3 The Potential and Limitations of the Trade Agreement

I support the left
though I’m leaning, leaning to the right
—Cream, “The Politician”

“It seems to me that I hear nothing but strikes now,” Gertrude Beeks wrote in May 1901 to Ralph Easley, the secretary and driving force of the newly founded National Civic Federation, an organization whose goal was to bring the leading lights of business, labor, and the general public together to solve industrial conflict. With a palpable sense of urgency, Beeks reported how workers in several cities prepared protests, “threaten[ing] catastrophes.”

Beeks was not wrong that strikes seemed to be everywhere. From 1897 to 1902 union membership had more than tripled, and the last two years of that period witnessed nearly three times as many strikes as the first two. If the late nineteenth century had seen the pragmatic, occupationally focused business unionism of the American Federation of Labor eclipse the more idealistic rhetoric and broader base of the Knights of Labor, the turn of the twentieth century was nevertheless a time of vigorous labor mobilization. That mobilization made use of new language and new interpretations of old concepts. This did not necessarily mean that workers endorsed the new order of things. Many workers may have continued to prefer the vision that construed “free labor” as economic independence to the turn-of-the-century interpretation that portrayed it as selling a commodity in the free marketplace. They may have scoffed at the idea that “liberty of contract” put workers and employers on an equal footing. But that did not prevent workers from taking these new orthodoxies and making use of them to demand a better deal for workers.

After all, if labor was a commodity and the market was free, surely workers could not be castigated for deciding when, where, and how to contract for the sale of their labor. If they wished to contract collectively rather than individually, was it not within their liberty to do so? Since the 1880s, an
increasing number of political economists had begun to find such arguments compelling. The general consensus by the turn of the twentieth century was that wage work, mass production, and long-distance trade had irredeemably eclipsed the world of the small independent producer; there was no return to the artisan republic. Given this new reality, unless workers had a right to act collectively, they would hardly be in a position to bargain with the employer on equal terms. Such assessments became common among the young economists who founded the American Economic Association in 1885 and focused their attention on historical and empirical economics. As these economists tried to reconcile the idea of democracy with the now seemingly permanent industrial society, one practical answer that many of them came to support was the organization of labor.

In some ways, this vision fit well into the turn-of-the-century moment. It was the “age of organization,” after all. The economic upheavals of the post–Civil War decades—the massive growth in manufacturing output and the size of factories, the shock of the 1870s and 1890s economic depressions, the competition that pushed down profits and caused business failures, the new extremes of wealth and poverty, the violent labor conflicts—had generated a sense of malaise in which laissez-faire ideas about the economy appeared entirely inadequate to address new realities. It increasingly seemed that the modern thing to do was to replace unfettered market competition with orderly and coordinated transactions. The depth of the desire for a well-governed modern society was revealed in everything from corporate mergers to demands for municipal ownership to government-run projects. Businessmen sought ways to rein in cutthroat competition and to make production more efficient. Critics of corruption in the cities called for more efficient city government. Both socialists and reformers drew up schemes for municipal ownership or at least regulation of public utilities.

The apprehensions of the era’s reformers were tempered with a generous dose of optimism and an industrious sense of purpose. Like Gertrude Beeks, they may have feared catastrophe, but they remained hopeful: Beeks concluded her letter by telling Ralph Easley, “Well, when one hears of these threatened catastrophes now, it is with a feeling of relief that one remembers that you are in the field actively at work.” And Easley was—so much so that by 1909 Easley’s doctor ordered him to take a two-week vacation in Europe to alleviate his serious fatigue. Such incessant, energetic activity characterized many of the middle-class reformers of the Progressive Era, who tended to possess a heartfelt if amorphous desire to remedy society’s many ills. Especially female reformers, whose experiences had perhaps made them more sensitive to the habitual exclusions of public discourse, sometimes came to
question received wisdom about not only gender relations but also relations between the classes. These reformers created settlement houses as hubs of reform in immigrant and working-class neighborhoods, pursued litigation and legislation in behalf of workers, investigated the conditions of work and life around the country, and formed alliances with each other and, sometimes, with workers.8

The era’s emphasis on efficiency, coordination, and reform provided a potential opening for labor organizing. Besides dousing the raging fires of class conflict, labor unions and collective bargaining might ameliorate the era’s persistent economic malaise, which economists increasingly began to diagnose as a problem of overproduction and underconsumption. If the health of the economy depended as much on consumption as it did on production, perhaps it made sense to improve the ability of workers to bargain for higher wages, as that would allow them to buy more goods and services. Some labor leaders, especially AFL president Samuel Gompers, latched on to such arguments, perceiving in it not just an economic logic but also a way to defend workers’ dignity: workers were entitled to bargain for wages that could sustain a level of consumption and comfort worthy of a citizen in a democracy.9

For a time, the trade agreement—a formal accord over wages, working conditions, and other parameters of the employment relationship, generally between a union and an employer or employers’ organization—became the favored solution to the problem of labor conflict among many reformers and even some businessmen. It seemed to offer hope of an orderly and rational solution that provided real benefits without requiring too much upheaval. Yet if the idea that workers could collectively set the price of their labor was becoming more respectable, it nevertheless remained in constant conflict with ideas about the rights of employers to dispose of their property freely. How was one to square the property right of the employer in his business with the mechanisms workers found necessary to enforce the price of labor that they had collectively set? Could workers picket a factory or demand that all employees join the union? And what about the employer’s property rights in the labor he had bought—didn’t the logic of labor as a commodity sold by the laborer and purchased by the employer confer to the employer a right to dispose of it as he saw fit? If it did, where did that leave workers’ claims to control on the job?

