William Heighton’s dream of mounting a radical counterpoise to the depredations of capital suddenly seemed possible in the spring 1827. His rousing speeches goaded workingmen into coming together in the Mechanics’ Union of Trade Associations, the nation’s first bona fide labor movement, and then organizing their own press and reading rooms. The following year they extended the front of struggle to politics and formed the Working Men’s party, the M.U.T.A.’s political arm. But the optimism that inspired labor’s awakening quickly turned to despair. Radicals neglected the Mechanics’ Union upon plunging into politics, and the party itself ran poorly in 1830 and even worse in 1831, its last year on the ballot.¹

Even at the height of its power in 1827-1828, the Mechanics’ Union scarcely represented Philadelphia’s working class. A union of artisans, it overlooked unskilled workers, factory hands, and specialized craftsmen, owing to the inertia of these workers and to the policies of some member unions. Such unions honored the custom of limiting membership to trained journeymen. The members of the Association of Journeymen Hatters, for example, barred non-
apprenticed workers and tradesmen working "on any machinery that has a tendency to reduce the manual labour required at the business." Machiney was inconsequential to the followers of the Journeymen Tailors' Association, but the quality of work and workmanship was very much on their minds. The unquestioned aristocrats of their trade, they considered "costly broad cloth" and other fine garments made to order worthy of their skillful hands, but not "a light summer coatee" or slop work, which they demeaned as the "work of women, and . . . not . . . so dignified a subject of employment as the former, which men alone have the honor to make." Men or women making up cheap clothing were unwelcome in this union.

Radicals of a more democratic bent discouraged such restrictions. They determined to expand the scope of unionism, and urged the organization of semiskilled workers in the crafts and of wage earners in vocations without traditions of collection action. They were especially attentive to the plight of the millhands. Heighton published the letters of protesting operatives in the Mechanics' Free Press, and editorialized on their behalf. But this was a brief interlude in the short life of the Mechanics' Union. The drive to democratize unionism was aborted when the leaders turned their attention to politics and the Mechanics' Union remained the preserve of radicals and a handful of followers; traditionalists and revivalists stood outside the fold. Wary of the radicals and suspicious of one another, they continued to be more responsive to fire alarms and church bells.

The apathetic mood of working-class Philadelphia and the desultory state of unionism shifted dramatically in the years immediately following the end of the Working Men's party. Rumblings of change appeared in October of 1833, when a group of shoemakers, tailors, and bookbinders met to assess the past and weigh the prospects of revitalizing the labor movement. Heighton was not in attendance. He left Philadelphia forever at the beginning of the thirties, passing the baton of leadership to his former colleagues in the Mechanics' Union, who turned out in force. These veteran unionists spoke against mixing politics with unionism for fear of rehearsing the mistakes of the past and their view held sway. Delegates agreed to effect a nonpartisan labor movement and summoned area workers to assist in drafting a constitution and bylaws. In the spring of 1834 they
completed their work and unveiled the General Trades' Union of the City and County of Philadelphia, which soon became the most impressive city central union in Jacksonian America. Within two years the G.T.U. grew from an embryo of seventeen affiliates (the Mechanics' Union had only eighteen member unions) and about 2,000 members, to a giant of more than fifty unions representing over 10,000 wage earners.

The G.T.U. seems to have been more highly structured than the Mechanics' Union. There were five executive officers elected semi-annually, two deliberative bodies, the General Assembly and Finance Committee, and a wealth of elective and appointive committees. Each affiliate had proportionate representation in the Assembly, the major decision-making body, which met weekly, and a single deputy on the Finance Committee. Unions were admitted and decisions reached by a majority vote of the Assembly, and funds were raised by assessing each member 6½¢ a month. Financial matters received close attention. The Treasury Committee could not make disbursements "unless by authority from the Union, under an order from the President, attested by the Secretary," and the Finance Committee scrutinized the books of each affiliate "at least once in three months."

Conservatives often attacked the G.T.U. for being "undemocratic." Union spokesmen answered such charges in letters to the local press that emphasized the semiannual election of officers and union delegates, and the institutional checks on the abuse of power. "The funds of the Union," wrote one leader in response to a detractor, "are . . . secure against the powerful representation of the larger societies, (for) each . . . [union] selects one individual to transact the money matters of the institution, denominated the Finance Committee, and this alone is under their control, so that the society of fifty members have [sic] the same responsibility and interest in the funds that the society of nine hundred and fifty have [sic]." Another officer pointed to the bicameral governance structure as further evidence of democratic rule and boasted that this arrangement approximated the "system of our National Government."

