When I first learned of John Bodnar’s work on Pennsylvania industrial workers, the Regional Economic History Research Center happened to be collaborating with the Hagley Museum in the creation of a museum exhibit on a subject very closely related to Bodnar’s. Entirely independently, we had chosen highly similar titles for our respective projects. His manuscript was called *Workers’ World: Kinship, Community, and Protest in an Industrial Society, 1900–1940*; the museum’s exhibit was entitled “The Workers’ World: The Industrial Village and the Company Town.”

Because of my involvement with the exhibit, I read the Pennsylvania interviews and Bodnar’s evaluation of them with special interest. The personal recollections of the workers were fascinating, and Professor Bodnar’s deft analysis highlighted patterns in the lives of his subjects and placed them in the context of recent scholarly work on the history of laboring men and women. I was convinced that *Workers’ World* was right for the series “Studies in Industry and Society.”

Oral history has given students of the relatively recent past the chance to do what historians of more distant days can only dream of doing—to speak directly with the participants. This is especially valuable to those who are trying to understand the lives of everyday people, who seldom leave behind the kinds of detailed written evidence that have enabled historians to portray so well the story of the prominent. Few sources can give such penetrating insights into the attitudes and values of individuals as oral history can. The life stories gathered for *Workers’ World* give us a rare and often moving look inside the culture of working-class Pennsylvanians of the early twentieth century. Like so many other powerful devices, however, this kind of interviewing must be used with great care. In this study John Bodnar clearly demonstrates his familiarity with the literature on oral history and his sensitivity and skill in employing the technique.
The people whose words appear on the pages that follow are a highly varied lot. Although they, like the economy of the state they live in, are particularly identified with coal mining and steelmaking, they represent a wide range of occupations and a mix of ethnic and racial origins. Their experiences are especially important because they illuminate a period of working-class history that we still know relatively little about, and many of them were at the heart of the story of the rise of the semiskilled worker in the American labor force. Furthermore, the evidence in Part III sheds new light on the perspectives of the rank and file in the coming of the CIO during the 1930s. Like most recent contributions to labor history, however, this book's main focus is not on public events, formal institutions, unions, or strikes. Rather, it deals with the everyday lives of workers.

Bodnar's major concern is the culture of the workers. *Workers' World* provides strong evidence that there was, in fact, a distinct working-class culture in early twentieth century Pennsylvania. That culture was oriented much more toward "traditional" institutions than toward "modern" ones, toward the ties of kin and ethnicity and religion rather than toward individualism. Even today we are a mix of things traditional and modern, but for the workers covered in this book, the mix was heavily weighted toward the traditional. The working class portrayed here was clearly peopled by persons who were at once constrained and sustained by the roles assigned by their culture. Its outlook was not that of the success-oriented, self-improving middle class, but neither was it radical. Bodnar calls it "realistic" and "pragmatic." It included the expectation that things would probably get slightly better in the future, but would not become dramatically either better or worse. Unlike so many of their historians, the industrial workers in this study seem not to have been vitally concerned with politics or with issues of "worker control" of jobs and the nature of the work itself. Instead, their main concern was with their role in what Bodnar calls "the enclave," the particular working-class social world defined by the obligations and rewards of family, occupation, ethnicity, and religion.

One of the major contributions of this study is that it rescues "the worker" from the two-dimensional world of protest, politics, and constant struggle, a world too often imagined by historians more intent on using the past to affect the present than on understanding the past. *Workers' World* reminds us that the men and women who worked in industrial Pennsylvania were, like ourselves, complex and multifaceted people. They neither struggled ceaselessly against injustice nor adopted the alleged "American Dream" of upward mobility. They usually felt powerless to affect the world outside the enclave, and it is far from clear how they would have wanted to affect it if they had been able to. It was distant people—bosses, politicians, sometimes union officials—who had power, and that power was as immutable a part of the landscape of workers' lives as were
the demands of kinship. The workers did the best they could under prevailing conditions, and it was difficult and perhaps somewhat frightening to imagine a very different world, one either vastly improved or vastly worsened. Even unions could be the enemy on occasion, when their leaders aligned themselves with the bosses or when they supplanted the bosses in dispensing favors inequitably and venally. The workers' world depicted here was one in which family and community concerns were paramount, and where it seemed difficult and impractical to consider matters in a long-term perspective. These people lived a highly constrained, pragmatic version of the American Dream, and they did so with a courage and an endurance that were deeply rooted in their complex social roles. It is to Professor Bodnar's credit that he is able to capture that complexity without giving in to the temptation merely to conclude that life is very complicated. He has been faithful to his subject while discharging the historian's task of interpreting his piece of the past in its wider context. That is why *Workers' World* is a significant contribution to our understanding of the social and human meaning of industrialization.

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