The enthusiasm for agreements had at its heart something of a paradox. To be meaningful, agreements clearly needed both parties to have access to some power to enforce them, but workers’ means of enforcement worried many of the same people who found the idea of agreements attractive.
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When workers insisted on mechanisms that would enable them to enforce agreements—strikes, picketing, boycotts, shop-floor control, required union membership—many economic and legal authorities found their cautious acceptance of collective bargaining wavering. Without such mechanisms, though, the collective voice of workers would be a reedy one indeed. The unwillingness of middle-class economists, lawyers, and reformers to face this fact signaled their deep wariness about worker power. It also meant that unions found such people fickle allies at best.

This chapter focuses on what the trade agreement meant to the different parties interested in it and what they saw it as requiring. The chapter starts with a section examining the rise of the trade agreement as the solution to intractable labor strife. The next section analyzes where the membership requirement (closed shop), whose development was discussed in the preceding chapter, fit into the trade agreement idea, while the subsequent section considers who was left outside the fold. The final section examines both left-wing critique and middle-class apprehensions about the trade agreement system.

Averting Industrial War

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed many governmental investigations that attempted to get a handle on the labor question and to find a way to alleviate industrial strife. Drawing on experiences abroad, these investigations began to portray moderate unions—unions asking for limited practical improvements rather than an overhaul of economic and political relations—as both a bulwark against radicalism and a legitimate form of worker organizing. For example, the governmental investigation into the Pullman strike and boycott, a major labor dispute that pitted the American Railway Union against the intransigent Pullman Palace Car Company, praised moderate trade unionism not only as a counterpoint to the radicalism of the ARU but also as a corrective to the unequal power relations in corporate workplaces. The investigation noted particularly that collective bargaining had a “record of success both here and abroad.”

Similarly, the US Industrial Commission, tasked in 1898 by Congress with investigating industrial conditions in the country, claimed in its final report in 1902 that “there is a general consensus of opinion that the voluntary extension and perfection of systems of collective bargaining, conciliation, and arbitration within the various trades themselves would prove highly advantageous, both to employers and working men, and to the general public.” Drawing on the British experience as the standard to which it compared American labor relations,
the commission noted that although collective bargaining and conferences between organized workers and employers were not a universal guarantee of industrial peace, “experience both in England and in our own country shows that where these practices have once become fairly well established they greatly reduce the number of strikes and lockouts.”

As the Industrial Commission was aware, collective bargaining could take many forms and result in many different types of arrangements. A union local could bargain with a single employer for a local contract. Employers and workers could haggle over work rules or wages without the talks resulting in a formal contract. Or, in the most comprehensive manifestation of collective bargaining, a national union could negotiate a national trade agreement that set the terms for all or most employers (represented by an employers’ association) and all (unionized) workers in that industry. By the same token, some form of agreement between labor and management could result from mechanisms other than actual collective bargaining between organized parties. For example, reflecting older craft governance practices, a union might offer a wage scale for the employer to simply approve, with little negotiation. Alternatively, some third party or a more informal group of workers and employers could mediate between workers and employers to either “conciliate” their interests or “arbitrate” between them (the latter usually implying that the third party had some authority to decide between competing claims). All these practices remained in flux, as did the language about them: the commission observed that the phrase “collective bargaining” was not widely used in the United States, and “no little confusion” reigned about the practices themselves, while “the terms used in describing these practices are often misapplied.”

At the time of the Industrial Commission’s investigations at the turn of the twentieth century, formal collective bargaining enjoyed the sheen of an exciting new idea, and wide-reaching trade agreements were often represented as the (at least temporary) pinnacle of evolution in the relations between employers and workers. This was the view of the British socialist reformers and scholars Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, who were influential with economists closely associated with the Industrial Commission. The Webbs saw bargaining between workers and employers progressing from more or less ad hoc local arrangements toward organized, bureaucratized contracts between parties increasingly well versed in the machinery of the trade agreement. The “most highly developed form,” the Webbs contended, clearly distinguished between bargaining over the terms of the agreement, which should take place rarely and where the “representative element” was needed, and applying the terms, which should be the job of a well-trained “professional expert” (who,
The commission followed the Webbs’ emphasis on distinguishing contract negotiation from contract interpretation: conciliation and arbitration, the commission argued, were appropriate for settling minor matters of interpretation of contracts, whereas collective bargaining entailed direct negotiations between organized workers and employers and thus was more likely to produce lasting agreements between them.\textsuperscript{15}

