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Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality

Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age

Edward T. O'Donnell



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"Labor Built This Republic, Labor Shall Rule It"

Our father, who is supposed to be in Heaven, dispenser of charity, justice and eternal love, thy name be hallowed. Thy kingdom come alike unto every one, rich or poor. Cause thy will to be respected in Heaven and our rights on earth. We demand to-day our daily bread for which we labor. Forgive us our trespasses if possible, as we shall try to forgive those who starve and oppress us. Withhold from us the temptation to become masters of our fellow men, and deliver us from the evil of ignorance, superstition and the bondage of eternal slavery. Then ours should be the land and the fruits as well as the labor forever and ever, Amen.

—A. Porter, "The Workingmen's Prayer" (published in *Truth*, 1882)

"A SWORD IN DEFENSE OF LABOR"

In the fall of 1882, with the Irish Land League no more, Henry George set sail for New York City. His year in Ireland had been a spectacular success in terms of promoting his book and enhancing reputation in both Great Britain and America. If he did not realize it then, he would soon discover that his most enthusiastic following in the United States was among poor, urban workers. As soon as word spread that he was returning to the city, the CLU resolved to tender him a grand public reception upon his arrival.¹

Patrick Ford, Robert Blissert, P. J. McGuire, Matthew Maguire and many other leading progressive Irish nationalists and labor leaders were in attendance at the fête, which took place at Cooper Union on October 20, 1882.² Throughout every speech delivered that evening, there ran a single, unifying theme: unless workers, inspired by the philosophy of

Henry George and the example of Irish Land League, came to understand the prime source of their oppression (land monopoly) and its remedy (radical land reform), industrial society worldwide would continue to hurtle toward disaster. "No man has unsheathed a sword in defense of Labor so grand and so beautiful as that which Henry George unsheathed in that book of his," said Blissert. That work, declared McGuire, had established a "new political economy" that elevated man's labor above the status "of a mere commodity" and would lead to the "establishment of . . . an industrial government . . . [where] finance and all the tools of labor will belong to the people and not to a few." In other words, proclaimed another speaker, "this great, simple, rightful doctrine of the nationalization of land will prove the emancipation of Labor in America."³

The next evening George attended a very different kind of reception, this time at New York's posh Delmonico's restaurant. Organized by Louis F. Post, editor of *Truth* and one of George's devotees, it drew together several men from the ranks of New York City's emerging mugwump reformers, including Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, Charles Francis Adams, and Congressman Perry Belmont.⁴ The contrast between the two events could not have been more striking. George recognized few of the guests assembled to "honor" him, and many of them had never heard of him. The elegant setting and the cultured speeches made clear that far from being an expression of widespread popular sentiment like the CLU event the night before, this evening represented Post's attempt to cultivate interest in George among the city's eminent, reform-minded swallowtail set.

The holding of two separate receptions reflected a conscious decision of the CLU leadership. They had declined Post's suggestion for a single reception and instead planned their own distinctly labor-centered event where they could lay claim to George and his message, just as they had done with Davitt the previous summer. Blissert and his fellow Land League and labor activists considered George *their* spokesman and inspiration, not an ally of "bread and water" Beecher. Recent experience with the Land League and Davitt had taught them to be wary of letting politicians, professionals, and establishment reformers into a movement.

On a broader level, this effort to create a distinctly working-class event and to claim the increasingly well-known Henry George as a working-class

hero pointed to an emerging belief among many laborers that the nation had entered a dangerous and potentially fatal period in its history. They rejected, however, the conclusion of middle- and upper-class Americans that the nation's ills stemmed from the misguided embrace of radical, un-American ideologies like socialism by the "dangerous classes." Instead, workers offered a different diagnosis and prescription, one shaped by a rising working-class republicanism, that identified a republican crisis caused by a headlong and unrestrained industrialization that enriched and empowered a small elite while impoverishing the masses. This working-class republicanism drew on earlier labor protest traditions that invoked republican ideals, but it went further by stressing inclusiveness across traditional worker divides of skill, ethnicity, race, and gender, in addition to the democratization of industry. Working-class republicanism in the Gilded Age also asserted that republican citizenship must guarantee not only political rights but economic rights as well, and it called upon the state to guarantee them. This language of protest offered a vision of an alternative, cooperative society.⁵

