have they ever been to a union meeting?
3. I then have students who belong to unions compare salaries, benefits, job security, etc., with students who work but don't belong to unions or work in union shops.
4. Then I try to have them draw conclusions about the functions of unions.

I then try to lead into a more general discussion of unions. I might ask:

1. What do the following things have in common a baseball strike, 20c postage on a letter, no new television shows until November instead of September, no job until you are 16, etc.? When they draw the conclusion that these things are all the result of the work of organized labor, I ask

them for examples of other ways in which organized labor has an impact on our lives.

2. I then lead them into a discussion of what unions are and what they do, issues with which they deal; and I try to get them to come up with things other than wages, i.e., hours, working conditions, benefits, etc.

3. I ask them why unions are needed to do these things. What are the purposes of organizing?

4. I ask them how long unions have existed. Why do they think that unions were formed in the first place?

As a follow-up activity, I might ask the students to go home and ask their parents whether they belong to unions, and if so, which ones, and why? Is there one in the place where they work? What do they think of their unions, and of unions in general?

Lesson 2—Vocabulary

(figure available in print form)

Lesson 3—Vocabulary

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Lesson 4—Vocabulary

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Lesson 5—Vocabulary

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Lesson 8—Vocabulary

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Lesson 9—Vocabulary

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Lesson 10—Vocabulary

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Lesson 11—Vocabulary

(figure available in print form)

Notes

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