Collective bargaining became, in some ways, unions’ ticket to respectability. Instead of challenging the basic contours of the economic system, men like Samuel Gompers insisted on labor receiving its full share within that system. Reframing the workers’ quest in terms of greater freedom \textit{from} work rather than greater freedom \textit{at} work, Gompers posed labor’s demand as “more.” As Rosanne Currarino has argued, this was not merely a narrow economic demand; instead, it made a powerful claim to full participation. “More” encapsulated a vision of freedom in a society in which wage work was permanent. It was the freedom to enjoy the fruits of one’s labor and to spend one’s wages on what one pleased, but it was also the freedom to shape one’s life. It meant “better homes, better surroundings,” and other material things, but it also included, Gompers insisted, “higher education, higher aspirations, nobler thoughts, more human feelings, all the human instincts that go to make up a manhood that shall be free and independent and loving and noble and true and sympathetic.”\textsuperscript{16}

Unions explicitly connected their project to a modern movement toward organization, arguing that as industry had become larger and more concentrated, so had unions. There was no turning back the clock to the era of small workshops. Given that reality, labor had every right to organize to get its due in the new industrial regime: unions were, in Gompers’s words, “the legitimate outgrowth of modern societal and industrial conditions.”\textsuperscript{17}

The emphasis on efficiency and modernity was also reflected in the changing practice and language of the major US unions on symbolic and tangible levels: the railroad brotherhoods, for instance, shifted from the trappings of fraternalism, with its “lodges” and “grand masters,” to the presidents, secretaries, and associations of twentieth-century business unionism. They built hierarchical, bureaucratic, and well-resourced structures and self-consciously positioned themselves as legitimate on account of their good business organization.\textsuperscript{18} Such responsible, efficient unions, the implication was, were respectable partners in collective bargaining with employers.

The trade agreement was the practical expression of this businesslike approach to labor conflict. In exchange for the employer agreeing to certain wages, hours, and working conditions, the union would undertake to police
its members and see to it that during the life of the agreement they would not strike. In industry-wide agreements, the union would also act as a rule-setter for the industry: the union would use its power in numbers to ensure that all employers paid the same or similar rate of wages and observed certain rules of production. The result would be better living standards for the workers and relief from cutthroat competition for the employers. At least as importantly, the trade agreement would eliminate the chaos of pitched battles between strikers and private or public security forces and minimize disruptions to orderly production and distribution. The trade agreement was, as the labor editor and statistician Ethelbert Stewart put it in 1910, “the embodiment of the exhortation ‘Come, and let us reason together.’”

Although the trade agreement was still relatively new, various forms of it had taken root in a number of industries in the United States. Results were mixed, but—especially at the turn-of-the-century moment before the employer counteroffensive took off—there were enough successes to bolster the optimism of those inclined to see agreements as the wave of the future. Besides a variety of local and limited agreements, national-level agreements had been forged in several industries in the late nineteenth century. Most branches of the glass industry instituted national agreements in the 1890s; the pottery industry transformed its local agreements to national ones in 1900; the longshoremen on the Great Lakes forged agreements with lumber shippers and ore and coal docks; an agreement in bituminous coal in the late 1890s equalized wages (and, importantly, costs of production) throughout much of the industry; the stove founders had by 1900 almost a decade of comprehensive collective bargaining experience with the Iron Molders’ Union (IMU, after 1907 called the International Molders’ Union). The printers, with a decades-long union tradition, had moved toward written agreements and increasingly centralized control of bargaining; by the turn of the century the International Typographical Union had become a central clearinghouse for approving local contracts, as well as arbitrating (together with representatives of national employer associations) disputes arising from them.

To be sure, some industries, such as steel, had tried but failed to institute wide-reaching agreements, while others that the Industrial Commission was optimistic about were about to be disrupted by technological change or the growth of organized employer resistance. But for the time being, there seemed to be hope, and in any case the turbulence of the preceding years made orderly industrial relations imperative. The Industrial Commission’s approval of the emerging practice of trade agreements and collective bargaining was echoed in the views of the National Civic Federation, with which it shared some personnel (e.g., the economists E. Dana Durand, John
R. Commons, and Jeremiah W. Jenks). In the words of the NCF’s publication, the *NCF Review*, the trade agreement was “by no means perfect” but nevertheless constituted “the only practical present-day method for averting industrial wars.”

Neither the NCF nor the Industrial Commission ignored the challenges the trade agreement faced. They seemed to hope, though, that moral exhortation would suffice to overcome the disparate interests of the parties: the Industrial Commission warned that collective bargaining could only be effective if the organizations on each side represented “fair minded,” “intelligent,” and “conservative” workers and employers, while the NCF emphasized the need for the “sane and patriotic leaders” of both labor and capital to overcome the impulses of the hotheads. If they only acted reasonably, the commission and the NCF insisted, workers and capitalists could lead the country to a bright future where the “cumulative” benefit of collective bargaining produced mutual understanding between employers and workers, improved knowledge of industrial conditions on each side, and led to the general democratic and civic development of workers.