Popularizing this working-class republicanism became a primary goal of the CLU from its earliest days. A significant moment in this effort came in August 1883 when a U.S. Senate committee arrived in New York City to hold public hearings in their tour of the nation investigating the state of relations between labor and capital.⁶ Investigations such as this (there were two others launched in 1878 and 1894), notes Mary O. Furner, "subjected the new industrial capitalism to a political and ideological fitness test" regarding its compatibility with republican values and institutions.⁷ Keenly aware of this opportunity, the CLU seized the moment and, reflecting its concern that only *authentic* workers provide testimony rather than so-called "workingmen" sent by bosses or local politicians, requested and received permission to present a slate of its own witnesses.⁸

The CLU-organized testimony, as well as the independent corroborations of other individual CLU members, provided a unique opportunity to set before members of the Senate and the wider public (the testimony received substantial press attention) the key elements of working-class republicanism. At its core lay the conviction that a principle central to all earlier forms of republicanism—that economic opportunity and upward mobility were open to all honest, hardworking men of solid character and

good habits—had been nullified by laissez-faire industrialization and capitalist-friendly government policy. Finding themselves no longer able to rise, asserted CLU witnesses, American workers were trapped as members of an underclass of poorly paid wage earners, without the freedom and independence of true republican citizens.⁹ In his testimony, for example, brass-worker Joseph Finnerty pointed out that men in his trade earned about \$15 per week, whereas they would have averaged between \$18 and \$21 per week just fourteen years ago.¹⁰ Teamster Thomas McGuire and others likewise noted that many workers found it impossible to find regular, full-time employment.¹¹ Another source of concern centered on the increased mechanization of production, which subdivided tasks and undermined skills, leading to, in machinist John Morrison's words, a "very demoralizing effect" on workers and the belief that they had now become "part of the machinery."¹² Workers also found themselves increasingly isolated from their employers, the latter having been replaced by managers who showed little concern for their well-being.¹³ Life in overcrowded and unhealthy tenement districts had become the norm for wage earners; as a result, temperance and frugality became meaningless aspirations.¹⁴ Workers also feared being fired and blacklisted for union activity, which undermined their ability to defend their rights, a problem neatly summarized by tailor Robert Blissert: "The members of any trade without a union are slaves."¹⁵

This working-class republicanism articulated by the CLU witnesses also focused on a particularly distressing aspect of labor's plight—its seemingly *permanent* condition, a fact that called into question America's free labor tradition that had previously always characterized wage work as a temporary stage in an upward journey to eventual self-employment and independence.¹⁶ They spoke of thwarted opportunity and "the crystallization of society more and more into distinct classes, classes just as distinct as any that exist to-day in Europe, and a man born in one of them can never hope to reach the other," as P. J. McGuire put it. This "crystallization," they argued, stemmed from the growing power of monopolies and corporations to crush competitors, potential entrepreneurs, and labor organizations. Finnerty claimed that a man needed just \$300 to \$400 to set up his own business as a brass worker as late as 1870. But by the early 1880s, the emergence of large companies pushed the average start-up cost to \$5,000—a sum far beyond

the means of the average brass worker. Thomas McGuire cited similar statistics, recounting his own frustration in trying to compete with large corporations as an independent expressman. Not a single worker questioned the inherent virtue of a capitalist economy. Rather, they charged that it had been corrupted by unscrupulous monopolists.¹⁷

