CONCLUSION: CULTURE AND PROTEST

The memories of ordinary workers recorded here have cast light on many of the hidden recesses of life in America's industrial regions before the 1930s, but perhaps the most distinct impression they have left is that the upsurge of unionization among the rank and file during the Great Depression was shaped by the values and predilections of a family-centered, circumscribed world. Labor protest among the lower ranks of the industrial proletariat was a direct response to several factors, including irregular employment, arbitrary use of power, and family deprivation. Its ultimate thrust and direction, however, were firmly molded by workers whose cultural traits and objectives emerged from the meeting of the industrial with the family-based economy.

Most explanations of this protest have acknowledged the limitations of its objectives, but they have attributed labor's conservatism to external forces acting to temper what was perceived to be a potential militancy. The legislation and rhetoric of the New Deal are now thought to be excellent examples of factors which undercut labor's inherent militancy. Historian David Montgomery argues that the New Deal was simultaneously liberating and co-optive, since it eased the burden of managerial control while subjecting powerful unions to tight legal and political controls. Other analysts of the labor upsurge blame the federal government for creating a "businesslike" relationship between labor leaders and management, a relationship which tempered the "explosive creation" of the mid-1930s. Even the recent surge of interest in the workplace as a framework for discovering the nature of working-class behavior continues the theme of workers as victims and rests on the questionable assumption that working-class militancy was rooted solely in the structure of the factory. Nelson Lichtenstein argued this point recently, observing that the workers' preoccupation with workplace objectives inhibited their realization of larger social and political goals. Montgomery echoes this explanation and con-
continues the theme of workers as victims by stating that their attempts to control the production process were destroyed by managerial offensives such as scientific management.¹

Rarely acknowledged in discussions of workers’ thoughts and actions, however, is the fact that deeply conservative tendencies pervaded the American working class well before the labor unrest of the 1930s. These tendencies emanated from a complex world that was grounded not only in the workplace but also in intricate networks of family, communal, and work associations. It was to this larger world—and culture—that the workers’ consciousness and behavior were tied.

For the era after that described by E. P. Thompson in The Making of the English Working Class, narrow and restrictive definitions of class no longer suffice. If England’s working class was defined by men as they lived their history, so, too, the workers of Pennsylvania forged a world of their own from the complex realities around them. This process of building families, associations, and ligaments to workplaces was cumulative, it spanned decades and generations, and it was achieved at a great cost. Much was endured. Parents assisted children, uncles gained jobs for nephews, and friends forged associations within common boundaries. Individuals who had endured hard times and joy, who had shared lives and experiences over a long period of time, were not about to abandon that world—its memories or its reality—all at once. Regardless of what historians may have written, the industrial worker’s immediate instinct was to preserve what was familiar. The integrity of the workers’ world came first. Only when that was secure would these men push for control of the workplace or worry about larger social objectives. In a very real and ironic sense, community emerged as a prerequisite for protest because it was simultaneously the workers’ ultimate objective. This is not to suggest that workplace issues were unimportant. It is merely to note that most of the rank and file shared a culture and a history that were far more extensive than the workplace itself, and that this culture and history have seldom been penetrated by labor historians. Indeed, workplace issues were often more preeminent for the small groups of highly skilled operatives who confronted managerial assaults on their autonomy directly.²

Below the ranks of the skilled workers and artisans who captured the attention of labor historians were the masses of rank-and-file toilers who were reared in strong, family-based enclaves. Some scholars have even suggested that kinship units became the basis for the first type of industrial management.³ To an extent this was true, because families provided access to the industrial order and socialized children in such a way that they accepted and even pursued steady, industrial jobs; families seldom criticized or challenged the industrial system. Since most of the memories recorded in this study are those of second-generation industrial workers, the
primacy of family considerations and even of family management is somewhat predictable. In other instances, however, scholars have criticized historians for limiting their definitions of working-class protest to transition periods such as the passage from preindustrial work to the industrial age. These scholars argue that the accumulation of capital continually creates grounds for worker protest; such is the case in the ongoing process of creating new job categories and condemning old ones. Such criticism is itself restrictive, however, in that it describes working-class protest as a reflex reaction to job dislocation or management's abuse of power and overlooks the wider and equally ongoing lure of family and communal stability and the full complexity of the workers' culture.

Of course, the life reviews presented here do not totally discredit alternative explanations of working-class life. Some workers, for instance, pursued middle-class notions of success and entered the business world. John Butrymowicz, a Pittsburgh Pole, left a glasshouse as a boy to work as a teller in a bank, taking banking courses in the evening in order to avoid the fate of thousands of other young Poles who hired on at the local mills. Maria Kresic recalled that her father, a Slovene immigrant, set up several business establishments and insisted that his son enter college, despite criticism from fellow Slovenes that the boy should be sent into the mills at Steelton. Italian immigrants like Ray La Marca had learned barbering or other trades in Italy and quickly established these trades in America. One Pittsburgh Pole worked in a factory only long enough to save enough money to open his own tavern. And Louis Smolinski, a steelworker, considered becoming a salesman soon after entering the Edgar Thomson mill in Braddock. As he put it, "What the hell am I to do here all my life?"