The trade agreement as the foundation of a more peaceful and civilized future was a key project for Ralph Easley and therefore the NCF, which he headed. Founded in 1900 as an explicitly tripartite organization with members from the top echelons of labor, business, and “the public,” the NCF centered much of its early work on promoting the trade agreement conceptually and in practice. Actively looking for sites of industrial conflict that it considered “ripe for rational treatment” through negotiation and agreements, the NCF formed a strong alliance with labor’s top leadership, particularly AFL president Samuel Gompers and United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) president John Mitchell. It also claimed rapid successes: in 1903 alone, according to Easley, the NCF had successfully conciliated nearly one hundred disputes, while by 1906 its services had been enlisted in over five hundred cases. Though it developed a clear understanding of the trade agreement and of union priorities, it nevertheless continued to emphasize harmony over strengthening unions; indeed, Easley often continued to use terminology of “conciliation” even as he promoted concrete agreements. He also often praised the fact that a conflict had been resolved over the content of the resolution. For example, Easley hailed the settlement in the famous anthracite strike of 1902 as demonstrating “the great value of the conference method of settling differences between capital and labor.” He did so because it ended the strike and resulted in a commission that eventually issued an award including a raise, shorter hours, and a board of conciliation—even though the settlement explicitly did not result in recognition of the UMWA by the
coal operators. Such vacillation between an emphasis on harmony and an emphasis on orderly, formal relations continued to plague both the NCF’s work on trade agreements and the development of formalized bargaining and agreements more generally.

The Trade Agreement and the Logic of the Closed Shop

If the trade agreement—or, indeed, any form of effective collective bargaining—was to be the vehicle for creating a reasonably peaceable and smoothly functioning regime of industrial relations, unions needed some real power. A powerless party to a negotiation, after all, would have a hard time keeping up its end of the bargain. The membership requirement—the closed or union shop—undergirded union power. Therefore, in the view of unions, it was part of the bedrock on which agreements rested. Without it, unions could neither function nor survive.

Some employers, as well as some reformers, argued that unions should instead make themselves into legal persons—to incorporate so as to have standing to enter into agreements enforceable in a court of law. This idea, as well as state-administered arbitration of labor disputes, had in fact received some support among unions in the nineteenth century. In the 1880s the predecessor of the AFL had supported a national law on union incorporation, and unions had backed arbitration laws that had passed in several states. The attraction of state adjudication of labor matters, however, quickly faded. The attempts to punish unions under the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which outlawed combinations in restraint of trade, convinced unionists that incorporation posed too much risk; it would only make union finances vulnerable to court-ordered damages. Similarly, arbitration could easily be made to favor employers, some of whom embraced it as a means to prevent strikes. Merely involving the state did not solve the problem of whose interests would be protected; whether they were to be enforced through the state or through union contracts, workers’ demands only had weight if their voice could not be ignored.

Required membership is not, of course, the only way of ensuring that workers have a voice and that unions have some power. Indeed, the closed or union shop has traditionally been rare everywhere except in the English-speaking world. It rarely made an appearance in continental Europe, perhaps in part because the union movement on the Continent generally had a much clearer and stronger political thrust. This meant both that it was more focused on gaining sufficient influence with the state to ensure the state’s backing for union activity and that it self-consciously wanted to portray the unions as the representatives of the whole working class, not of an exclusive group. In
cases where continental unions’ bids for a hold on state power succeeded and they managed to establish, for example, state-sponsored tripartite bargaining systems, they also had less need for a mechanism like required membership to boost their stability.29

In the United States, though, the membership requirement—the closed shop—was the chief instrument unions employed to ensure their persistence and power. The logic of the closed shop had several components.

First, a trade agreement without the membership requirement left the employer free to rid himself of the union simply by hiring nonmembers. The union, having done the hard work of recruiting members and using the strength of its membership to wrest concessions from an employer, would be constantly faced with the employer’s attempts to weaken the union by hiring nonunion workers. Eventually the shop might revert to nonunion conditions entirely. The leeway that the open-shop policy gave employers to do this, unionists argued, was precisely why employers favored it: they knew that “freedom to employ non-unionists is, in present conditions, sufficiently destructive of unionism,” and so they could hide their antiunionism behind the claim that they respected workers’ right to organize and only opposed the demand for a closed shop.30

Second, not requiring workers to join the union would weaken the union through free riding and through the union’s inability to exercise shop-floor control. If workers knew that they could get benefits without paying union dues, why should they join the union? By the same token, how would it be possible to keep up the morale of union members who felt they were exposing themselves to retaliation and risks while others benefited? According to its proponents, the membership requirement was no infringement on rights but a guarantee of them: it guaranteed rights collectively. Employers might “quote the one man who is trespassed,” but against this the unionists “quote the fifty men whom the one man trespasses.”31

Finally, and crucially, without the membership requirement, the union would not be able to guarantee the workers’ adherence to their contracts. After all, how was a union supposed to “sign a trade agreement for workers who are nons [nonmembers]?32 What power would the national union have to “compel the local members to toe the mark” if they could simply leave the union without suffering any consequences? Only under union shop conditions could a national union keep its members from striking in violation of a contract, as the UMWA had done with regard to the bituminous field during the massive anthracite strike of 1902.33 Thus, to be against the union membership requirement—against the closed shop—was tantamount to being against unions and trade agreements entirely.
The union shop lent worker power to the vision of the trade agreement. It rooted collective bargaining in the mechanisms of craft rule and union governance. It made an explicit claim to the union being the collective government of the workers, negotiating with the employer as an equal. In this vision of union governance, workers were not individual atomized actors in a marketplace where the employer set the rules. Instead, they operated within a governing structure of their own making—one that had jurisdiction over the price of labor, as well as over many aspects of working conditions, and that asserted the power to enforce its decisions over the whole body of workers under its purview (whether this was defined as a whole industry or a particular craft). It was, in essence, the same claim as that excoriated by the court in the *Commonwealth v. Pullis* case back in 1806, that the workers were raising “besides our state legislature, a new legislature” consisting of themselves.34