As it decried the declining status of workers—the true citizens of the republic—Gilded Age working-class republicanism also denounced the rise of a newly empowered elite that enjoyed extraordinary wealth, status, and power. “The poor unfortunate laborer is just like the kernel of wheat between the upper and lower millstone,” observed Thomas McGuire. “In any case he is certain to be ground. He *produces* all the wealth while the men who produce nothing *have* all the wealth.”¹⁸ Morrison succinctly quipped: “Jay Gould never earned a great deal, but he owns a terrible lot.”¹⁹ This working-class republican critique employed the same anti-aristocratic terminology popular in antebellum republicanism, only in the Gilded Age it seemed less a package of useful metaphors to describe un-republican behavior and more a set of terms to identify the very real efforts of elites to establish themselves as a permanent American aristocracy. Gilded Age elites rejected the ideal of republican simplicity that had long restrained their predecessors (hence Vanderbilt’s mansion and grand opening ball in 1883, and the copycat galas that followed). Not surprisingly, a central theme of working-class republican rhetoric and political cartoon imagery excoriated the wealthy for this behavior. “The dangerous classes are not to be found in the tenement houses and filthy districts, but in mansions and villas,” asserted the CLU’s Conrad Carl in a biting rhetorical reversal of a phrase popular among elites in the Gilded Age.²⁰

Additionally, working-class republicanism of this period attacked *laissez-faire* as an extreme ideology employed by the wealthy to justify un-republican actions that violated the rights, liberties, and dignity of workers. The ubiquity of this sentiment is seen in how frequently labor speakers, writers, and editors denounced the claim that labor was “a mere commodity,” rejecting it as antithetical to traditional republicanism’s emphasis on the common good. The CLU’s Ed King, for example, attributed all labor disputes to a single cause: “It is because capital insists on regarding a

business concern, plant, stock, *and hands* as so much raw material, to be bought and sold, that conflicts do, and always must, prevail between workmen and employers.” This *laissez-faire* notion, he declared, “is rejected altogether by the working classes.”²¹

The working-class republicanism articulated by CLU witnesses also criticized the state of American politics as corrupt and undemocratic, with cadres of wealthy special interests working in concert to fleece the poor and deny them their rightful voice in the polity. “The entire political system from top to bottom is a system of bribery and corruption,” pronounced Thomas McGuire.²² Labor intended, therefore, to reclaim its political influence and rid the nation of “class legislation” to establish a government, in the words of Morrison, “of the people, for the people, and by the people”—different entirely from the present form of government.²³

That several of the CLU witnesses referenced “class legislation” points to a distinct working-class republican interpretation of class. Most workers, like their fellow middle- and upper-class citizens, believed that a true republican society was free of classes and, consequently, class conflict. As a result, they expressed great concern over the profusion of class rhetoric in the 1870s and 1880s, but they differed sharply in their interpretation of the causes. Whereas the elites and bourgeoisie blamed the surge of class rhetoric on jealous losers deluded by “foreign” ideologies like socialism, proponents of working-class republicanism attributed its rise to the un-republican behavior of rich people, monopolists, and other elites. This interpretation explains why populist agitation in this period by workers and farmers often avoided employing class terminology when describing themselves, preferring instead to lump all producers—a category defined very broadly—into “the people” or “the masses.” Edward King clarified this idea: “Working people do not represent a class interest at all. They claim to be *the people*.”²⁴ Workers placed monopolists, lawyers, bankers, and other nonproducers outside this circle of republican virtue, deeming them the true sources of class conflict. The latter had banded together as a class to act in their own self-interest, regardless of the cost to the common good. As P. J. McGuire told the senators, “One hundred men with millions of dollars at their command . . . [who] are not engaged in any productive industry . . . have the power to change the value of every pound of

merchandise, and every dwelling house and every hour's labor." Class conflict would disappear only when these elite interests ceased to conspire as a class against "the people."²⁵

In many ways, this working-class republicanism of the Gilded Age resembled earlier antebellum manifestations of artisan republicanism. Yet there were significant differences, especially in its greater emphasis on communal ideals over individualism and its vision of a more powerful state. Some of its proponents, including CLU witnesses, for example, called for the abolition of the wage system and the adoption of cooperative production.²⁶ Working-class republicanism also embraced solutions that called for a greater role of the state in protecting republican independence, opportunity, and equality. "If it has not the power," said P. J. McGuire of Congress regarding the need for laws protecting unions, "it should assume the power; and if necessary, amend the Constitution."²⁷