Like any organization, however, the character of the G.T.U. is reflected more accurately in its behavior than in such roseate rhetoric. There was substantial turnover in leadership. Twenty-three men
filled its executive offices from 1834 to 1838 and thirteen served only one term. But the Union's scanty records disclose that some individuals exerted outstanding influence. John Ferral, William English, William Thompson, and Edward Penniman were especially active and energetic within the Assembly and on committees, and some trades were over-represented in the highest offices. Seven, or nearly a third of the officers, for example, were men's and ladies' cordwainers. Nor did the checks and balances of governance prevent the Union from acting with vigor and dispatch. Authority was frequently delegated to committees whose jurisdiction ranged from mediating disputes, both between affiliates and between unions and employers, to organizing workers and investigating the constitutions of applicants for membership.

The G.T.U. diverged from the Mechanics' Union in ways other than scale, structure, and political orientation. In attracting more members, the Trades' Union represented a wider constituency of occupational and cultural groups. In part this was the result of the affiliates' relaxation of membership standards and efforts to organize semiskilled workers. The house carpenters, for example, had a reputation for scorning "half-trained" workmen, but broke with tradition in bracing for a confrontation with contractors over the length of the workday in the summer of 1835. Preparing for the strike, they divided the city and county into three zones, and dispatched teams of organizers to shops and construction sites in each. The committeemen canvassed fellow tradesmen to "persuade them if possible to unite ... in obtaining the object." Cordwainers, cigar makers, and others in the sweated trades worked assiduously to bring the unorganized into their fold. The men's and ladies' cordwainers (men working on women's footwear) concentrated their organizing drives in the suburban districts which housed large groups of Irish and native-born traditionalists. The men's branch apparently excelled in integrating the foreign-born into their union, for these practitioners of the "gentle craft" elected Irish immigrant John Ryan president. The spirit of mobilization also gripped nonradical workers in occupations without histories of unionism or informal collective protest. Traditionalist frame tenders and revivalist millhands of both sexes organized for the first time and joined with radicals in the G.T.U.
The ecumenicalism of the Trade Union derived from the convergence of several factors. Drastic economic change made the late twenties and thirties a difficult period for all wage earners. Rising prices and declining earnings compounded the problem of making ends meet, and the early stages of production for mass markets triggered a general deterioration of working conditions and a tightening of work discipline. Such developments encouraged feelings of mutualism and grievances in common. The division of labor and cheapening of skills, for example, prompted skilled tradesmen to reassess their policy of limiting union membership to their own kind. The influx of specialized workers gave them the choice of either maintaining exclusivity and inviting trade-union obsolescence or adjusting to new realities; evidently, most adjusted. Workers also lost a measure of autonomy, as employers extracted extra effort by extending hours or by cutting piece rates, and as production moved from homes and small shops to the advanced settings. Traditionalist workers who had battled one another and racial foes in earlier years suddenly turned against employers in resistance to excessive toil.

The traits of modernizing production even aroused revivalists by the mid-thirties. Some clerical proponents of the Protestant work ethic now detected ravelings of the moral fabric in unbridled acquisitiveness and single-minded attention to work. They employed the occasion of a circular letter on Sabbatarianism to reprimand overwork as a sign of "avarice" and a cause of immorality and familial decay. Everyone required an "occasional respite from labor" in order to maintain health, observe the duties of parenthood, and ensure individual and national prosperity. "Our own property, . . . . our domestic comfort, and our children's happiness and security," they reasoned, "are dependent upon the blessings which distinguish us as a people."16

Their working-class constituents, usually quite obedient, appropriated this reasoning for their own ends at a temperance rally on the Fourth of July. The "Glorious Fourth" marked a day of commemoration, and the celebrants in 1835 included the Mechanics' and Workingmen's Temperance Society, whose followers were among the most forceful proponents of the new industrial morality. Albert Barnes and other notable evangelical clergymen delivered speeches touting the virtues of hard work and led the gathering in
songs written for the occasion. But the class unity was shaken when workers in the audience submitted songs of their own, one of which expressed solidarity with fellow wage earners striking for a ten-hour day. Entitled “The Temperance Strike,” it reads:

His chains the tyrant rum, too long
     Has tried to cast around us,—
Shall not Mechanics prove too strong,
     When any would confound us?—
We shall! we shall! we feel our strength
     And who no sword will draw,
When we for freedom strike at length?
     Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!