These examples of rising expectations were rare, however. Most industrial newcomers diverted their energies away from personal advancement to the realities of sustaining their families. The people we interviewed affirmed the view that working-class life in industrial Pennsylvania allowed little room for risk taking or long-term investments in personal careers. Commonplace was the family whose children left school as soon as possible in order to enter a wage-earning occupation. While children frequently made the decision to leave school themselves, it was just as likely that the push for an early entry into the job market came from parents who were eager to increase the income of their household. Joe Rudiak, a second-generation Pole, explained that in the company town in which he was raised, few adolescents finished high school and most started work after the eighth grade, including a number who left the community to work in the expanding automobile plants of Detroit. Among some Ukrainian Americans in the 1920s and 1930s, working at an early age was "expected." An electrical worker in Erie recalled that if you could leave school and find a job, you were considered fortunate.
Additional probes of personal histories have further weakened the generalization that workers were driving feverishly toward success and the acquisition of goods. The American working class may never have been as impervious to outside ideas as English workers appear to have been in the period 1870-1900, but by and large its members manifested rather limited social aspirations and continually sacrificed individual inclinations to family needs. Studies of automobile workers in America, Italians in Buffalo, and Slovaks in McKeesport have confirmed the preeminence of family objectives over personal goals. Shoemakers in Lynn, Massachusetts, actually exhibited a diminishing belief in individual opportunity with the rise of the factory system. Interviews with Amoskeag textile workers in Manchester, New Hampshire, revealed a similar emphasis on the present and the family. Mary Cunion, a Scottish weaver at Amoskeag, recounted that "we just took what came," while Mary Dancause saw employment at Amoskeag as a means to support her family. In fact, Amoskeag workers found considerable security and contentment in the flexible work routines of the mill and were often unwilling to leave it. Indeed, at the heart of this working-class view was a sense of realism, an ability to remain pragmatic in the face of the prevailing American-bourgeois ideology. Workers recognized all along that the promise of mobility masked the incredible difficulties and risks involved in any attempt to abandon their status as wage laborers. Long before historians discovered the difficulties of achieving middle-class status, most workers recognized that their opportunities were circumscribed and that ways would continually have to be devised to ensure their livelihood from paycheck to paycheck.

In attempting to understand the rise of a family-centered world, it might be instructive to focus closely on the initial contact industrial workers had with the American occupational structure and on their entry into the economic system. The most striking feature of work patterns in early industrial America was the lack of a random distribution of workers, or, to put it another way, the extent to which workers were grouped. In 1850, nearly half of the Philadelphia Irish held unskilled jobs, for instance, while 67 percent of Philadelphia's Germans were artisans. In Buffalo, Germans dominated crafts such as masonry, cooperage, and shoemaking, while the Irish worked largely as unskilled laborers, domestics, ships' carpenters, and teamsters. This early bunching resulted directly from the workers' possession or lack of skills prior to immigrating. After 1880, however, most immigrants generally came with fewer skills than the Germans and thus intensified the pattern of clustering. By 1911, in seven urban areas nearly one-third of all South Italians were categorized as "general laborers," as contrasted to only 9 percent of the Poles and 7 percent of the Germans. Sixty-five percent of the Poles were in manufacturing and mechanical pursuits, compared to only 28.8 percent of the South Italians.
Greeks were highly congregated in personal-service endeavors, while more than half of all Serbs were general laborers. Groups such as the Swedes, Jews, and Germans were considerably underrepresented in “unspecified labor” positions.9

Contemporary scholarship has substantiated the earlier descriptions of initial occupational concentrations. In his massive study of Boston workers, Stephan Thernstrom found significant differences in the distribution of immigrants. In 1890, for instance, 65 percent of Boston’s Irish labored in low-level manual jobs, while about half the immigrants from Canada and Germany obtained skilled employment. Moreover, Thernstrom found that clustering continued through two generations. By 1950, Jewish and British newcomers were still overrepresented in managerial and professional classes, and the Irish and Italians were still heavily lumped in the unskilled categories. Even more significant was the fact that second-generation Italian and Irish men continued to be overrepresented in unskilled work while Jewish and British males continued in above-normal concentrations in professional and managerial positions.10 Recent sociological investigations of upwardly mobile individuals have substantiated the fact that ethnic groups generally followed specific paths in gaining “prominence” after the 1920s.11

Studies of individual immigration waves in various locations sustain the impression of limited dispersion into the occupational structure. In Indiana oil refineries, Croatians held jobs in only three categories: stillman helper, fireman, and still cleaner. In the ready-made-clothing industry, Jews predominated in small firms where mechanization and the segmentation of labor were minimal, while Italians were concentrated in large factories that tended to require fewer individual skills. Serbs and Croatians in New York City were heavily involved in freight handling. Italians dominated construction gangs and barbershops in Buffalo, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. By 1918, 75 percent of the women in the men’s and boys’ clothing industry and 93 percent of the females doing hand embroidery in New York City, were Italian. By 1900, nearly all of the 3,000 employees in the Peninsular Car Company in Detroit were Polish. By 1909, Polish women in Chicago dominated restaurant and kitchen jobs, which they preferred to domestic employment. By 1920, 69 percent of all Slovak males were coal miners, and about half of all Mexican males were blast-furnace laborers.12

Before rushing to the conclusion the clustering was attributable solely to the operation of premigration bonds of kinship or skill, however, we must note the alterations in the skill levels of American workers that occurred between 1880 and 1920. Historian Daniel Nelson has described the factory of the 1880s as a “congeries of craftsmen’s shops.” While certainly more than skilled work was performed in these factories, a 1906 U.S. Department of Labor study did note an increase in the division of labor, as a result of
which more operations were subdivided into minute operations. The report explained that hand trades were rapidly becoming obsolete and labor processes were requiring less overall proficiency. The substitution of unskilled for skilled labor was already widespread in such industries as meat packing, coal mining, and textiles. By 1920, employers had intensified the drive to establish more efficient operations, reduce costs, and avoid the burden of extensive worker training programs by reducing skill requirements for incoming laborers. The expanded hiring of children, females, and unskilled foreign laborers as well as the decline of apprenticeship programs and highly proficient operatives underscored the trend. In the early decades of the twentieth century the number of blacksmiths, machinists, and glass blowers declined substantially. Apprenticeships among brick- and stonemasons and machinists fell from 39,463 in 1920 to 13,606 a decade later. The number of dressmakers and seamstresses dropped by over 300,000 during this period, while the number of ironmolders and -casters was halved by 1930. Simultaneously the number of laborers in blast furnaces and rolling mills, shirt factories, glassworks, electrical manufacturing plants, and the expanding automobile industry increased markedly.

The dilution of crafts and skills accelerated after 1900 and had a negative impact upon the older immigrant stocks from Northern and Western Europe. Germans in nineteenth-century Philadelphia predominated in butchering, tailoring, and shoemaking positions. As these occupations declined, however, Germans were frequently dislocated and found it more difficult to transfer their jobs to their sons. A similar pattern among skilled Germans in Poughkeepsie, New York, resulted in a greater number of second-generation Germans becoming factory operatives or concentrating in low-paying trades such as barbering and coopering. Indeed, in both Philadelphia and Poughkeepsie, fewer than 9 percent of second-generation Germans held skilled jobs; they began to appear in "lower" trades such as cigar making, which, according to Clyde and Sally Griffen, offered "limited futures."