Part of the difficulty in the fights about the closed or union shop lay in how difficult it was for those outside the union fold to understand the depth of the unions’ claim to governance. As David Montgomery has argued in his classic work on nineteenth-century iron puddlers and other craftsmen, craftsmen possessed a “functional autonomy” derived from their exclusive familiarity with the work process and its requirements. This autonomy eventually morphed into formal written union rules. These rules governed everything from the number of apprentices and the rate of wages to when particular work tasks could be performed, how much could be produced in a set amount of time, and how promotions should function. In the highly skilled crafts, such workers’ control measures made sense, as the employer’s role was mainly to offer the conditions for completing the product (equipment, raw materials) and to take it to market when it was done. In such a work process, there was little to negotiate with the employer about.35 Many craft unionists took it as a given that they had the right to refuse to work with someone who flouted the union-enforced rules of the craft. Indeed, they reacted rather like a modern-day academic might if someone from outside one’s discipline presumed to have input on who should be hired on a departmental faculty or what should be taught in the introductory course in one’s field.36 Retaining the traditions and dignity of the craft required certain standards—of apprenticeship, of income, of skill. The craft society created those standards and held its members to them. The role of the employer was somewhat incidental to this process: if the employer came up to the standards (paid sufficiently, did not abuse the apprenticeship system, etc.), then members were allowed to work for him; if he did not, they were not. Therefore, despite employer cries of union “tyranny” in collective bargaining, in the view of many unionists the very idea of negotiating with an employer was already something of a concession.
Even as industrial conditions changed and negotiation with employers became a more central part of labor union activity, the claim to governance remained an important part of union ideology. The employer, after all, asserted the right to govern his side of the business; to have anything like equal weight, unions needed to counter this right with jurisdiction of their own. In a way, retaining the right to legislate for the craft made unions “schools of democracy and independence,” as Clayton Sinyai has argued. The features of craft unions that are most often criticized as overly conservative can, Sinyai points out, also be seen in the light of creating enduring institutions that proved the civic virtue of workers and undergirded workers’ claims with real and enduring power. High membership dues can have the effect of excluding less well-off workers, but they also helped ensure the financial stability and thus the longevity of the organization. An aversion to sympathy strikes can be seen as indicating a lack of solidarity, but it can also signal a disciplined husbandry of the organization’s resources and future. Resisting state legislation on social welfare can be cast as reactionary antistatism, but it might also spring from a commitment to building workers’ institutions, such as fraternal insurance, instead of looking to a paternalistic state. Perhaps most starkly, the insistence on disallowing dual unionism that can look like cantankerous power-grabbing can equally well represent a logical corollary of the claim that unions are really government-like institutions: one can hardly be subject to multiple competing governments with conflicting rules.

The assertion that unions had the right to demand membership was part and parcel of this conceptualization of unions as government. The vision of governance that the union shop entailed, however, could also widen the gap between the rank and file and the union leadership. Part of the explicit logic of the union shop, after all, was the enforcement of union rules on the members, including enforcing the contract the national union had signed, sometimes over the objections of rank-and-file members. Indeed, this was a big part of how the unions sold themselves as responsible negotiating partners and how allies like the NCF promoted them. Easley regularly cited as proof of “what organized labor has learned” instances when the leaders of national unions went against their members. For example, Easley approvingly noted that when Buffalo longshoremen had struck despite being under a current trade agreement, Daniel O’Keefe, the president of the International Longshoremen’s Association, had told them to get back to work and had brought in nonunion workers to break the strike when they refused.

Unlike many other Progressive Era reformers, Easley understood and accepted the central role that the unions accorded the membership requirement in the trade agreement system. Because he realized its centrality to the unions’ ability to enforce contracts, he was also willing to defend it to
those of the NCF’s employer members who were less than enthusiastic about it. For example, Easley explained to the clothing manufacturer Marcus M. Marks that Marks’s insistence on unions operating without the closed shop made no sense to unionists: “From Mr. Gompers’ standpoint it is folly for you to say in one breath that you believe in organized labor . . . and then in the next breath demand that he shall surrender to a policy which he knows by experience means the utter disintegration of the union.”

Such flank support held significant value for labor leaders like Gompers and Mitchell. Their goal, after all, was not to eliminate capitalism or employers but to establish unions’ control over specific aspects of the work relationship. Having allies who understood and accepted the need for that control and were willing to explain it to employers was nothing to be sneezed at. However, because it was tied to a vision where the key role of labor leaders was to be enforcers of collective bargaining contracts vis-à-vis rank-and-file demands, it reinforced the hierarchical aspects of the union shop instead of its democratic potential. As Craig Phelan notes in his biography of Mitchell, for example, the “success of the trade agreement depended on the existence of a highly centralized and bureaucratic union.” It also kept Mitchell talking to coal operators rather than to miners, and over time he came to identify more with the “attitudes and values” of the operators than with those of the miners. The end result was “a union in which rank-and-file sentiment would exercise limited influence.”