Our Fathers—who may see their like!
     When trodden down as cattle,
For liberty knew how to strike,
     And win the righteous battle!
And shall their sons be slaves to drink?
     O never! never! Nor
Will Working Men like cowards shrink,
     No boys!— hurrah! hurrah!

The pledge to Temperance we renew
     For she is Freedom's daughter—
In generous draughts of mountain dew,
     In cold and limpid water!
Strike hands with us!—for wine like this
     The toper never saw;
E'en Woman's lip such cup may kiss
     Unstained, hurrah! hurrah!

Some strike for wages, some for hours,
     Shall we refuse?—O never!
For time and cash we pledge our powers,
     And strike for both for ever!
Then strike who will for “6 to 6,”
     We flinch not in the war;
For Temperance and for Seventy-Six
     We strike—hurrah! hurrah!

The event referred to in these lyrics, the strike for a ten-hour day, offers the best evidence of the depth of worker unrest. It began
inauspiciously in late May of 1835, when the coal heavers on the Schuylkill docks left their jobs in protest against long hours. Parading through the city on June 3, they caught the eye of cordwainers peering through workshop windows. The cordwainers threw down their awls and rushed to join the procession, shouting “We are all day laborers!” The mushrooming line of march attracted carpenters and other tradesmen in quick succession and precipitated spontaneous rallies of artisans throughout the city. Smiths, leather dressers, plumbers, painters, and cigar makers among others voted to stand out by the end of the week. The republic’s first general strike was on; and general it was. The fervor reached into textile mills around the county and into the homes of outworkers, who normally had no interest in the hours question. But rate cuts forced the cottagers to work longer and faster. The only form their struggle for shorter hours could take was a wage increase, and they struck for rate advances. A festive air prevailed. There were great parades and rallies uniting workers with master craftsmen and other middle class sympathizers all bearing banners with variations of the motto “6 to 6.” Friendly shopkeepers displayed this battle cry in windows and youngsters chalked it on fences. Wage earners were seen everywhere except at their workplaces, which moved the United States Gazette to note the obvious: “Our buildings are at a stand, and business generally is . . . impeded.”

No one knows how many workers walked off their jobs or won their point through negotiation. On June 10, after some mechanics celebrated victory and others prepared to stand out, one newspaper counted twenty trades still on strike. At least double that number—possibly as many as 20,000 workers—participated in walkouts, and all were successful, though the millhands compromised on an eleven-hour day and some trades waited until the fall and following spring before announcing a ten-hour day. The laborers who had sparked the strike were among the most triumphant of all. Those toiling on public projects in Southwark extracted a wage increase as well as an ordinance making ten hours a legal day’s work.

Irish handloom weaver John Ferral correctly pronounced the general strike an unexpected boon to the General Trades’ Union. Membership, he happily observed, soared in the wake of the stand out, as ad hoc strike committees created in the fervor of the moment
turned into unions, and established societies inducted scores of journeymen. The inflow of new recruits, most of whom were strangers to trade unionism, transformed the G.T.U. from a small clique of radicals into a diversified union representing workers of various cultures.

Though declining working conditions pitted traditionalist and revivalist workers against employers, and propelled them into the Trades' Union, neither these conditions nor the euphoria of the general strike alone shaped the G.T.U. or sustained class unity. Such solidarity, in the 1830s, as in any period, could not be sustained without the cultivation of talented leadership.

Trades' Union radicals were uniquely equipped for the task of fostering intraclass harmony. They appreciated the competing political and religious loyalties of their followers, and judiciously eschewed fractious issues for the sake of unity. Most of them, for example, supported the Democratic party, following the collapse of the Working Men's party. They vied for public office under the Democratic banner and served as party officials, but studiously refrained from pressing partisan causes at Union gatherings and steadfastly resisted the temptation to convert the Union into a party adjunct. When a well-meaning but misguided critic recommended allying with the Democrats, a Trades' Unionist rejected the idea with the explanation that the G.T.U. welcomed "men of every party. A thousand different ideas would clash together and annihilate the institution in the moment the attempt [to merge] was made."26 Union leaders also toned down their hostility toward organized religion in recognition of the volatility of the issue and in observance of Heighton's injunction: "Let the subject of religion alone—or the death knell of our Associations will soon be sounded."27 With this in mind radical saddler and G.T.U. official John Crossin explained that the "followers of Christ acknowledge a time for all things—we do the same."28 Affiliates of the Trades' Union thus barred the discussion of religion and the Union itself, "asked no qualification of birth or parentage—nor sign nor token to gain admission."29