The blurring of skill distinctions among workers and the implementation of new efficiency schemes were further accelerated during the period of the "new immigration." With proletarian protest growing in the late nineteenth century and with larger concentrations of workers emerging in urban areas, industrial managers began to impose a bureaucratic structure upon the work force by establishing hierarchical gradations of unskilled and semiskilled operations. Some theorists have contended that this restructuring of the work itself resulted in something of a segmentation of the labor market, for it created an infinite number of "entry-level" jobs, jobs which only intensified the process of clustering while making it extremely difficult for newcomers to implement any previously acquired skills. The promise of industrial America to incoming workers was not so much that one could rise
as that one could gain access at any number of points of entry. Opportunity was not vertical but horizontal, a fact which tended to blunt the rhetoric that social mobility was attained immediately upon an immigrant's arrival.

If skills were no longer needed to obtain work in the expanding sectors of the economy, something else would have to take their place. That "something else" was the random entry of thousands of immigrant workers into the industrial complex. However, the widespread existence of clusters suggests that a sense of order in matching newcomers with occupations was operative. In even the most cursory survey of immigrant and migrant job acquisition, kinship and ethnic ties invariably emerge as the vital link. But the infusion of these ties is not, as Gutman's arguments suggest, the sole explanation of the pattern. To be sure, newcomers carried strong kinship bonds to industrial America, but without the diminution of skills, these associations could not have been implemented on such a vast scale. Those who would explain immigrant and migrant adaptation as a function of premigration culture,\textsuperscript{17} or who argue that immigrants entered occupations that allowed them to implement premigration skills,\textsuperscript{18} neglect the structural transformations that characterized expanding industries and the extent to which a match was made between previously acquired behavior and available opportunities in America.

It is true, of course, that even in the period of declining skills, some immigrants did implement their premigration skills. For instance, a group of South Slavs from the Dalmatian high country applied their skills in butchering and boning to newly acquired jobs in the meat-packing industry. A number of Slovene soft-coal miners had spent their early years in Austrian mines. Barrel factories in Bayonne, New Jersey, employed Slovak coopers as early as the 1880s. Skilled Czechs were making pearl buttons in America in the 1890s. The matching of Jewish tailoring skills to the expanding garment industry in New York City is well known.\textsuperscript{19}

Instances of skill implementation were the exception, however. Immigrants normally relied on ethnic and kinship attachments to establish small beachheads in a given occupation, and these in turn attracted later arrivals. Although its influence varied from city to city and by 1900 had in fact declined, the Italian padrone system is a well-known example of how a cluster could be established. In Philadelphia, padrones channeled Italian immigrants into railroad construction gangs. Once established, these immigrant chains functioned so effectively that middlemen and labor agents were inevitably replaced by an informal network of friends and relatives. Theorists who accept the "split-labor-market theory" and its assumption that ethnic middlemen emerged from migration streams possessing a "sojourning orientation" overlook the fact that intermediaries usually functioned at the very beginning of the immigration process and were eventually superseded by ties of ethnicity and kinship.\textsuperscript{20}
In the expanding industrial sectors of Pennsylvania, our interviews revealed, kinship and ethnicity were particularly effective in distributing the mass of incoming workers because this network overshadowed skills, labor recruiters, and middlemen. In Pittsburgh, Poles established occupational beachheads at the Jones & Laughlin and Oliver mills on the South Side, at Hepponstalls and the Pennsylvania Railroad in Lawrenceville, and at the Armstrong Cork Company and the H. J. Heinz plant. According to Stanley Brozek, for instance, fathers spoke to foremen on behalf of their sons to get them jobs at the Edgar Thomson mill in Braddock. This pattern was reported in many of our interviews. Ignacy M. immigrated from Russian Poland in 1912, relying on his brother in America to get him a position piling steel beams. Joseph D. left Prussia for a mill job that was procured by his wife’s uncle. A cousin found work for Edward R. in a machine shop. John S. followed friends from Galicia in 1909, but relatives secured for him a job as a machinist. Charles W. relied on a friend to transform him from a shepherd in Russian Poland to a molder at the Crucible Steel Company. And hundreds of Polish women relied on relatives to find them domestic work in the homes of “Americans” or boardinghouse tasks among the Poles.  

Every Italian we interviewed in Pittsburgh had relied on kin or friends to persuade foremen or other supervisors to hire them. Where a relative had already established a trade or business, a position was usually waiting. In fact, kinship networks narrowed the job search considerably. Thus, both the father and brother of Nicholas R. relied on friends to find employment for them on the railroads in 1904. When Nicholas himself arrived in America, his father asked the foreman to “give him a break,” and Nicholas joined his kin in laying tracks. Antonio S. obtained work on the railroad through cousins who had come to America from the same village. It was not surprising that Leo G. worked for the Pittsburgh Railway Company laying stone foundations for streetcar tracks; his grandfather, father, brother, and uncle all were employed by the company. Similarly, in 1900 Palfilo C. came to the Bloomfield section of Pittsburgh, where his brother-in-law found him a job on a pipe-laying gang.  

A striking example of the Italians’ ability to use kinship in order to gain entrance into a particular occupational sector is seen in the accomplishment of newcomers who came to Bloomfield from the village of Ateleta in the province of Abruzzi. From the 1890s to the 1930s, these villagers brought “paesani” to the pipe construction department of the Equitable Gas Company. One of the first to gain employment was Anthony B., who had been a farmer in Italy; when he found work with the gas company, he informed several friends in Ateleta about job possibilities. Amico L., who initially arrived in 1890, returned to Ateleta three times. Upon each return he recruited a friend or relative for the Pittsburgh pipe-line “gang.” Vin-
cent L. came to the city around 1900 and through an uncle who was already there, obtained his job laying pipe. After two more round trips from Ateleta to Pittsburgh, he returned to Ateleta for good in 1911, but he later sent over one of his sons, who was hired by sewer contractors at the request of friends who were already working with the firm.24

