Workers and Dissent in the Redwood Empire

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Chapter 8

The Making of a Union Movement, 1900–1906

A Resurgent Labor Movement

At the dawn of the twentieth century, only sailors, longshoremen, carpenters, and typographical workers belonged to unions in Humboldt County. In a few years, however, a dramatic renaissance of the Humboldt County labor movement occurred, paralleling the resurgence of the labor movement in many parts of the country. By 1906, hardly a trade or occupation in the county had not founded a union; some unions, especially in the building industry, organized almost every member of their trade. The Humboldt County lumber workers established the first international union of lumber workers—the International Brotherhood of Woodsmen and Sawmill Workers (IBWSW)—which organized over 2,000 workers, or approximately half the county's lumber workforce, within two years of its founding in 1905. Within five years, the Humboldt County labor movement acquired a degree of economic and political power that would have been unimaginable to the pioneers of the labor movement in the late nineteenth century.

Almost all unions, including the IBWSW, affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The Humboldt County AFL was not a narrow, sectional, or exclusive organization. It attempted, with considerable success, to organize a broad spectrum of the county's labor force and to foster a vibrant union culture. Many union members perceived the labor movement not simply as an agency to extract concessions from employers but also as a social and moral force in the community. Accordingly, they created a set of institutions to give expression to the values represented by this ascending social force.
In 1900, Humboldt County, with 27,104 residents, was the eleventh most populous of California's 58 counties. Eureka contained 7,327 inhabitants and was by far the largest city in the county, and the most important port on the West Coast between San Francisco and Portland. Nevertheless, Humboldt County was almost as isolated from the rest of the state as it had been in 1850. Although the county was well served by an elaborate internal railroad network, it was not connected to the state and national railroad systems until 1914.

The foreign-born made up 22 percent of the Humboldt County population in 1900. The bulk of them came from the following countries: English-speaking Canada (1,698); Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (1,539); Germany (726); Ireland (604); and Switzerland (409). In Eureka, 28 percent of the city's population was foreign-born. By 1920, when the county had more than 37,000 residents, the proportion of foreign-born remained almost the same. There were, however, some significant shifts in the composition of the immigrant population. The Italian share of the foreign-born increased from 3.7 percent to 15.2 percent, and the Scandinavian countries, led by Finland, surpassed the English-Canadians as the major source of foreign stock.

During the first years of the twentieth century, Eureka experienced unprecedented growth. Between 1900 and 1903, the city's population grew from 7,327 residents to 11,111. The local press made frequent references to a building boom; indeed, between 1902 and 1903, the assessed value of all realty in Eureka increased from $10,720,092 to $13,409,074. Eureka had evolved into a full-fledged city with a diverse array of business, manufacturing, and financial concerns. Some goods were imported from San Francisco and elsewhere, but the range of enterprises in Eureka made it and the county an essentially self-sufficient economic entity. Reflecting the culmination of a trend that had been under way since the 1880s, Eureka was no longer the hub of the county's lumber industry. Logging operations moved farther and farther from Eureka; by 1904, the city contained only 11 of the approximately 50 lumber mills in the county.

A booming economy in Eureka and the county at large occurred in the midst of a sustained national economic recovery after the depression of the 1890s. Humboldt County's economy benefited particularly from a spectacular revival of the lumber industry. At the height of the depression in 1896, lumber production slumped to 100,000,000 board feet, valued at $1,351,577. By 1906, the amount of lumber produced (361,000,000 board feet) and its dollar value ($7,201,000) had more than tripled. The agricultural sector of the county, dominated
by the dairy industry, was also thriving; the value of all dairy products increased from $828,991 in 1899 to $1,351,577 in 1909.\footnote{10}

Unquestionably, the flourishing economy set the stage for the renaissance of the Humboldt County labor movement. The first two years of the new century saw 20 unions established, embracing not only the trades but many semiskilled and unskilled workers, including bootblacks, stablemen, cooks and waiters, barbers, and laundry workers.\footnote{11} In August 1902, the Eureka Federated Trades Council received an AFL charter,\footnote{12} and a month later, C. D. Rogers, the general organizer of the California State Federation of Labor, reported that Eureka was a strong union town.\footnote{13} The growth of the Humboldt County labor movement owed little to outside organizers. Officials of the California State Federation of Labor made occasional visits to the county, but these were usually for ceremonial purposes. Rarely did such visits spawn new unions or lead to the significant growth of existing ones. The men who played the crucial role as organizers were leading lights in the local labor movement; sometimes, in recognition of their services, they received official appointments from the State Federation of Labor.