Radicals hewed to this policy outside the G.T.U. They were especially watchful of employers, politicians, and clergymen given to fomenting intraclass discord by exacerbating religious and ethnic tensions. John Ferral stood out as a voice of moderation and con-
ciliation. In March of 1834 he and William Gilmore, a cordwainer and close friend, came to Manayunk, where an operatives' strike was in progress. The stoppage had been called to contest a wage reduction that slashed earnings by a substantial 30 percent. This pay cut united the entire workforce at Joseph Ripka’s Schuylkill factory and the strikers held firm throughout March and April, even though Ripka hired a small force of strikebreakers and protected them with armed guards. In mid-May Ripka turned in desperation to Manayunk’s Protestant clergy, who dutifully urged the operatives back to work. Ferral and Gilmore responded with a mass meeting and a list of resolutions, one of which tactfully chided the ministers for the “recent attempt made by certain persons in this place, to force some to go back to work at the reduced prices, and more so because they are religious pastors, from whom better might be expected.” The millhands not only endorsed the resolutions, but stayed out for two more weeks, then returned to work with a wage increase.

The following fall brought Ferral another opportunity to act the part of conciliator. Whiggish politicians, who were rapidly earning a well-deserved reputation for exploiting sectarian differences, performed up to standard in the local elections. Hard-pressed to break the Democratic strangle hold on the suburban districts, they nominated an Irish Protestant for the state Senate and campaigned for Protestant votes with nativist slogans and anti-Catholic epithets. Their strategy reminded Ferral of the Old World’s hateful politics and moved him to convene a meeting of Irish Americans, without regard to religion. He beseeched his listeners to recall their past experiences of Ireland, where “aristocracy” exploited religious hatred in order to “keep the honest and industrious population divided, rendering them . . . an easy prey to their enemies.” Such appeals on the part of radicals countered the polarizing force of the politicians, and their leadership helps explain why areas like Southwark, Moyamensing, Kensington, and Manayunk, which mixed together Protestant and Catholic workers, resisted the politics of ethnicity and returned solid Democratic majorities during the thirties.

Radicals worked to direct the class unity that they had done so much to encourage into trade-union channels. They traveled across the county spreading the gospel of organization. Edward Penniman
(of the Coachmakers', Painters', and Trimmers' Union), John Crossin (of the Saddlers' and Harnessmakers'), Thomas Hogan (of the Printers'), and William English (of the Ladies' Cordwainers), to name the most active, helped unionize fellow tradesmen and staffed the executive offices of the unions in their respective crafts. They also ventured outside their own callings in a concerted effort to organize noncraft and industrial workers. Ferral and Gilmore assisted and, perhaps, even precipitated, the unionization of Manayunk textile hands. And English and Hogan took some credit for the emergence of a combination of paperworkers at Mill Creek in the mid-thirties. A terse account of their exploits thus reads, "met an assemblage of individuals engaged in the manufacture of paper, who after hearing addresses . . . formed themselves into a Trade Society."33

Not even the imposing barrier of sex dampened the enthusiasm of radical organizers, even though they did not regard women as equals. Radicals, in fact, took a dim view of women as employees. Like most male workers, they decried the "multiplying descriptions of labor for females" as a "pecuniary injury" to men, because of job competition, and a "moral injury" to women, because gainful employment transferred them from the protective isolation of the home to the inelegancies of the workshop, where they rubbed shoulders with crude and vulgar men and risked acquiring "ruder habits" and "losing all that sacred influence which it is the peculiar prerogative of woman to exercise over man."34 This point of view conformed to the "cult of the true womanhood" then being popularized by clergymen and writers, but was only one source of radical antipathy to women's employment.35 The other was rooted in radical fascination with the physiological literature that depicted women as the weaker sex, and more inclined to nervous disorders. Such "wisdom" convinced radicals that women needed sheltering from the "overstimulation" of gainful employment, and were best off in the home rearing rationalist children.36