Men were not the only ones to follow kinship and ethnic paths into the industrial workplace. Immigrant women also found such ties convenient. A 1930 study of 2,000 foreign-born women revealed that most had secured their first jobs through relatives and friends. All had worked in either cigar or textile factories, but fewer than 10 percent had acquired the relevant skills for these jobs prior to immigrating. Surveys of loopers of full-fashioned hosiery revealed that the majority had obtained their positions through acquaintances. One study of hosiery loopers concluded that during the period 1900–1930, following relatives into the mill was a “general practice” among younger girls. According to a 1924 investigation of Italian girls in New York City, not only had 75 percent of them acquired their first jobs through friends or relatives but these women were “ashamed” to seek employment alone and would quit a task if friends or kin left the workplace. In Buffalo, Italian women assisted each other in obtaining work in the canneries, while in nearly all cities immigrant women shared information on the availability of domestic work.25

What was particularly salient about this clustering was the fact that it was not short-lived; it often prevailed in the first generation born into industrial society. The important data compiled by E. P. Hutchinson are provocative evidence both of grouping and of the fact that initial-entry occupations profoundly affected the subsequent careers of workers in most groups. Through special access to 1950 census data, Hutchinson was able to determine the relative concentrations of ethnic groups at mid-century. For most, there were several significant concentrations: Greeks as cooks; Italians as tailors, barbers, and textile workers; the Irish as cleaners and guards; Germans as bakers, managers, and toolmakers; Yugoslavs as dress-factory workers, cooks, and mine laborers.

Even among immigrant children, who by 1950 were well advanced in their careers, this clustering in entry occupations continued. Greeks were still overrepresented in restaurants, Italians in the apparel industry, the Irish as guards, Germans as toolmakers, and Yugoslavs as miners and dressmakers. To be sure, intergenerational mobility had occurred, but the incidence of ethnic grouping still attested to the impact of these initial occupations. In fact, in the metal industry, the relative concentrations of Irish, Polish, and Yugoslav workers actually increased from the first to the second generation.26

By entering the occupational world of their kin and friends, second-generation industrial workers could exploit lowered entrance requirements,
and this practice was widespread. Studies of mining families in southwestern Pennsylvania and Illinois indicate that sons were drawn into the mines by their fathers. Between 1920 and 1940, heavy concentrations of Yugoslavs and Poles joined their relatives in South Chicago steel plants. A 1946 report from a mill town stressed that “father-son” work relationships existed throughout the local plant; moreover, of the sixty-one workers interviewed, one-third had brothers in the mill. The National Tube Company in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, was reluctant to move its facilities in 1950 because jobs in seamless-type construction had been “handed down from father to son.” Among Philadelphia toolmakers in 1951, one in five explained that the influence of family and friends had attracted them to the work. In a New England textile factory, nepotism in securing employment was found to be so widespread that workers with family connections within the plant were actually held in higher esteem than “unattached” employees, who were presumed to be more transient.

Kinship and ethnicity functioned so effectively in distributing workers that industrial managers frequently encouraged the system. Before, and in some cases after, the establishment of centralized personnel offices following World War I, shop foremen, who were usually too busy to recruit workers, generally relied upon informal contacts with various ethnic groups. At the Pittsburgh Steel Company in Monessen, Pennsylvania, foremen frequented the Croatian Club to obtain references for potential workers and twenty-dollar bills conveniently left on the bar. Foremen and managers were also influenced by existing stereotypes, which favored one group over another. Italians were often thought to be better suited for outdoor work, while Poles were preferred for factory and mill employment. Such stereotyping repeatedly favored immigrant over black workers. At the Illinois Steel Company, blacks were overlooked even when the company’s own figures showed that their rate of turnover and absenteeism was lower than that of whites. In Milwaukee, German immigrants dominated the work force at the Pabst Brewing Company, Italians moved into the shipping room of International Harvester, and Poles were preferred for unskilled labor gangs. Extensive documentation shows that in New Hampshire, textile mill managers relied heavily on the ability of French Canadians to attract their kin and train them, even after a central employment office was created.

As a consequence of declining skill requirements and emerging kinship-occupational clusters, family concerns were strongly reinforced. Family objectives now superseded the personal goals of individual members, in part because families were now able to perform crucial functions in the process of job procurement. This ability led to a pattern whereby immigrant parents generally dictated the career paths of their children and thereby effectively diverted them away from personal advancement and
social idealism and toward objectives that were of immediate concern to the family as a whole. Oral interviews are especially illustrative of this family dominance in working-class life. In preparing their children for adulthood, parents wasted little time imparting skills that seemed unnecessary from the perspective of men and women who labored in mines and mills. Marie S., who was born in a coal town in 1914, aspired to a music career, but at the age of fifteen was asked by her mother to leave school and help at home in the rearing of her brothers and sisters. She was later joined at home by a sister who left school in the ninth grade. Both girls remained at home, assisting in the household chores and earning extra income by sewing, until they married. They were well prepared for such tasks, for their mother had instructed them in canning, cooking, and sewing since they were eight years old. Another young Pole, Anna S., said she had wanted to study music, but her parents thought otherwise. Believing that it was more practical for her to become a dressmaker, Anna’s father bought her a sewing machine and asked her to remain at home to sew and care for her small brother. A Slovene girl wept when forced by her father to leave school after the sixth grade because he felt that a girl didn’t need schooling “to change diapers.”

In general, girls either remained at home to work on domestic tasks or found employment in silk mills and cigar factories. Boys, on the other hand, were usually sent to mills or breakers. They were often told that learning a job skill was preferable to remaining in school. No particular trade or skill seems to have been favored over any other; the point was to acquire some experience that would help them gain steady employment. Usually they received such training on the job in a position that was secured by their immigrant fathers. The first job for one Bethlehem steel-worker was learning to operate a crane at the steel mill where his father worked. Interviews with Poles in the Lawrenceville section of Pittsburgh revealed that during the 1920s and the 1930s, boys worked alongside their fathers at Hepponstalls, Armour Meats, and other plants in the area. In cases where fathers did not provide actual jobs, boys were usually urged to attend trade school to learn carpentry, shoemaking, or patternmaking.