For Easley, this was a key attraction of the trade agreement. A great believer in “conservative” leadership, he saw labor’s functionaries as men he could level with, men who were “much broader and more intelligent than the members of the rank and file.” Similarly, for such leaders as Gompers and Mitchell, strengthening union hierarchy dovetailed with an emphasis on responsible and pragmatic action over pipe dreams about far-reaching social change; it also caressed their egos and amplified their power. For the union rank and file and for those left outside the union fold, though, the vision of unionism peddled by the NCF presented a less happy reality in which the union shop controlled them as much as it liberated them—or, at worst, actively excluded them from the ranks of organized labor.

Craft Unionism and the Nonunionist

The employers, especially the activists of the open-shop movement, accused unions of coercion and violence to maintain their closed-shop rules. Such accusations were calculated to rob unions of legitimacy as the voice of workers and were no doubt advanced far more often than the evidence warranted. The employers did not, however, manufacture them out of thin air. Even when
craft unionism fulfilled its democratic potential for union members, it did not always treat kindly nonunion workers who refused to join in protests, crossed picket lines, or otherwise ignored union rules.

Employers emphasized violence against nonunionists; unionists denied the accusations. But violence did sometimes occur. Sometimes violence was directed against a lone individualist willfully defying the union and (at least in unionists’ perception) currying favor with the employer. Montgomery recounts a case of a worker in a machine shop who consistently sided with the boss and strove to be a model of efficiency, readying his tools before work officially began, for instance. He also showed up for work when everyone else turned out to demand the eight-hour day in 1886, with the result that “when he sauntered out at noontime for his can of beer, he was viciously beaten by his mates.” More often, violence—or coercion that slid into violence—formed part of a concerted effort to prevent strikebreakers from doing the work the strikers were refusing to do. Usually such violence was limited to punches, but sometimes workers greeted strikebreakers with guns and even dynamite. This happened in some of the most famous strikes of the era, such as the strike at Andrew Carnegie’s steelworks in Homestead, Pennsylvania, in 1892 and the strike at the Pressed Steel Car Company in McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, in 1909. In the mining industry, too, where strikebreaking was frequently accompanied by armed guards (themselves often guilty of excessive violence), strikebreakers might be the target of unionists’ bullets. In some cases, violence was directed at the employer’s person or his property; for example, in 1860s Manchester, England, employers trying to wrest control of hiring, firing, and the work process from unionized brickmakers sometimes gave up the attempt for fear of their lives. Usually, though, violence was less extreme: most commonly, a worker crossing a picket line might be roughhoused either at that moment or outside of working hours, or in cases where the workplace itself was exposed (as in, say, a streetcar strike) the strikebreaker might be attacked on the job.

Noting that strikers sometimes engaged in violence against strikebreakers should not be confused with claiming that strikebreakers bore the brunt of strike-related violence. Data on historical strike violence is severely lacking, but all indications are that strikers themselves, as well as their supporters, suffered the most from violent attacks, the vast majority of which were committed not by strikers but by state actors, company-hired guards, or even vigilante businessmen themselves. In a recent effort to create a more reliable data set of strike fatalities, for instance, Paul Lipold and Larry Isaac found that between 1877 and 1947, in cases where the “affiliation” of the victim could be identified, 64 percent were strikers or allies; strikebreakers accounted for less
than 12 percent of victims. However, one might plausibly speculate that the disparity could well be far less extreme with regard to less severe violence, that is, the kind intended to convince strikebreakers to leave their positions. No real statistics exist on the matter, but certainly nonunion workers willing to take up strikers’ jobs often did so at some risk if not to life, then at least to limb. This was perhaps particularly the case when the strikebreakers were African American: the Chicago packinghouse strikes of 1894 and 1904, as well as the Chicago teamsters’ strike of 1905, for instance, involved multiple severe attacks on African American strikebreakers by strikers and strike sympathizers.

Some violence committed by unionists against strikebreakers came about when frustration and animosity boiled over in unplanned mob attacks on replacement workers. But violence could also be a calculated and deliberate tactic. In the Manchester brickmakers’ case cited above, for instance, the decision to apply violence against employers was taken democratically in a general union meeting. Similarly, in the Chicago teamsters’ strike, president Cornelius Shea of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters reportedly informed the employers’ association, “You have the Negroes in here to fight us, and we answer that we have the right to attack them wherever found.”

Even when violence was not involved, the craft unions’ insistence on government and jurisdiction placed limits on the freedom of workers who did not fulfill the requirements of the craft. Craft unionists tried to deflect the accusations of the closed shop’s exclusiveness by arguing that unions were open to membership—as Gompers put it and other craft union leaders echoed, “Any qualified non-union wage worker can enter any union shop through the union door.” The catch, though, lay in the word “qualified”—almost every declaration of the openness of unions was accompanied by a more or less inconspicuous proviso that the applicant for membership had to be “qualified” and otherwise acceptable.