Biographical information on leaders of the early-twentieth-century Humboldt County labor movement is sparse. Most of them were relatively new to the community, and their names cannot be found in voting registers or the city and county directories of the 1890s. Some of the newcomers were experienced in the trade union movement before settling in Humboldt County. The most notable of these was Charles Grambarth, who had worked with Samuel Gompers in New York City during the 1870s and was president of the San Francisco Federated Trades Council in the 1880s.\footnote{14} There were, however, some continuities between the leadership of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Humboldt County labor movement. For example, Charles Devlin, who had been active in the Knights of Labor and the Populists, was a successful candidate on the Union Labor party ticket in the 1903 Eureka elections. That there were many new union leaders is not entirely surprising, since the county's labor movement had not flourished since the mid-1880s. Moreover, the depression of the 1890s must have forced union pioneers to migrate in search of work. Conversely, the revival of the county's economy drew men such as Grambarth to the community.

Continuities between the two labor movements may have been more pronounced at the rank-and-file level, although in the absence of union membership lists, this is impossible to determine. What can be said is that most unions arose out of the spontaneous efforts of a core of men in a particular trade or occupation. In some instances, however,
especially between 1900 and 1902, general organizers, such as Gram-barth, and the sailors’ and longshoremen’s unions played important supportive roles in the embryonic stages of a union’s development. A major and largely successful strike by West Coast longshoremen and sailors in 1901 enhanced the power of the Humboldt longshoremen’s and sailors’ unions. By 1903, the longshoremen’s union contained 160 members, almost every longshoreman in the county. The Eureka branch of the Sailors’ Union of the Pacific (SUP) was evidently almost as thoroughly organized as the longshoremen’s. Both unions lent assistance to the Teamsters, the Painters and Decorators, the Cooks and Waiters, and perhaps other unions in their formative stages. The Teamsters and the Cooks and Waiters passed resolutions expressing their gratitude to the seafaring unions.

Indicative of the longshoremen’s commitment to supporting unionism was the fact that at one meeting in 1902, they raised $112 in support of the nation’s striking anthracite miners; then, not content with their contribution, they continued to raise funds for the miners.

Along with a benign national economic climate, a number of local factors played a part in the flowering of Humboldt County’s labor movement in the early twentieth century. The relative isolation of the county labor market strengthened the bargaining power of labor. Humboldt employers had to rely for workers mainly on employment agencies, usually located in San Francisco, but in a booming labor market this did not always compensate for the county’s remote location. As a result, wage rates in Humboldt County were higher than in most parts of California, including San Francisco.

Employers seem to have been taken by surprise by the rapid expansion of the labor movement and, at least initially, resigned to it. Employers were poorly organized outside the lumber industry, and often employer organization was a belated and reactive response to the union movement. The Humboldt Lumber Manufacturers’ Association (HLMA) did little to oppose the labor movement, and even the most formidable lumber employers seemed bemused by the growth of union power. “Men are demanding more for their labor all along the line, and when it will stop it is hard to guess,” lamented William Carson in 1906. Writing in the same year, Irving Harpster, a top official of the Elk River Mill and Lumber Company, was equally despondent: “It seems to be the policy to get as much wages as possible and do as little work as possible. Talk about trusts, these labor unions are the greatest trusts in the world today, and the end is not yet.”