Occasionally this continual imposition of parental wishes generated intergenerational friction, despite the fact that parents seemed genuinely concerned about their children’s future welfare. Tamara Hareven argued that marriage did not offer women an escape from work outside the home, because a family depended upon the income of more than one member. But in the coal-mining regions of Pennsylvania women viewed the situation differently. A number of Polish and Croatian women in Nanticoke and Monessen confessed that they had eagerly sought a marriage partner in order to escape their families of origin and the employment burdens they had endured as young people. We also learned that in some in-
stances, when a child attempted to defy a parent and remain in school, an older brother or sister would intervene in support of the parent's wishes. Consider the case of Stella K. In 1930 she was offered an opportunity to leave Nanticoke and live with a wealthy family on Long Island. The arrangement was that she would perform domestic service and simultaneously be allowed to complete her high-school education. Her parents abandoned the plan, however, when her brother complained bitterly because he had been forced to leave high school early to enter the mines.35

In most cases where tension and discord surfaced, the wishes of parents prevailed. George M. was the second of four children in a Croatian family. His parents wanted him to begin working, but he wanted to finish high school and enter Carnegie-Mellon University to study electrical engineering. As he put it, however, "I was only seventeen; I couldn't do anything about it." Helen M. wanted to study bookkeeping, but her parents insisted that she help at home. John S., a Braddock Slovak, expressed the desire to enter the priesthood, but his mother's response to the idea determined his fate. "Son, why don't you go and work," she implored. "School won't make you any money." In 1939 Mary M. wanted to attend business school in Charleroi, but her father insisted that she help the family instead. Thus, she and an older sister found employment in a glass factory, and at the age of seventeen one of her brothers went to work at the Pittsburgh Steel Company at Monessen. Mary theorized that her parents "just didn't believe in school."36 Rose Popovich, another of the workers we interviewed, concluded: "In those days children weren't treated the way they are today...It was always work, work of some kind. No matter how young I was they [her parents] always found something for me to do."37

Such disagreements over work and school were not representative, however. More typical in Pennsylvania was the working-class youth who not only abided by his parents' wishes but actually initiated the early termination of his education. Moreover, not all parents minimized the potential value of extended schooling. In a small number of homes children were urged to acquire as much education as possible, even if tremendous economic sacrifices were required of their parents. These children in turn were likely to display a deep obligation to ease the financial burden of their parents by leaving school and turning their wages over to their parents in an almost ritualistic manner. Antionette W. was one of five children raised in a Polish family. At the age of fourteen she decided to work in a Wilkes-Barre silk mill. Although her mother opposed the idea, Antionette explained that she was unable to concentrate on school when money was needed so badly at home. Similarly, her older brother began working on a nearby farm at the age of eleven and an older sister entered a textile factory at the age of twelve. A Monessen steelworker left school early and delayed his marriage until he was thirty-one in order to remain at home.
and assist his parents. Eleanor D. chose to quit high school. As her immigrant mother recalled, "She was sixteen years old and she just wanted to leave and help in our store." Over the objections of his parents, Eleanor's husband left school at the age of fourteen in order to work with an uncle in a butcher shop. Tom Luketich returned to Cokeburg from Detroit in the 1930s because his father had become unemployed and his brother was still too young to work; he said that he felt an obligation to support his family. Virginia V. actually felt ambivalent toward marrying and leaving her mother; she was persuaded to do so only because two sisters remained at home to provide support. Joseph G. quit school at the age of sixteen and began working in a coal mine near Daisytown because he felt it would be too great a financial burden for his father if he remained in school. This attitude was summarized pointedly for us by Lillian N., who as a young girl had thought of becoming a nurse, but decided instead to leave high school after one year and work in a Nanticoke silk mill. Carefully detailing her reasoning to us, she explained: "I figured I would leave school in the first year of high school. I couldn't go away to be a nurse because I was needed at home much more than anything else because I helped with the children and all. We had to bathe the children, dress them, and put them to sleep. My mother had enough to do with just cooking."

Clearly, family obligations dominated working-class predilections and exerted a moderating influence on individual expectations and the formulation of social and economic goals. The assertion of historians William Goode and Edward Shorter that a family member's participation in the industrial labor force led to a growing independence on the part of workers and a diminution in their family ties and responsibilities weakens considerably in the face of the data presented here. Focusing his attention on women, Shorter argued that working away from home led women to be increasingly affected by the mentality of the marketplace and the pursuit of individual interests. More accurate, however, are the assertions of Elizabeth Pleck, who had demonstrated that industrialization did not clearly lead to a separation of work and family interests, and that such a separation was more characteristic of the middle class.

Even more striking than the predominance of family interests over personal ones was the realistic assessment of survival expressed to us by Pennsylvania's laboring families. To be sure, some clamored for ideals. John Czelen related how Slavic steelworkers were persuaded by promises of "equality" in Monessen in return for their support during the 1919 strike effort. Misgivings about an "acquisitive society" also were woven throughout the consciousness of these industrial workers. A few attempted to leave industrial routines behind and initiate business ventures of their own, but the heart of the worker's system of values—his very ethos—was a fundamental sense of realism. Industrial workers in Pennsylvania's coal
and steel regions simply confronted the demands and pressures of their world and reacted in ways that were invariably pragmatic. Rose Popovich explained that her family rented rooms to boarders in the mill town of Monessen because "that was the only way you could get yourself on your feet" and pay the gas and food bills and the rent. A Bethlehem steelworker claimed that his motivation for working was simply that his family was big and left him no time to be tired. John C. claimed it was a necessity to leave school at an early age: "You had to help things along." He picketed for the National Miner's Union "not because I was a Bolshevik but because I was hungry."\(^{43}\) Steve Kika joined an unemployment council in McKeesport in 1932 not to restructure society but because he was looking for ways to find work. The words of one immigrant woman we talked to reflect the essence of this working-class realism: "I was poor. To live in America is work, work, work. I'm sick and my family was sick. And my husband died so fast and leave me with a mortgage. That was a headache. I didn't sell the home. I go to work and pay my mortgage. I raised the kids. That's enough for me."\(^{44}\)