There were several ways in which a worker might not be eligible for craft union membership. Most simply, a worker might not possess the specific training or skill that the union demanded. Given the AFL’s well-known lack of interest in organizing unskilled workers on the basis of industry, this excluded significant numbers of workers from its ranks. More nefariously, some workers were not welcome because of immutable characteristics: women workers found themselves slighted by male unionists, while African Americans often found themselves categorically shut out. Though the AFL promoted immigration restriction, European immigrants might become full-blown union members; the same was not, however, true of Asian immigrants, whom the AFL treated as unassimilable and inferior. Employers rarely expressed
concern about bigotry, but they did call attention to how skill or training prerequisites set by the craft unions excluded workers. Together, all these exclusions caused union claims of openness to ring hollow and seriously undermined the unions’ claim to be the representative voice of workers. If workers outside unions declined membership out of selfishness, as unions regularly claimed, then the claim that the union shop simply prevented unfair free riding had a basis. But if those workers were excluded from membership to begin with, matters were rather different.

The exclusionism of craft unions was the flip side of their self-regard as upstanding citizens. Their embrace of a posture of respectability helped them gain acceptance with entities like the NCF and the Industrial Commission, which viewed these unions as providing desirable and moderate leadership. But the politics of respectability could also constrain the strategies available to unionists and spill over into contempt for those whose social status was lesser than their own.

The railroad brotherhoods, for example, quite explicitly positioned themselves as a “conservative” worker organization. Especially early on, strikes were very low on the list of union activity, which instead concentrated on mutual aid, such as cooperative insurance and traveling systems. In the aftermath of the 1877 Great Railroad Strike, which witnessed massive worker unrest throughout the country, Paul Taillon argues, such conservatism became a key element in the brotherhoods’ attempts to convince employers that it would be better to deal with them than with a mass of unruly workers. In the two decades following the strike, the brotherhoods concluded written agreements that “provided favorable wages and working conditions while protecting railwaymen against the vagaries of railroad work and arbitrary management.”

When relations became more contentious, the brotherhoods considered federating their respective trades but worried that managers would see such efforts as embodying a more radical class spirit: “We have been favored by the great majority of railroad managers for our conservatism. . . . Are we going to cast it aside?”

The brotherhoods’ concern to appear respectable and conservative reflected a more general tacit skepticism among labor leaders about ordinary workers’ capacities that perhaps underlay the AFL’s lackluster interest in industrial unions. Despite occasional nods toward the necessity of creating industrial unions, the leadership of the AFL never followed through on such ideas with much conviction. It also often attacked actual industrial organizing projects as dualistic, that is, as splitting the loyalties of the workers between two unions and leading to recrimination and disputes between workers who should be under a single jurisdiction (in the AFL leadership’s
view, the jurisdiction of the AFL). After being practically forced to organize a Building Trades Department in 1907 by the intensive industry-wide organization in the building trades, the AFL did charter a number of industrial departments. However, as one scholar points out, these “might be said to have presented a cover for inaction” more than a new departure.\textsuperscript{54}

Concerns about respectability and a rather limited view of solidarity also showed in the AFL’s attitudes toward immigrants, African Americans, and women. The AFL favored restricting all immigration but particularly that of Asians. In arguing for restriction, the AFL did not limit itself to straightforward economic arguments about the impact of supply and demand of workers on wages but also appealed explicitly and implicitly to race-based thinking. The labor movement’s opposition to Chinese immigration had always depicted the Chinese as constitutionally different from white Americans. In the early twentieth century, although the immigration of Chinese workers had been banned since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese workers remained on the AFL’s radar because of their role in the construction of the Panama Canal and because of their presence in Hawaii and the Philippines. Some of the objections to Chinese workers at the canal focused on contract labor—that the Chinese, having signed exploitative multiyear contracts, were basically being used as slave labor in Panama and that this “set a pernicious example to some of our states where the demand for peon and contract labor is steadily increasing.”\textsuperscript{55} It was clear, however, that such objections were not distinct from objections on racial grounds. Indeed, the racial difference (and inferiority) of the Chinese seemed so blindingly obvious to many labor leaders that they could forswear prejudice in one sentence and invoke racist arguments in the next. Thus, UMWA president John Mitchell wrote in 1909 that “the American workman, be he native or immigrant, entertains no prejudice against his fellow from other lands.” In the next sentence, Mitchell explained that “the demand for the exclusion of Asiatics, especially the Chinese and the Hindus, is based solely on the fact that, as a race[,] their standard of living is extremely low and their assimilation by Americans impossible.”\textsuperscript{56}

Other Asians were equally explicitly racialized and seemed perhaps even more of a threat, because some continued to be able to immigrate until the completion of Asian exclusion in the Immigration Act of 1924.\textsuperscript{57} For example, the October 1907 issue of the \textit{American Federationist} contained an article by one Albert S. Ashmead, identified as the “former medical director of Tokio Hospital,” titled “Japanese Atavism.” The article was packed with language that seemed to aim more at impressing the nonexpert with its scientific ring than at helping a general reader understand complex biological theory. For example, Ashmead wrote of “the increased or diminished torsion of the Japanese
humerus” and “the incurvation of the ulna, below the sigmoid cavity,” noting that these were “distinctly simian.” Armed with this scientific sheen, most of the article then devoted itself to recounting various disagreements among ethnologists about the origins and traits of the Japanese “race,” but the main point was clear in the first paragraph: in considering immigration policy, it was a mistake to assume that the “Japanese are a superior race” compared to “Chinese and Hindus.” They were not. “To one who has studied the Japanese closely,” Ashmead assured his readers, “there are many racial traits which betray an origin and development that are not a good basis upon which to hope to make American citizens.”