Confronted with a resurgent union movement, employers in some trades and businesses responded by drawing up price schedules and
passing the cost of wage increases on to consumers. Thus, in 1903, when the Cooks and Waiters' Union demanded a wage increase, the hotel and restaurant owners met informally and agreed to wage concessions. At the same time, they founded the Restaurant and Hotel Keepers' Association of Eureka, which embraced all establishments in the city except one, and they immediately increased the charges for board and meals. Plumbers, drugstore owners, barbers, creamery operators, and many other groups of employers developed various cooperative arrangements. The comparatively few employers engaged in a particular trade or business facilitated agreements, as did Eureka's isolation from the competition of other metropolitan business communities.

**The Divine Mission of the Labor Movement**

Labor historians have tended to attribute the dramatic growth of the labor movement in the early years of the twentieth century largely to the propitious economic climate. Certainly questions concerning the ideological complexion of the labor movement that enabled and encouraged it to exploit the favorable circumstances have been neglected. In Humboldt County, the labor movement's ability to tap an undercurrent of deeply felt grievances and draw on tenets of nineteenth-century radical democratic-republican tradition, albeit in a modified form, were crucial to its success.

Like their Gilded Age predecessors, and in almost identical rhetoric, leaders of the early-twentieth-century labor movement portrayed the working class as victims of an iniquitous social and political system. In March 1903, the labor movement held a mass meeting attended by at least 500 people to publicize the aims of trade unionism. Grambarth of the Cigarmakers' Union opened the proceedings:

Fifty years ago there were few or no millionaires in the country and a contented and prosperous people. Today there are hundreds, yes thousands of millionaires, and thousands and hundreds of thousands of poverty stricken among the toiling masses. The why: labor has not received its just and equitable compensation.

Grambarth argued that every workingman had a moral duty to his family to join a trade union to secure a "fair wage." He insisted that "whatever concessions capital makes to labor it is forced to do so; labor unions will force capital to treat us with fairness." George Keeling of the Printers' Union spoke in a similar tone: "Labor! Capital! These
are in a world called business each seeking advantage. Capital talks of its investments and dividends, and thinks little of sentiment. Labor speaks of its rights, a living wage, and casts an eye in a hazy fashion towards brotherhood.

The labor theory of value remained crucial to the ideology of most workingmen, affirming their belief in the righteousness of the union cause. Labor leaders and workingmen harped on the theme that, for years, capital had been appropriating a larger and larger share of the value of their labor. The following extract from a letter by "Wage Earner" to the Arcata Union in 1906 is indicative of this sentiment:

I am a wage earner, and believe that a great majority of the population are in the same position, and consequently we must be the principal consumers, therefore will [sic] say that in the course of a year there are 20,000,000 wage earners engaged in manufacturing $11,000,000 worth in commodities and we receive in wages about $2,000,000 which we must in turn immediately exchange for the necessities of life. Therefore I see we do not share the increase of wealth for the simple reason that our wages do not give us the power to buy back what we have made.

Labor leaders and union members also invoked the memory of the American Revolution to legitimate their cause and to proclaim that full-fledged unionism represented the Manifest Destiny of workingmen born in a country founded on the democratic-republican principles of the Founding Fathers. In 1906, the county’s labor movement held its own Independence Day celebration for the first time. In spite of the fact that the occasion took place at Blue Lake, 15 miles from Eureka, 3,000 people attended. Walter Macarthur, of the SUP and editor of the Coast Seamen’s Journal, opened the ceremonies. Extracts from his speech covered the front page of Labor News:

Today we celebrate the greatest event in modern history—the establishment of political liberty. . . . Today upon the one hundred and thirtieth anniversary of American Independence, we reaffirm our faith in the equality of all men and in a “government of the people, by the people.” And as an indisputable pledge and proof of that faith we present to the world its greatest, most powerful and prosperous example of national life—our own United States.