Despite such patronizing attitudes, radicals appreciated the hardships of women who did work and did not hesitate to applaud their unionizing or assist their struggles against rapacious employers.37 (Blacks, of course, were another matter entirely. There is no evidence of radicals endorsing the rights of Blacks, either as workers or as citizens.) Thus the printer Thomas Hogan and the hand
loom weaver John Ferral spoke on behalf of women textile operatives and paperworkers and proved instrumental in organizing both groups. Radical cordwainers had a selfish reason to oppose female employment: their employers hired them by the score when they divided up the work. But when the male members of the Union Beneficial Society of Cordwainers, Ladies' Branch, learned of a strike conducted by a struggling union of female corders and binders, they closed ranks behind the beleaguered women. The union's leaders pilloried "heartless" employers for conspiring to "crush a suffering class of females" and, resolving to take the binders "under our wing to sink or swim with us," organized a solidarity committee to coordinate a joint strike and solicit donations. The same spirit animated a meeting of the cigar makers that produced a resolution sympathizing with the women of the trade whose "earnings fell below a just compensation for their labor," and inviting them "in a body to strike with us."

As these incidents imply, radicals were effective organizers because of their remarkable ability to relate to the inarticulate. In an age when the spoken word carried a powerful inspirational thrust, their forceful oratory mobilized workers of varying occupations and cultural origins. If we are to believe eyewitnesses, nearly all Trades' Union leaders shared this oratorical skill; among them, however, William English surpassed all rivals. His charisma and command of language dazzled the most skeptical and astonished Trades' Union critics. A favorite speaker at Union rallies, he once addressed a meeting in support of Boston strikers. Two reporters from the city's conservative United States Gazette were present. Though inclined to reflect the Gazette's antilabor bias, they grudgingly conceded to have "rarely listened to more effective eloquence." English in particular evoked their amazement and admiration. He eschewed "grandiloquence," "ranting," "farfetched figure or long quotation," and other expectations of an unlettered stump speaker in favor of a "direct appeal, in vigorous language, to the experience and attachments of the audience." Upon scanning the crowd, they marked "upon the countenances . . . the changes which each effective sentence operated, and then . . . understood the secret of . . . [the] effects which popular orators of olden times were wont to work on the minds of the people."
The substance of the speech is unknown, but most likely English identified the ten-hour movement with the protection of republican liberties. Radicals routinely invoked the republican idiom on such occasions and during their own "standouts," as their strikes were called. The members of English's own union equated their work stoppage for a rate increase with the struggle of the "toil-worn veterans of '76 who nobly moistened the soil with their blood in defense of equal rights and equal privileges." A radical shoemaker contested the arbitrary imposition of work rules in a similar fashion. The right to "require strict observance of such . . . regulations," he insisted, was not absolute because journeymen were republican citizens whose rights carried over to the workplace and, therefore, should be "consulted before a rule is permanently established." Nor did the employer have the "right to charge the Journeymen in his . . . trade or art, with unsurping a control over his business when they merely refused to be governed by rules or laws which they may deem to be despotic. . . . And when . . . Journeymen have resisted the enforcement of such rules and have brought the subject fairly before all the members of the same trade and they in turn make common cause in resisting what they conceive to be tyranny and oppression, are they not strictly justifiable in making such resistance?" A Manayunk cotton spinner answered this rhetorical question in the positive and raised precisely the same point in condemning work rules. "In spite of all that is or may be said on the contrary," he affirmed, "they are not the offspring of mutual consent."

This invocation of republicanism served a dual purpose. As E. P. Thompson observes, popular protest rests on some "legitimizing notion" of right. In this respect, radical republicanism was analogous to the "Rights of Freeborn Englishmen," the slogan appropriated by English artisans of the time. It justified dissent around immediate issues, as well as the larger movement for social equality. It also operated as a bridge between radicals, on the one hand, and revivalists and traditionalists, on the other. All workers spoke the language of Republicanism, even if they attached slightly different meaning to it, and by summoning republican metaphors, radicals provided a substantive and symbolic rallying point for their class.

It would be foolish to contend, however, that the chemistry of
worker degradation and skillful leadership dissolved all points of conflict among the G.T.U. membership. Internal squabbles arose from time to time over several issues, the most predictable of which was union jurisdiction. Trades undergoing the division of labor were especially inclined to jurisdictional disputes. The ladies’ cordwainers discretely avoided one in cooperating with the women binders and corders, but the blacksmiths objected when a union of horse shoers—comparable to the binders—applied for membership in the Trades’ Union. The Union leadership appointed a mediation committee, which only confused matters further by submitting minority and majority reports. The delegate Assembly rejected both documents and ordered the committee to reconvene. It reached consensus the second time, but its report produced such acrimony that the Assembly adjourned “without coming to a decision.” And the disappointed horse shoers withdrew their application.  