This preoccupation with survival strategies and family welfare should not, however, lead one to conclude that Perlman's stress on pure and simple economic issues was correct all along. To accept such an argument would be to assume that economic issues were goals in themselves. In fact, they were only part of a larger cultural system that focused individual energies on the maintenance of the family unit. Perlman and many other labor and economic historians failed to realize that the behavior of individuals in the workplace was an extension of their familial world. Immigrants, blacks, and native-born toilers entered the mines and mills of Pennsylvania prior to 1940 not on their own behalf but because of the needs of their kin. It should not surprise us, therefore, that so many willingly relinquished their paychecks. Personal satisfaction, the control of production, equality, and mobility were usually secondary concerns. Admittedly, what Gutman described as a continuation of traditional values in industrial society was not literally a cultural persistence, for changes and adaptations were widespread. Still, during the half-century of industrialization after 1890, a family-oriented culture defined the framework of individual lives.\(^{45}\) Yet few historians have bothered to link this culture with the nature of worker protest, especially that which occurred during periods of crisis such as the 1930s. If workers agitated for job security more than for social equality, and if they demonstrated a realism that disappointed those who would have preferred a greater ground swell of social idealism in America, it was because equality and even mobility were largely personal goals, while job security was the key to family sustenance. After all other arguments have been heard, one is left with the belief that for the rank and file in the early twentieth century, labor issues were essentially family issues; culture and economics were simply inseparable.
Within the context of working-class families, placement influenced the aspirations and horizons of working people more than prevailing middle-class notions of success and individualism, and the secondary factors of life in America's industrial regions served to accentuate the sense of what exactly was possible. The work experience itself frequently influenced the individual's occupational and social objectives. Industrial routines were not universally monotonous, but in many instances they were severe enough to force job changes and the formulation of alternative occupational goals. Ray La Marca, for example, found the pulling of steel bars with heavy tongs so arduous that he left his job at a tin mill in McKeesport after only three days. At the Union Switch & Signal plant in Pittsburgh he secured a position that was less demanding physically. Similar reactions to specific work tasks shaped the aspirations of men entering the bituminous coal mines of southwestern Pennsylvania. Those who were taken into the mines by their fathers to assist in loading coal soon began to seek the less-arduous job of a blaster or the somewhat shorter hours of a contract miner. Nick Kiak and countless others who started out in general labor jobs in steel mills quickly set their sights on the position of crane operator. Contemporary observers who claimed that immigrant workers simply "endured" hard labor often failed to notice such subtle shifts in employment inside the workplace.

The severity of work responsibilities also shaped the short-term goals of women. Women who had labored at an early age raising younger brothers or sisters and performing other household duties frequently defined marriage as the means to a less-demanding work pace. However erroneous such a view may have been, it was nevertheless real for those who expressed it. Rose Popovich, who assisted her mother in caring for boarders, convinced herself that marriage might lead to a "nicer life."46

The objectives of industrial laborers were not limited by work demands alone, however. Anything that tempered individual goals tended to intensify the hold of family units over their members. One such tempering influence was the circumscribed world in which working people found themselves in their communities. Essentially powerless to direct their economic and social well-being, they took refuge in the regularity and predictability of the family and the worker enclave, where they could exercise some power and gain a sense of order. The powerlessness they experienced in their immediate milieu kept them family oriented rather than outward-striving. In interview after interview, the workers' lack of power, especially in local affairs before the 1930s, was continually emphasized. In Chester, to cite a case in point, blacks who had recently arrived from the South were accompanied into polling booths by local Republican workers who helped them vote "properly." In Donora, steelworkers knew that the dreaded coal and iron police were being paid by the local town council with taxpayers' money, but they were unable to do anything about it. Min-
ing families in Scranton were similarly aware that if they did not purchase goods from local company stores, they would be criticized by their superintendents. When coal companies "dumped" dead or injured miners on the front porches of their homes, the workers' sense of helplessness reached a limit, and families were the only source of solace. Numerous interviews revealed that workers were unable to obtain adequate relief from the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s because they lacked the necessary "connections" at local county courthouses.

A final expression of workers' realism surfaced in the information on job turnover and transiency which was related to us. While such movement may have seemed to pose a threat to family associations, it actually nurtured such ties, for geographical mobility inevitably led to dependence on kin for housing and job information. Furthermore, transiency was an alternative to engaging in ideological or economic protest, which seemed quite fruitless in the many instances where resources and power were overwhelmingly in the hands of others. The fact that workers frequently engaged in strikes or protests should not obscure the fact that more often they did not.

Quantitative historians have repeatedly noted the high degree of geographic mobility among urban industrial populations, but they have yet to offer serious explanations of this phenomenon. The intensive life reviews presented here include workers' reflections on the decision making that led to these moves. Although the causes of transiency were numerous, no variable appeared to be more pervasive than the claim that work was slack. Thus, irregular employment was a fundamental cause of turnover, but other factors continually influenced workers as well. Thousands of immigrants and a lesser number of blacks never intended to remain in industrial jobs permanently, and returned to their native countries or their homes elsewhere in the United States whenever they could. Burdensome work routines led some workers to give up their jobs for seemingly less-taxing labor. Some blacks, including the husband of Amelia Brown, quit their jobs when they were asked to teach a white man the skills they had brought from the South. When blacks felt that the transmission of such skills would allow whites to take over their jobs, they simply sought employment elsewhere. Blacklisting was another factor that forced workers to relocate, especially in the wake of labor disturbances. Finally, many workers sought escape from tasks that were boring or routinized.

The early encounter of workers with industrialized America fostered the growth of a family economy, which sensibly sought basic economic benefits and muted individual inclinations and idealism in favor of group survival. Thus, a framework for the labor protest of the 1930s was established before the Great Depression ever began. David Brody has argued that the Depression experience undermined the prevailing system of labor
control; that the welfare capitalism of the 1920s raised expectations of economic well-being and security and that these expectations were exploded by the onset of hard times. According to Brody, the labor activity of the 1930s was generated by a feeling among industrial workers that they had been betrayed by paternalistic employers. The recollections presented here, however, indicate that expectations of well-being were not raised substantially prior to the 1930s and that during this period workers were primarily concerned with survival. What was threatened was the sense of security that jobs provided: regular employment for family members and thus the survival of the family economy itself. In Pennsylvania, expectations seemed somewhat modest and realistic throughout the pre-Depression period as the cadence of industrial life exhibited remarkable continuity. Families generally searched for ways to make ends meet, achieved little in the way of savings, sent their children to work early in life, and valued steady employment.