In an editorial on the celebration, Labor News articulated the connection that many unionists saw between their democratic heritage and the mission of the labor movement:

It was an expression not only of the . . . American ideal of government, but also of a powerful force that is rising in our land today to make its impress on the
future of the nation—namely, that of organized labor. . . . It has a mission to perform, the success of which will do more to insure true freedom in our country than any great upheaval that has preceded. Its mission is to emancipate the human race from . . . the remnants of feudal servility and the worse than slave conditions that exist in so many of our industrial centers. . . . The rise of labor to a position of such absorbing importance is a new development, and it is fitting that this rapidly growing army . . . should celebrate Independence Day whose ideals they are pledged to support in their own way.30

One cannot overstate the degree to which labor in early-twentieth-century Humboldt County was imbued with a sense of divine mission. In one speech, C. Roberts, president of the Eureka Trades Council, compared the mission of union leaders with that of Christ’s apostles.31 George Keeling likened the labor movement to Rip Van Winkle; after “many centuries” of sleep, it had finally stirred.32

Although these labor leaders carried much of the ideological baggage of their Gilded Age predecessors, to a significant degree they broke with this legacy. The ideologues of the early-twentieth-century labor movement in Humboldt County without exception espoused an antagonistic view of class relations and stressed that only through aggressive unionism would workers extract concessions from capital and enjoy a fair share of the fruits of their labor. Furthermore, both obliquely and directly, they attacked elements of the democratic-republican tradition that obfuscated this reality. For example, at labor’s 1906 Independence Day celebrations, Keeling repudiated the jingoistic overtones of the occasion: “We as laborers respect the flag as much as any, but if we had entire control we would never let it stand for many things it has almost come to stand for. We would not allow it to have any connection at all with militarism.”33 Labor News attacked the notion of reciprocity between employer and worker. Stressing the low standard of living and insecure employment of most workers and the importance of a stable “home influence,” it asked: “How is this state of affairs to be brought about? Not by trusting luck, or fortune, or the generosity of employers. No, what workingmen must do is to work out their own salvation.”34 In another editorial, Labor News attacked the ideology of social mobility. “The fact is that there is not room for all to rise, and many will have to resign themselves to their station. The best way a young man can elevate his condition is by joining the union.”35

Some millmen employed by the surviving pioneer lumber entrepreneurs clung to a reciprocal and deferential conception of class relations, but elsewhere such notions were vanishing. Undoubtedly, the influence of newcomers to the community such as Grambarth, Keeling, and Joseph Bredsteen (editor of Labor News) was important, but
the receptivity of rank-and-file workers to a polar conception of social relations also reflected the depression of the 1890s and the Populist movement. The severity of the depression further undermined the credibility and legitimacy of a political order that had been under fire for two decades. The strong support the Populists attracted in Eureka reflected the increasing dissolution of reciprocal notions of social relations and the growing polarization of class attitudes.

Union Power, Union Culture

The new Humboldt County labor movement demonstrated a commitment to organizing all workers, regardless of sex, skill, or nationality. It strongly endorsed a resolution passed at the 1906 annual meeting of the California State Federation of Labor condemning the high initiation fees charged by some unions. Such a policy, asserted Labor News, "is fundamentally selfish and is contrary to the broader minded spirit that lies close to the mainsprings of trade unionism and which welcomes every bona fide worker to the ranks of organized labor." Women were welcome in the union movement, although the fact that they made up a small proportion of the workforce meant that they constituted a fraction of the overall union membership. Nevertheless, they were well represented in the Cooks and Waiters' and the Retail Clerks' unions, and women held important executive offices in both. Labor News also provided good coverage of social and political issues affecting women.

The Women's Label League, founded in 1904, played an important role in the social life of the union movement. Membership in the league was open to all wage-earning women and to men in good standing with their union, although men could not hold office or vote. The primary function of the league was to ensure that all merchandise, whether manufactured locally or not, bore the union label. Women delegates visited stores to determine the extent to which a business carried the union label and reported their findings to the Trades Council. The league took its work seriously. In 1906, after an inspection of men's clothing stores, it resolved to fine any league member who could not show at least three items of clothing bearing the union label. The Trades Council attached great importance to the league's work and appointed a Women's Label League Committee. In addition to providing death and illness benefits for its members, league members visited hospitalized union members. At these visitations, women read to patients and brought them flowers. At least once a month, the
Label League held a social at the Union Labor Hall to which all union members were invited. In 1906, the league established a special fund to purchase a $600 piano. The league was such a success that by the end of 1906, it claimed more than 200 members.\textsuperscript{50}