Trades’ Union leaders recognized the recurring problem of competing jurisdictional claims. A Union-appointed committee that met in 1839 to consider structural reform drafted a report that lamented the “indiscriminate association of trades without any regard to affinity.” The report hinted that the building tradesmen, chronically involved in jurisdictional infighting, were particularly displeased with this arrangement, and it recommended reorganizing the Union along the lines of the later American Federation of Labor, that is, with councils or associations of kindred trades with “supreme” authority in their “own sphere of action.” The 1837 panic had already greatly weakened the Union, however, and the proposal was a dead letter.

Controversy also developed over guidelines for dispensing benefits to striking affiliates. Member unions were spared the bureaucratic nightmare of the Knights of Labor, but they still had to contend with strict procedures. Applications for strike payments required the approval of a Union-appointed committee, which investigated the cause of the dispute, the means employed, and the “probable chances” of successful negotiations, and the sanction of a two-thirds vote of the general membership. “Sherman,” writing in the popular press, detected an “advantage” in the Union’s negative rulings “in more than one instance,” but some union deputies disagreed. They settled upon streamlining procedures and presented a resolution ordering a
committee to develop a “more certain and effectual plan in sanctioning strikes and granting assistance to Societies on stand.” Its fate, however, is unknown.

Much of this infighting was inevitable in an organization as large and diversified and, one might add, as primitive as the Trades’ Union. But disputes over jurisdiction and Union policy were more irksome and time-consuming than consequential. None were serious enough to threaten the unity that was the G.T.U.’s hallmark. “Sherman’s” assessment that the Trades’ Union was the “only system yet devised which has been able to harmonize all parties and sects” was not the idle boast of a partisan.

The cohesiveness that prompted “Sherman’s” appraisal was evident after the dust of the spirited summer of 1835 had settled. Worker struggles in the following years, though far less dramatic than the general strike, demonstrated ongoing solidarity. In January of 1836, for example, the journeyman bookbinders embarked on a protracted strike when the master binders abrogated a wage agreement. Faced with both a rate reduction amounting to 30 percent and formidable foes who organized a masters’ association and issued a blacklist, the journeymen won the sympathy of the G.T.U., local unions, and area bookbinders. All of these groups, including twenty-one Philadelphia unions, contributed in excess of $3,400 to the bookbinders’ war chest.

Even Moyamensing’s impoverished handloom weavers felt an identity of interest with these prestigious strikers. Barely able to support their own families, the frame tenders donated $100 to the cause “in order to show our marked hostility to this claim of Mastership on the part of the Employing Bookbinders.” Later that year it was the handloom weavers’ turn to test the good will of fellow Trades’ Unionists. Moyamensing and Kensington weavers struck to resist rate cuts in the fall and asked the Union for financial assistance. They were voted a total of $1,500 in strike benefits, which sufficed for the loom tenders in Kensington, but left those in Moyamensing short of funds. When they appealed for additional aid, a group of cordwainers, saddlers, and carpenters, reflecting the Union’s mutualist ethic, organized a three-man committee to solicit donations.

If traditionalist Irish handloom weavers seemed to be unlikely recipients of artisanal sympathy, so were the day laborers. Despite
the unpopularity of their religion, the weavers had at least some claim to membership in the fraternity of artisans; but the unskilled were seen by nonradicals as a group apart, which is why tradesmen who banded together with them during the general strike balked at admitting them to the Trades' Union despite the advocacy of some radicals. But these opponents had a change of heart in the spring of 1836, when they not only welcomed the day laborers, but rushed to their defense.

The admission of the laborers to the Trades' Union came in the course of a stirring struggle between the Schuylkill dockers and the coal merchants. The lines were drawn when the merchants rejected the dockers' request for a rate advance. A strike followed in which the merchants posted advertisements for strikebreakers. Because few scabs were willing to brave the laborers' picket line or intimidations, the merchants looked to the courts and public officials for relief, charging the strikers with breach of the peace. They had the backing of Whig Mayor John Swift, who ordered the arrest of eight laborers and a tavern owner, an appropriate leader of a protest march staged by these traditionalist workmen. Bail was set at $2,500 each, an impossibly high amount, and it broke the walkout. Swift, in setting bail, delivered a blistering attack on the Trades' Union. It was held to blame for recent "mischiefs," and Swift threatened, so reports had it, to strike at its "root" until he "felled the tree that it might lay and rot."