Much of the analysis of the rise of unions during the thirties, moreover, has focused on the workplace, especially the shop-floor experience. Emphasizing the pace and process of production and internal activities such as the grievance system, some historians have suggested that the impetus toward unionization involved, above all, power and its redistribution, with workers seeking to resist further incursions by scientific managers into the workplace and to expand their control over the basic system of production. This view has been supplemented by indications that men in the shop represented a new breed, often second-generation Americans, who were rational, less intimidated by foremen, calculating, aggressive, and "possessed of an impulse for self-improvement." There is no question that individual workmen were angered by management's abuses of power (although resentment of managerial control may have been more characteristic of skilled workers). However, several qualifications must be made when discussing the quest of workers for control of the workplace. First, it was frequently the case that some of the workers' demands were met, a situation which could lead to quiescence. Anthracite miners in Glen Lyon, for instance, were quite proud that they were able to impose a limit on production prior to World War II. When these men did agitate in the 1930s, they did so not to achieve greater power in the workplace but to end perceived abuses by their own union leaders, who were thought to be receiving favorable treatment from company officials. Second, struggles in the workplace, like working-class behavior in general, were often more complex than a simple contest between workers and owners might imply. Workers themselves were sometimes divided in their struggle for internal power and position. Shared work experiences did not inevitably obliterate personal ambitions. The anthracite miners' quarrel with their own union leaders in the 1930s indicates that the desire for power did not ensure
unanimity within the working class. Frequently in our interviews state­ments surfaced to the effect that some men were favored by their foremen and thus were suspected of receiving slightly higher wages. The interviews also offered considerable information concerning resentment of the arbitrary exercise of power outside the workplace in industrial communities, a fact that has generally been overlooked by those who have studied exclusively the shop-floor experience. Little resentment over the pace of production surfaced at all. Montgomery and other historians have described twentieth-century labor movements as "an unprecedented quest" for social power and control in reaction to the growing rationalization and dehuman­ization of the work itself, but they have tended to overlook the complexity of human aspirations and the powerful need to maintain the family system which emerged from the clash of tradition with modern industrial capital­ism and which in the thirties was shaken to its very foundations.

Indeed, this focus on skilled workers as the catalyst of industrial pro­test, a focus which has dominated much recent labor history, has ob­surred the role of the less-skilled masses in generating the unionization drives of the thirties. Montgomery saw twentieth-century workers reacting to management’s attempt to control the workplace, and Ronald Schatz highlighted the important role of skilled electrical workers in organizing General Electric. But the data from our interviews suggest that less­skilled operatives like Louis Smolinski, Stanley Brozek, and Dominic Del Turco in Braddock and Aliquipa, for instance, were moving toward stronger organizations on their own and were becoming dissatisfied with existing institutions such as the Amalgamated. Stanley Brozek told us that at the Edgar Thomson Steel Works in Braddock the push toward unionization came from the less-skilled rail straighteners, drillers, chippers, and pilers in the finishing department. Dominic Del Turco related that workers in Aliquipa had already asked John L. Lewis to organize steel before Lewis set up the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC). Additional evidence indicates that aluminum workers at the Alcoa plant in New Kensington, Pennsylvania, organized before 1933, not because they were skilled workers seeking to stem the rush of scientific management, but because their ranks were filled with former United Mine Workers of America members who had fled the coal fields after the violence of the 1920s and were now implementing familiar organizational responses to ir­regular work opportunities. In the mill town of Donora, John Chorey, later a collaborator of Louis Smolinski’s, was intent upon establishing a union in the nail mill as a solution to his family and employment difficulties because he remembered his father’s urging that he carry on the task he had started as an unskilled Slovak steelworker in 1919. The point is that the popular ground swell for unionization to meet needs that were impor-
tant to the rank and file has been overlooked as an ingredient which combined with traditional, skilled-worker discontent over declining autonomy to create a rare, temporary alliance that made the upsurge of the thirties so effective.

Some have even discovered in the rank-and-file militancy of the 1930s an embryonic "revolutionary potential." This theory, advanced primarily by Staughton Lynd, also emphasizes the importance of shop-level activism. Interviewing working-class organizers from the 1930s, Lynd was impressed by the recurring theme of social idealism among working-class spokesmen. He argued that these readers were attempting to initiate a movement for social democracy. "They believed," he asserted, "that the human right to a job should take precedence over the property right to manage an enterprise as the employer saw fit." Such idealism was tempered, but not wholly discounted, in the conclusions reached by Sidney Fine in his study of the 1936-37 "sit down" strike in Flint, Michigan. Fine sensed that for a time the strikers saw themselves as part of a collective effort to better not just their own condition but the nation as well; in their eyes the union was a "social and moral force."

On balance, the evidence indicates that while a grass-roots movement toward unionization did surface in the 1930s, it was not ultimately revolutionary in nature. Brief flirtations with larger social visions emerged, but they were seldom sustained among the rank and file. In his examination of the unionization of the converted-paper industry in the 1930s, Robert Zieger concluded that grass-roots militancy played a major role, but that it was far from revolutionary and was, in fact, somewhat unpredictable, with workers frequently neglecting to pay their dues or maintain a sound organization. In a later study, Zieger observed that the "sporadic militancy" of the 1930s had been somewhat exaggerated, given the degree of antiunionism and apathy that existed among workers. Thousands had joined unions, Zieger discovered, only after careful calculation of their economic interests.

Our interviews with Pennsylvania workers do not specifically refute the assertion by Lynd and others that a tradition of working-class democracy aimed at humanizing society at large was operative or that strains of mobility and self-improvement pervaded the industrial working class. It should be emphasized, however, that such conclusions followed from analyses that concentrated largely on articulate, working-class leaders and intellectuals and stopped short of penetrating the temper of rank-and-file objectives. The limits to the ground swell of union activity in the 1930s noted by some observers may have been determined by family priorities, which continued to direct the objectives of most workers. One modern account of the 1930s which attributes the lack of radicalism in America to a
basic acceptance of the “American Dream” by both the employed and the unemployed fails to perceive the larger family and community in which men and women went off to work each day.\textsuperscript{53}

Interwoven throughout our interviews was discussion of the desire for job security as the primary motive behind efforts to unionize in Pennsylvania. For all the disagreement over rank-and-file goals, even historians like Brody and Peter Friedlander do not seem ready to discount the centrality of this issue. Because job security was threatened by the uncertainty of the 1930s, family unity was endangered. “Sit-down” strikers in Flint were moved to action primarily because of a speed-up in production and the irregular employment they experienced after 1929. Indeed, most industrial workers in the early thirties experienced a loss or reduction in work, not a quickening of the pace of production. In order to stabilize their families’ existence, they needed to end the unemployment or shortened work schedules brought on by the Depression.