The Humboldt labor movement attempted to organize all workers in the county, regardless of their ethnicity or nationality. A concerted effort was made to organize the growing Italian population employed mainly in logging camps and mills outside Eureka. In 1905, the Eureka Trades Council persuaded the California State Federation of Labor to hire someone to translate union literature into Italian.\textsuperscript{40} In the same year the Trades Council purchased 1,000 pamphlets printed in Italian from the national AFL to assist in unionizing the Italian workforce; and in June 1906, Labor News began printing an Italian-language page. The labor movement may not have been as open to organizing Asians. This was never tested, since there were almost no Asians in the county by the early twentieth century. But resolutions passed by unions, articles in Labor News, and the affiliation of some unions with the Asiatic Exclusion League indicate that the Humboldt labor movement shared the racial prejudices toward Asians harbored so fervently by the West Coast labor movement.

Between 1902 and 1906, the Humboldt labor movement consolidated its position. At the 1905 Labor Day parade, 2,500 people represented 25 unions affiliated with the Eureka Trades Council, and 1,250 actual union members marched.\textsuperscript{42} In 1906, the Trades Council tripled its membership, boasting at least 4,000 members by year’s end.\textsuperscript{43} All craft unions won the eight-hour day, and most unions obtained wage increases. Some unions entered into formal collective bargaining agreements, especially in the building trades, where agreements often stipulated that employers could hire only union labor and use raw materials bearing the union label.\textsuperscript{44}

Rarely did unions engage in, or even threaten, strikes. The few strikes that did occur were usually prompted by the attempts of employers to use nonunion labor in heavily unionized trades. Carpenters struck successfully over this issue in 1903 and 1906.\textsuperscript{45} The boycott was the most commonly employed weapon. Sailors and clerks had tried it in the mid-1880s, but it was used much more extensively and effectively in the early twentieth century. Longshoremen demonstrated the efficacy of this tactic in their critical 1901 strike.\textsuperscript{46} Subsequently, barbers, musicians, cooks and waiters, painters, and retail clerks made effective use of the boycott. The Eureka Trades Council sanctioned boycotts and gave them wide publicity in Labor News. “Why Dance to Scab Music,” read the editorial headline of Labor News on April 1, 1905.
Union members were urged to attend only concerts given by orchestras whose members belonged to the Musicians' Union. Employers had an opportunity to appear before the Trades Council to explain why a boycott should not be imposed on them. Most disputes were resolved amicably, either by the parties themselves or after the intervention of the Arbitration Committee of the Trades Council.

Several unions fined or expelled members when they thought they were not acting in accordance with union principles. In 1902, the Clerks' Union passed a resolution warning members that they would be fined $10 if they purchased goods at a nonunion store. In 1906, the Cooks and Waiters levied fines on members who did not attend union meetings, and one member was expelled for working on a nonunion boat during a strike by the longshoremen's and sailors' unions. The Painters' Union expelled a member for smoking nonunion cigarettes and fined two others for using nonunion tobacco. Union discipline and influence expressed itself in other ways that demonstrated union power. The Scandia Hotel, heavily patronized by union members, refused to serve three nonunion longshoremen. A near riot ensued, and union men bundled the longshoremen out of the restaurant.

The Humboldt County union movement represented more than the aggregate of its collective bargaining power. Many members believed that the movement should play a broad social and political role in the community, commensurate with its newfound stature and power. The Eureka Trades Council maintained a Social and Educational Committee to supervise Labor Day, Independence Day celebrations, and union picnics. The committee also organized several well-attended mass meetings to publicize the goals of the trade union movement. Such occasions were part of a deliberate effort to foster and sustain a union culture. These occasions became both educational forums and an opportunity to foster social camaraderie. Representative of this kind of event was a union picnic in 1904 attended by more than 1,000 people. Besides speeches by union leaders preaching the gospel of unionism, there was a diverse program of entertainments, including footraces for the children, a tug-of-war, and a pie-eating contest.