Moreover, CLU witnesses voiced another, starker, aspect of working-class republicanism: a foreboding sense of impending doom. Sounding very much like Henry George in *Progress and Poverty* and reflecting the popularity of apocalyptic rhetoric that suggested the very fate of the republic hung in the balance, CLU witnesses laced their testimony with bleak references to imminent social revolution. As Robert Blissert warned:

Unless some wise legislation is enacted here to protect the many from the aggressions of the few this will become the worse conditioned country that ever existed. . . . This country will see a revolution, the bloodiest revolution which the annals of history have ever recorded, because the growing intelligence and the growing discontent of the masses of people . . . will culminate either in a revolution or in the sudden overthrow of the monopolies.²⁸

"WHATEVER ENLARGES LABOR'S SENSE OF ITS POWER
HASTENS THE DAY OF ITS EMANCIPATION"

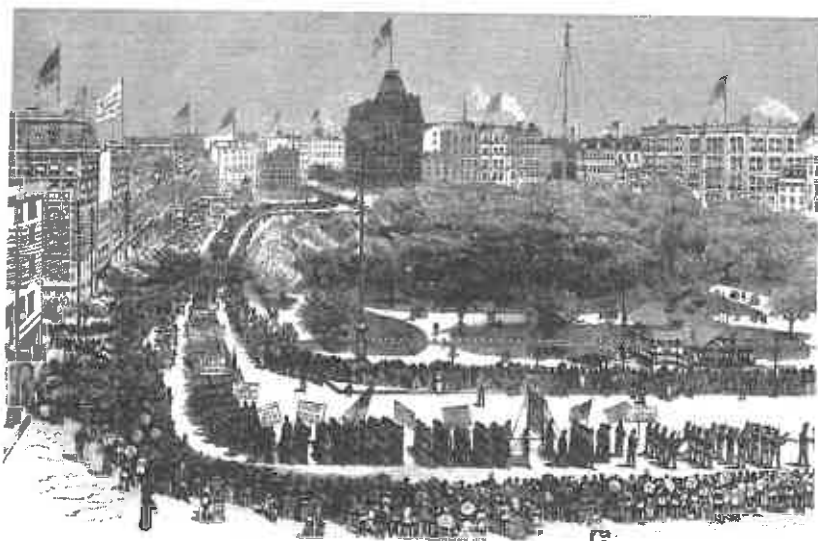
The CLU went beyond speeches and public testimony to promote working-class republicanism. Some of its most significant initiatives in this regard were symbolic, intended to build an oppositional working-class movement.

None captured so fully the effort to awaken workers to the crisis of the republic than the invention of Labor Day.

In the spring of 1882, at the regular weekly meeting of the CLU, Matthew McGuire proposed a resolution advocating that a day in early September "be set aside as a festive day [for] a parade through the streets of the city." They eventually chose Tuesday, September 5, in part because it coincided with convening of a national convention of the Knights of Labor in New York. When the day finally arrived, no one knew how many workers would turn out, given workers' fears of getting fired and blacklisted for labor union activity.²⁹ Only four hundred men and a brass band had assembled by the time the parade touched off at 10:00 a.m. But as the parade headed north up Broadway, it swelled in size; union after union fell in line from side streets, bringing the total somewhere between five and ten thousand marchers. Many workers held aloft signs with messages that pronounced the broad themes of working-class republicanism: "Labor Built this Republic, Labor Shall Rule It," "Labor Creates All Wealth," "All Men Are Created Equal," "To the Workers Should Belong all Wealth," "Our Power is at the Polls," "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," "Strike With the Ballot," "Land: The Common Property of the Whole People," "Eight Hours for Work—Eight Hours for Rest—Eight Hours for What We Will," and more. These assertions, indeed the event in its entirety, amounted to a public challenge to the popular progress mantras that suffused so much of mainstream Gilded Age discourse.³⁰