Swift failed in this clumsy attempt at discrediting the Trades' Union. The imprisoning of the day laborers created martyrs, not pariahs, and played into the hands of the radicals, who had sought to get them into the Union for the greater part of a year. His menacing conduct was interpreted as an assault on all workers, and generated such support for the embattled laborers that the Trades' Unionists arranged for their legal defense as well as voting to admit them. Their trials had a happy ending as well, for the court twice acquitted them—once for breach of the peace and once for conspiracy.

By embracing the laborers, Philadelphia artisans became the first skilled workmen to join with the unskilled in the same union. Their feat would not be repeated until the 1860s, when central labor unions united combinations of casual laborers with those of craftsmen. Radicals took some pride in this achievement and in the G.T.U.'s
stunning record. Trades' Union muscle helped establish a ten-hour day, organized labor's burning issue, and every walkout subsidized by Union funds in the seven months following the general strike ended in victory.53

Yet no radical envisioned class cohesion or even trade unionism as ends in themselves. Repelled by the horrors of poverty and the intellectual deadening produced by overwork, they endorsed any form of collective action that might alleviate these conditions. As radicals with dreams of reorganizing production along cooperative principles, however, they expected meager returns from trade unionism if workers continued to squander hard won leisure hours by fraternizing on street corners, in pubs, or at fire houses, or in churches and Sunday schools. According to the radicals, such activities retarded moral and intellectual advancement and cancelled the gains extracted at the workplace. They pressed for constructive uses of leisure, which involved cultivating tastes for reading and discourse and transforming class feeling, expressed through trade unionism, into radical consciousness.

The didacticism that punctuated the private life of radicals imbued their public life as well. Convinced of the need to lure revivalists and traditionalists from their chosen pastimes, they sponsored a range of functions and organizations designed to replace or at least compete with pub and pulpit. Rallies, meetings, and picnics with agitational speeches were complemented by debating clubs, lyceums, and reading rooms where workers could hear lectures and debates or consult radical literature, including the Radical Reformer and the National Laborer, organs of the G.T.U., in relaxed surroundings.

The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (S.D.U.K.), the major educative auxiliary of the Trades' Union, demonstrates the emphasis on self-improvement, radical style. Union leaders gave lectures twice monthly on topics of interest such as radical political economy, temperance, and the relationship between them.59 Records of these meetings do not survive, but the proceedings probably conformed to what we know of the "Moral and Physical Improvement Club," a local expression of the S.D.U.K. Speakers conveyed the essence of the labor theory of value and principles of primitive socialism through vivid example rather than abstraction. One lesson, we are told, went as follows:
If A goes to Germantown, for instance, and agrees with B to make him a gig, price asked, $200, which A agrees to give; he receives the gig, pays money for it, all right and fair; but he afterwards sells this gig for $220—their argument . . . was, that A is a scoundrel, rogue, robber . . . if he does not give B $10, half the profits made on it, as it was the production of his labor.60

Workers who did not attend such sessions but shared workplaces with radicals heard much the same thing. Radicals employed in small shops would read newspapers and hold informal seminars during the frequent dull spells in the course of the day.61

The impact of radical education is difficult to gauge. There is compelling evidence that some members, whose number defies quantification, refrained from this facet of G.T.U. activities. Such workers were driven to trade unionism by the polemics of the leaders and by the deterioration of work. They flocked to established combinations or formed their own loose organizations on the spur of the moment, but left the union fold when immediate grievances were satisfied or unionism showed signs of weakness. Their behavior accounts for the fitful rhythm of union membership, which swelled in the inspiring nine months following the general strike and fell off thereafter when employers in some trades came together in masters’ associations and defeated key strikes.62 These defeats so dampened the enthusiasm of some wage earners that membership thinned and the number of affiliates dropped from fifty-one in the spring of 1836 to about thirty a year later.63 It is impossible to know the cultural identities of these defectors, but one may assume that a disproportionate number were revivalists; their initial commitment to unionism was tenuous, and they were exposed to the potent countervailing force of their own political and cultural leaders. Evangelical ministers and Whiggish editorialists, stepping up their war against the Trades’ Union in the spring of 1836, stigmatized the Union as “radical,” “Jacobin,” and the standard epithet of all conservatives, “foreign import,” and posed as defenders of the sacred rights of property against the levelist thrust of labor.64 These fulminations were subject to lengthy rebuttals, but there seems little doubt that they tainted the G.T.U. for some evangelical workers. One of them, writing under the fitting pseudonym of “True American,” endorsed
the jaundiced views of Union opponents and, sounding the alarm against the specter of godlessness and agrarianism, called upon fellow workers to “Strike for your altars and your fires, God, and your native land.”