Individual unions also held their own social events. Quite often, after the formal business had been attended to, a union meeting turned into a convivial social occasion with music, plays, and dancing. Frequently, these events lasted into the small hours of a Sunday morning. From time to time, a fraternal invitation was extended to members of another union. Several unions held annual picnics or balls to which the general public was invited. The longshoremen began holding an annual picnic in 1901, and some of their banquets attracted upward of
500 people. The second annual picnic of the Shingle Weavers' Union drew 1,500 people.

In 1906, the Humboldt County labor movement founded the Union Labor Hospital Association. It secured temporary quarters in Eureka and charged union members $10 annually for a hospital ticket. Later in the year, the association decided to finance construction of a $20,000 hospital facility. The project was funded by selling 800 bonds at $25 each to unions and individual union members. Labor News boasted that it would be the best-equipped hospital in northern California and hailed the decision to build it: "The aims and purposes of the hospital association touch the mainsprings of brotherhood and fraternity. Such an institution represents one of the leading features of progressive unionism... Long live the hospital and the brotherhood that has given it birth." In 1906, also, the Eureka Trades Council and the Building Trades Council leased a cigar store and established a free employment agency.

The Eureka Trades Council did not attempt to supersede the role of local charitable organizations, but the council responded generously in cases of exceptional hardship. In 1903, the council established a fund for an elderly couple who had lost all their possessions in a fire. Longshoremen opened the fund with a $25 donation. When a single woman with five children appeared before the council to ask for financial assistance, a special committee was appointed "with power to relieve the immediate wants of the above lady and children."

The Trades Council established its own reading room, which it stocked with books on socialism and trade unionism. It also submitted a list of books on these subjects to the Eureka Public Library and provided funds for the acquisition of these works. Individual unions made periodic donations to the union library fund. The founding of Labor News was a major achievement of the labor movement. Launched in February 1905, it was one of the first California labor papers established outside the San Francisco Bay Area. Until July 1905, two union officials edited the paper. After this date, and until 1919, Joseph Bredsteen owned and edited the paper, although it remained the official organ of the Trades Council. Unfortunately, there is little biographical information on Bredsteen. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin at the turn of the century and worked for a time as a printer before arriving in Humboldt County shortly before he took over Labor News. He was not apparently a member of any Humboldt union, but for fifteen years he played a critical role in the labor movement. An avowed socialist, he was the principal speaker at numerous union and Trades Council functions. The labor movement lent undying support
to Labor News. Most unions had bloc subscriptions to the paper, which meant that every member of the union subscribed to it. The Trades Council encouraged unions not only to take out subscriptions but also to patronize businesses that advertised in Labor News.

By any standard, Labor News was an excellent trade union newspaper under the stewardship of Bredsteen. An eight-page weekly, it gave almost equal coverage to local, state, national, and international labor news, but the local labor movement was the main focus of attention. Labor News did not simply report on the activities of the Humboldt county labor movement; it candidly analyzed and criticized the movement on occasions, without its loyalty ever being called into question. A considerable amount of space—sometimes the whole front page—covered the labor movement and working conditions in other countries. In its first few months of publication, Labor News printed long features on "The Russian Workmen," "New Zealand's Industrial Conditions," and "The Cooperative Store Movement in England."

A Union Debating Club began in 1905. It held meetings on Saturday nights that were open to the general public. It deliberately attempted to cultivate an informal atmosphere. Each meeting selected a new chairman, and people jotted down questions they thought worthy of debate and put them into a specially installed "ideas box." Topics discussed in the early months of the club's existence included the following: Should the National Government Institute a System of Old Age Pensions? Has Organized Labor Any Interest in and a Remedy for Food Adulteration? Should a Working Man Join the Police Force, the Detective Force or the National Guard? Would Municipal Ownership Benefit the Wage Workers?