Midway through the parade, the throng passed a reviewing stand at Union Square, where Terence Powderly, Patrick Ford, John Swinton, and other labor dignitaries acknowledged each group as it passed. Henry George would not return from Ireland for another month, so he was not present for this particular celebration. After moving up Fifth Avenue, past the opulent homes of Vanderbilt, Morgan, Gould, and other recently minted tycoons, the grand procession terminated at 42nd Street and Sixth Ave. From there, participants and their families (some twenty-five thousand people) headed to Wendel's Elm Park for a day of music, games, and speeches. There were copious amounts of food and beer, of course.³¹

After such an impressive start, annual Labor Day celebrations in New York grew in size and popularity each year. They also grew more diverse as



The first Labor Day parade. "Grand Procession of Workingmen, September 5." *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, September 16, 1882. Author's collection

contingents of women, Jews, and African Americans joined the parades.³² And each year workers passed a reviewing stand at Union Square, on which sat some of labor's most prominent leaders, such as Henry George, Patrick Ford, John Swinton, and Robert Blissert.³³ By 1886, the CLU's tradition had become a national event, indicating the depth and breadth of working-class discontent across Gilded Age America. That year, nearly twenty thousand marched in Manhattan and another ten thousand in Brooklyn, while twenty-five thousand turned out in Chicago, fifteen thousand in Boston, five thousand in Buffalo, and four thousand in Washington, D.C. Politicians soon took notice. In 1887, five states, including New York, passed laws making Labor Day a state holiday. In 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed into law a measure establishing Labor Day as a holiday for all federal workers.³⁴

In the CLU's day-to-day program of heightening workers' awareness of the need to redeem the republic from grasping monopolists and other non-producers, the annual Labor Day celebrations came to represent the high-point of the year. It promoted labor solidarity by featuring a public show of

strength, speechmaking, and craft exhibitions, capped by an afternoon of recreation sponsored not by political machine operatives, as was the custom of the day, but by unions. Moreover, by holding the event on a weekday, the CLU was harkening back to the antebellum artisanal tradition of taking time off according to one's interests.³⁵ As a ritual in the blossoming oppositional working-class republican culture, the celebration also drew together workers in ways similar to, but distinct from, traditional expressions of ethnic loyalty like the Land League and St. Patrick's Day parades or civic holidays such as Fourth of July picnics. On such occasions, participants came together as *workers* who, as the *New York Herald* observed in 1882, "sat together, joked together and caroused together. . . American and English, Irish and Germans, they all hobnobbed and seemed on a friendly footing as though the common cause had established a closer sense of brotherhood."³⁶ Commenting on this effect of Labor Day, Swinton observed, "Whatever enlarges labor's sense of its power hastens the day of its emancipation."³⁷

The invention of Labor Day, along with the celebration honoring Henry George upon his return from Ireland and the carefully orchestrated testimonies before the traveling Senate committee, was not the only important initiative undertaken by the CLU in its first eighteen months of existence. Another was the formation of an independent labor party. This effort faced two formidable obstacles. First, while some workers (many of them guided by Ferdinand LaSalle) advocated for the formation of independent labor parties, others (reflecting the views of Karl Marx) argued that such parties could succeed only *after* the formation of strong trade unions to back them up. This was the so-called "balance of power" strategy: labor would maximize its influence at the polls by delivering its votes to candidates who pursued a pro-labor agenda, regardless of party affiliation. These conflicting philosophies over political action divided labor organizations, including the Knights of Labor, all across the nation.³⁸

Supporters of an independent labor party also had to contend with the power of the Democratic Party, particularly New York's Tammany Hall. As previously detailed in chapter 3, Tammany garnered the lions' share of the working-class vote by distributing patronage jobs, no-questions-asked charity, and occasional rhetorical blandishments celebrating the "sons of toil." These efforts, in the words of Samuel Gompers, had turned workers