Yet there is good reason to conclude that the G.T.U.'s agitational and educative activities were of considerable importance. Union rallies consistently dwarfed those of political parties, even in this age of mass politics, and exposed workers to critical modes of thought. Lectures and debates also played to healthy audiences. And while no revivalist or traditionalist testified that the persuasive oratory at such conclaves swayed him to radicalism, Union leaders reported a change in the leisure tastes of their followers. Workers who had once socialized in pubs and other settings, said a Trades' Union official, now gathered together “for the purpose of deliberating upon measures for their mutual advancement.”

The best evidence of the growing popularity of radicalism is recorded in the behavior of Union members. Affiliates with factions of radicals and new converts such as the men's and ladies' cordwainers, saddlers, tailors, and handloom weavers, put radicalism into practice beginning in the summer of 1836 by experimenting with various kinds of cooperative production. As might be expected, however, their cooperatives ran into financial difficulty and they then turned to the G.T.U. for assistance. Their editorials and letters in the Union press and speeches to the delegate assembly proposed Union loans for cooperative ventures. Union delegates warmed to the idea, passing a radical-sponsored resolution that charged a committee of nine with drafting rules governing a “Savings and Cooperative Loan Fund” and consenting to a committee stacked with partisans of the plan. They voiced additional approval at the end of the summer upon endorsing the committee report. But there was another hurdle: in order to be implemented, the plan required the amendment of the by-laws by a two-thirds vote of the affiliates, and some unions were divided on the question.

The opponents came from two quarters. First, there were some traditionalists and revivalists who rejected cooperation as “impracticable” and who preferred to fight for their rights through unions and strikes. Second, there were some workers, largely revivalists, who opposed cooperation on ideological grounds. They
showed their displeasure with the drift toward radicalism by deserting unions that had transformed themselves into cooperatives. Revivalist tailors, for example, left the Association of Journeymen Tailors for this reason. Nonetheless a large segment, and perhaps a majority, of the G.T.U.'s societies favored cooperation. Twenty-three of twenty-nine member unions, some of which had already organized cooperatives, attended (in the winter and spring of 1837) meetings on non-competitive production and the procedures involved in initiating and sustaining cooperatives. Enthusiasm ran high, diminishing only with the 1837 panic that idled thousands and destroyed or debilitated unions and cooperatives alike. A shrinking band of loyalists continued to meet without voting on whether to make Union funds available. But the depression rendered the issue irrelevant.

The economic downturn of 1837 could not have been more inopportune. It delivered the decisive blow to the weakened Union and the symptoms of irreversible decline were soon apparent. Workers now watched helplessly or put up token resistance as employers ignored wage agreements. The house painters turned out in May, but, noting the "manner in which business of every kind is depreciating," then conceded defeat. The printers summoned tradesmen "wishing to join the Association" and protect the "present" bill of prices, but failed to raise any volunteers. Even the mighty cordwainers, whose unions had been the showcase of strength and unity, were now powerless. Both groups sharply attacked employers for violating price lists, but mustered only empty threats to defend wage scales and equally empty promises to find work for the unemployed of their trade. The ladies' branch, innovative to the end, charted a new course in changing their union into a benevolent society. Other trades followed suit.

With or without benevolent societies, wage earners took whatever work they could find. As unions atrophied, so did the G.T.U., and "A Workingman" penned a fitting though slightly premature epitaph for the Union in December of 1838. "Circumstances . . . beyond the control of any," wrote the saddened warrior, "have in a degree retarded, if not entirely broken up that system; so much that . . . the head is left to support itself without the members performing their proper functions. In other words, the body is dead." Four months
later a cadre of weary radicals announced the official death of the Trades' Union.

In one blow then, the panic of 1837 crushed working-class Philadelphia's initial experiment with trade unionism and radicalism. Their combinations, cooperatives, and umbrella organization, the G.T.U., in a shambles, workers were stripped of their agencies of struggle, unification, and critical thought. But while the organizational network of radicalism crumbled, radical nostrums would persist in transmuted form and exert a profound impact on worker culture. Just as evangelical divines imbued some wage earners with the principles of industrial morality, radical leaders, aided by class conflict itself, passed on radicalism to revivalists and traditionalists.

Labor's immediate task, however, was not to lament the end of the Trades' Union. Rather, it was to survive in the midst of the most prolonged economic downturn in memory. Few emerged from this dismal period unscarred.