The Union Labor Party and the Wobblies

The Union Labor Debating Club was founded several years after the Humboldt County labor movement assumed an assertive, independent, and progressive role in politics. As early as 1902, both the labor movement and the Democratic and Republican parties were acutely conscious of the political power of Humboldt labor. The 1902 platform of the Humboldt Democratic party recognized "the strong and growing tendency of the wage earning class of the state, and more particularly of this county, to organize for the better security of their rights and for the improvement of the conditions of labor." Accordingly, the Democrats assiduously courted the labor vote. Republicans appealed
to the labor vote just as openly, claiming that the strength of the union movement reflected the prosperity induced by Republican policies.  

The Humboldt County labor movement soon made it clear that it would not be seduced by party rhetoric. At a meeting in January 1903, the Eureka Trades Council expressed strong support for referendum and initiative amendments to the California constitution. The council's secretary was instructed to write to county representatives in the state legislature to determine their stance on these issues. The council also resolved to approach the City Council over the use of child labor in street sweeping, and a new committee was appointed to persuade the Eureka City Council to incorporate provisions limiting the hours of labor into a franchise that was shortly to be granted to the operators of Eureka's street railway system. Two county state legislators responded favorably to the request to support the initiative and referendum reforms, but when State Senator Selvage first ignored, then declared his opposition to, such reforms, he infuriated the Eureka Trades Council, which passed a resolution denouncing him as an enemy of organized labor.

Selvage's intransigence on the initiative and referendum was an important factor in the labor movement's decision in April 1903 to form a Union Labor party (ULP) to contest the upcoming Eureka elections. The success of a Union Labor party in San Francisco may also have been a factor. The platform of the party declared that the time had arrived "when the proper solution of all questions affecting the interests of the laboring class of people is to be found in the ballot." The main planks in the platform were support for better schools and compulsory education; a program of civic improvement, including the paving of all streets and the building of more parks and playgrounds; the public ownership of all utilities; an eight-hour day for all public works labor; and the submission of all city franchises to a referendum vote of the people.

Representatives from all 21 unions in the county participated in the ULP convention, and union members made up well over half the ticket. The rest were candidates who had declared their strong support for the party's platform. The ULP was up against the powerful Eureka Civic Federation, formed on May 7, 1903 (and formally incorporated on June 26), which suggests that its establishment may have been prompted by the perceived threat of the ULP. Founded under the auspices of the Eureka Chamber of Commerce with strong support from the Humboldt Times and Humboldt Standard, the Civic Federation boasted many of Eureka's leading Democrats and Republicans as
members. The professed aim of the federation was to encourage further commercial and industrial development in Eureka and to promote a wide range of municipal improvements, including better streets, public parks, and more grandiose public buildings. In a circular issued just before the election, the ULP accused the Civic Federation of being an autocratic clique that had not allowed its membership any say in the selection of candidates, and it appealed directly to the union vote: “Do you favor union labor? Do you favor yourself? If you do, vote the Union Labor ticket, and thereby strengthen unionism. It is the only honestly made ticket.” The Standard denounced the circular as a “pernicious” effort to “array class against class.”

The union leader Joseph Parker’s campaign for mayor was hurt by questions about whether he had resided in the city long enough to run for office and by the fact that his rival for the Union Labor party nomination remained in the field. In a four-way race, Parker polled a somewhat disappointing 17 percent of the vote. Other Union Labor candidates performed much more impressively. Three ULP candidates, including Charles Devlin, gained executive offices, and three of five councilmen elected had the endorsement of the party.

The labor movement did not venture directly into politics again until 1906. In the interim, it succeeded in getting most candidates for local and state office to appear before the Eureka Trades Council to explain their stand on important political issues. Resolutions were passed periodically denouncing the California legislature for its neglect of vital issues affecting labor. Labor News hailed the results of the 1905 Eureka elections, asserting that the mayor and three of the incoming City Council members had pledged themselves as friendly to labor. Even more important, as far as the Humboldt labor movement was concerned, measures to amend the city charter to provide for the initiative and referendum gained approval.