Some of the disagreement over the motives of workers in the thirties may have resulted from a failure to dissect the course of organization efforts over a given period of time. A close reading of our interviews suggests that unemployment and suddenly sporadic work routines provided the initial impulse to organize. Only after workers became immersed in the current of organization did the question of power—both the companies’ abuse of it and the rank and file’s own lack of it—begin to crystallize. Consequently, men like Dominic D. became enthusiastic when organizers emphasized the potential strength of workers who were united. When workers found the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Tin Workers to be ineffective, they sought, on their own, attachment to more effective organizations. But power was never their ultimate objective. They sought power in greater measure primarily to attain the goal of job stability—which in turn would bring some regularity to their world and that of their kin—and only secondarily to eliminate various inequities from the workplace.\textsuperscript{54}

In the life histories analyzed here, two points seem clear. First, Rank-and-file militancy was a grass-roots phenomenon that preceded and hastened the establishment of organizations such as SWOC. Second, the objectives of the rank and file were not particularly revolutionary or ideological. Certainly workers were concerned about production arrangements, but they were more concerned about job security and steady wages. That is why Louis Heim convinced fellow strikers in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, not to destroy equipment at Bethlehem Steel in 1937; repair of the machinery would have delayed the strikers’ eventual return to work. Dominic Del Turco and Michael Zahorsky told us that even before the establishment of SWOC, steelworkers in Aliquippa had concluded that the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Tin Workers was powerless. On their own initiative they sent a delegation to John L. Lewis asking him to begin
organizing steelworkers. Louis Smolinski recalled that workers at the Thomson Steel Works in Braddock repudiated the Amalgamated in 1934 and formed their own "Emergency Council," which consisted of Slavs in the finishing department. Moreover, most of the rank and file would probably have agreed with Stanley Brozek, another Braddock steelworker, who explained that he sought unionization because after being employed he realized that he wanted some form of security and compensation for unemployed men who were married and had children. Joe Rudiak claimed that unemployment intensified his support for a union, but he and other men also wanted to rectify abuses by foremen and the arbitrary use of power by companies in local communities where a bank loan was unobtainable unless you were "a fair-haired company boy." However, problems caused by management's abuse of power had existed for years and were not exacerbated until the workers' hold on their jobs suddenly became extremely tenuous.55

Clearly, then, for most workers and their families the labor discontent of the 1930s represented an affirmation of a pragmatic world view that included the valuation of job security and a steady wage as the means to family stability. Once the movement to unionize was under way, important issues of power and control crystallized as well, but the enclave mentality of the pre-Depression years proved a persistent force, and most rank-and-file workers never lost sight of their primary allegiances. Within the families and communities of the worker enclaves, measures were taken to ensure the cooperation of all potential wage earners. Workers did express concern about power relationships, work routines, occupational advancements, and even, on occasion, social transformations, but such objectives were ancillary and were tied more to their fate as individuals. Regular employment remained the foundation of the enclave itself.

NOTES


5. See the interviews with John B., Pittsburgh, March 3, 1976; Ray L., Pittsburgh, July 11, 1977; and Louis S., Braddock, June 20, 1978. All interviews cited, if not included in this text, are on file in the Oral History Collection, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg. Initials have been used for last names where anonymity was requested.


new spirit led to struggles for greater control of production by workers. Montgomery has not, however, mentioned the larger effort to maintain the family system, which was nurtured by the expansion of unskilled labor.


18. Golab, *Immigrant Destinations*. Jews may be an exception to this premise, for they frequently were able to implement premigration skills; see Arcadius Kahan, “Economic Opportunity and Some Pilgrims’ Progress: Jewish Immigrants from Eastern Europe in the U.S., 1890-1914,” *Journal of Economic History* 38 (March 1978): 237-45.


24. Ibid.


34. Interview with Stella K., Benton Township, August 7, 1977.


38. See the interviews with Antionette W., Wilkes-Barre, September 12, 1977; Eleanor O., Nanticoke, November 25, 1977; Mike D., Monessen, February 2, 1977; Thomas L., Cokeburg, June 17, 1976; and Virginia V., Nanticoke, December 6, 1977.


43. Interview with John C., Daisytown, May 8, 1975.

44. See the interview with Steve Kika, McKeesport, July 27, 1974; Rose P., Monessen, March 14, 1977; and John C., Daisytown, May 8, 1975.


46. Hareven, “Family Time and Industrial Time,” p. 377. See also the interviews with Arlene G., Nanticoke, December 11, 1977; and Stella K., Benton Township, August 7, 1977. Winifred Bolin (“The Economics of Middle Income Family Life: Working Women during the Great Depression,” Journal of American History 65 [June 1978]: 72-73) has noted that only 15 percent of all married women worked in 1940 and suggests that this reflected the cultural stigma attached to the working wife. It is possible, however, that domesticity seemed a preferable alternative to the drudgery working-class women experienced as adolescents in silk mills and cigar factories prior to marriage.

47. Interviews with George M., Monessen, March 22, 1977; and Helen M., Nanticoke, September 17, 1977.


50. Interviews by Alice Hoffman with Nicholas Zonarich (May 1966) and John Chorey (October 1966), on file in the Labor Archives of Pennsylvania State University, University Park.


55. See the interviews with Louis Heim, Lebanon, May 24, 1980; and Stanley B., Braddock, June 20, 1978. Job security as a fundamental goal among steelworkers in the 1930s is also stressed by Roger Simon in "Looking Backwards at Steel," *Antioch Review* 36 (Fall 1978): 451-52.