The labor movement decided to reenter politics in 1906, and in the summer of that year reconstituted the ULP. The party’s platform demanded the public ownership of all utilities; an eight-hour day for all workers; the abolition of child labor; the direct election of the U.S. president and senators; restriction on all immigration to the United States; an employer-liability law, and laws providing for better sanitary conditions at the workplace; and the institution of women’s suffrage. Virtually all ULP nominees were union members, and they formed part of an almost complete ticket.

The ULP elected only one of its candidates, but its performance was nevertheless impressive. Everett Logan, a carpenter and president of the Eureka Trades Council, won 43 percent of the Humboldt County
vote in his battle for a seat in the state senate. Logan obtained 51 percent of the vote in Eureka. Charles Grambarth garnered 38 percent of the vote in his contest for a seat in the California assembly. The ULP elected a sheriff, and in the other county contests the party generally received at least 30 percent of the vote. The Democratic party endorsed some ULP candidates, but in general this was true when it would have been futile for the Democrats to have competed with the ULP. Indeed, in the few contests where the Democrats offered a candidate, they were decisively beaten by the ULP nominees.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) attempted to attract a following in Humboldt County at a time when the AFL was at the peak of its power in the county and successfully organizing the county’s lumber workers. In late 1905, Ben Williams, a leading IWW organizer, arrived in Eureka. The Eureka Trades Council cordially offered Williams an opportunity to speak at the Union Labor Hall. Williams’s speech was not much more than a recitation of extracts from the IWW’s constitution and evidenced little knowledge of the recent history of the county’s labor movement. He declared that the IWW stood for the abolition of the capitalist class and argued that the organization of labor based on trades was irrelevant and useless. He described the AFL as an organization of stooges working for the capitalist class and proposed that all labor be divided into 13 industries controlled by a central body of representatives from each industry. Many in the audience challenged the broad assertions of Williams. He was asked specifically to show what the IWW could do that the AFL had not done, or was at least trying to do.77 Labor News commented critically on his speech:

He [Williams] made so many sweeping and rash statements that it is difficult to see how such procedure can gain much sympathy for the cause of the Industrial Workers of the World. To say, as he did, that the AFL and the trade unions of today are useless and never did any good for the workers is absurd. . . . The AFL has its faults and there is room for improvement. The IWW have some good features but these can be adopted by the AFL as soon as the majority of workers are ready to make the change . . . Many of the claims of the new organization seem visionary and impractical. Instead of taking people and conditions as they are they seem ready to go ahead on the basis of what people ought to be. What any local in Humboldt County would have to gain by joining the new organization it is difficult to see.78

The fact that, notwithstanding a concerted effort by Williams and the IWW to establish a rival union of lumber workers, the Wobblies failed to attract a significant following among them or other groups of workers indicates that most Humboldt County workers agreed with Labor News’s assessment. The IWW’s charges against the AFL else-
where may have been well founded, but in Humboldt they carried little credibility. Between 1900 and 1906, the county’s labor movement, under the auspices of the AFL, established almost from scratch one of the strongest bastions of unionism in California. The Eureka Trades Council and unions affiliated with the AFL made a determined effort to organize workers regardless of their skill, sex, or nationality without any evident support or interference from the national AFL and with only token moral support from the California State Federation of Labor. Imbued with a sense of righteous destiny, the labor movement nurtured a vibrant union culture. And, in most trades and occupations, labor became a formidable bargaining force that was able to secure increases in wages and improvements in working conditions.

Nevertheless, even as the Humboldt County movement was at its zenith, there were portents of the troubled path that lay ahead. Ironically, labor was to some extent the victim of its own success; successful organization efforts soon brought strong counterorganization by employers. Thus, in April 1906, Eureka’s builders and contractors established the Employers’ Association of Humboldt County, and in October, the Merchants’ Association of Eureka was founded. By this time, employers faced the possibility that unions might permanently entrench themselves and further erode employer prerogatives. A worsening economic climate in 1907 stiffened their resolve. Most ominously, lumber employers, confronted by the rapidly growing IBWSW, decided that the new union would have to be crushed when the 1907 season opened. The resulting strike was to have dire consequences for the whole Humboldt County labor movement.