The language that the AFL used of European immigrants was generally more sympathetic, emphasizing that employers took advantage of their desperate circumstances. For example, an editorial by Samuel Gompers in the American Federationist approvingly quoted the “conservative and dignified newspaper” the Boston Transcript, which argued that garment industry sweatshops were the result of allowing manufacturers to “take advantage of unrestricted immigration, and . . . the cheap labor of distressed European refugees.” Gompers argued that it was the closed shop that abolished the sweatshop and “secured for the garment workers . . . decent conditions.”

However, in other writings in the Federationist, the immigrants’ plight appeared less susceptible to the salutary influence of unionism. For example, in an article against child labor, Eva McDonald Valesh argued not only that the constant supply of immigrants made the employing class less concerned to protect the future supply of workers by trying to ensure that American children got to grow up healthy but also that the nature of the immigrants contributed to the prevalence of harsh treatment. “These immigrants,” Valesh wrote, “come from generations of hardy peasants who have toiled in the fields, and they really bring with them a sturdy health and vigor that takes more than one generation of factory life to bleach into impotence.” Moreover, being peasants, they failed to “understand the dangers of factory and mine work for children.”

A few months later, Valesh mused about the differences between union families and nonunion ones. Imagining an exhibit of the makers of the goods and not just of the goods themselves, she wrote, “Contrast pictures of the southern cotton mill children or the women slaves of New York sweatshops or newly arrived immigrant mine workers, with union men, their children going to school, their wives well dressed and in comfortable homes. Contrast the homes as well as the places of employment.” In a similar vein, a partial defense of the closed shop in the National Civic Federation Review by the economist Edwin R. A. Seligman argued that the closed shop had the virtue of protecting wage rates against “the cheap labor of ignorant
and indigent immigrants.” In all these, the emphasis was clearly on how unions had improved the lives of workers, but the repeated references to the immigrants’ “ignorance” and to the proper home life of the union men as contrasted with that of immigrants and nonunion workers still left the latter looking faintly disreputable. Such condescension was surely not lost on nonunion or immigrant workers.

Perhaps most explicitly, union chauvinism excluded African Americans. Black workers frequently found their entry to skilled trades or desirable jobs barred not by employers but by unionized workers. As documented extensively by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1902, the majority of American unions had few or no African American members due to either explicit clauses excluding them or an unwritten practice of not accepting African American apprentices (thus resulting in no applications from African American skilled workers).

Indeed, the AFL’s policy on allowing racial exclusion actually worsened as the organization grew. In the 1880s and 1890s Samuel Gompers had repeatedly insisted on the necessity of organizing African American workers, and in the 1890s the AFL had refused to charter unions that excluded them from membership. The AFL accepted separate locals for African Americans but viewed them as temporary and exceptional rather than as desirable and permanent. However, by 1895 the policy was fraying. That year, the International Association of Machinists (IAM) was allowed to affiliate with the AFL by simply removing from its constitution the explicit clause barring African Americans from membership, with the tacit understanding that each of its locals would be free to exclude them. Other unions were soon welcomed using the same subterfuge, and by the turn of the century even the implicit requirement of keeping discrimination discreet was dropped.

Meanwhile, some strikes that were ostensibly prompted by hiring nonunion workers were in fact specifically directed at the hiring of African American workers who were not union members, often because they were explicitly or implicitly excluded from membership. Even unions with a relatively large African American membership and a reputation for fair treatment, such as the International Longshoremen’s Association, were less than egalitarian, favoring white workers in employment both when union strength made strikebreaking less of a concern and when hard economic times made work scarce.

Unsurprisingly, some African Americans believed that unions’ exclusionary policies and white workers’ racism fully justified taking up jobs that became available due to strikes, which in turn solidified white unionists’ conviction that African Americans were a “scab race.”

Women workers, too, found it challenging to gain respect or representation in unions. Despite the crucial role that wives’ and daughters’ earnings played
in family budgets, the growing proportion of women in the paid workforce, and repeated proof of women’s capacity for militant unionism, union hierarchies and (male) union leadership found it hard not to treat women’s work roles as secondary or to see working women as temporary (and unwelcome) sojourners into the world of paid work. Of course, it was true that women’s labor force participation was often temporary and that the idea of insisting on a male breadwinner’s “family wage” that allowed his wife and children to stay at home had appeal for both women and men.

Nor were women workers immune to the broader gender divisions of society in thinking about their roles as potential unionists. Some women saw public activism not as liberating but as unfeminine and onerous and were not eager for leadership roles. For example, Dorothy Sue Cobble points out that unions of wait staff succeeded best in attracting active women unionists and women leaders when they were segregated into waitresses’ and waiters’ locals, which both kept male unionists from grabbing all the leadership positions and prevented “the girls” from “leav[ing] the work to the boys.”

Women’s low unionization rates (much lower than working men’s) were cited as evidence—by some women, as well as by men—that women’s interest in unionizing was fickle at best. Others, though, insisted that the problem was unions’ refusal to take women seriously. The legendary garment worker and labor organizer Rose Schneiderman, for example, kept trying to tell male unionists that women would join if the unions bothered to listen to the women’s concerns. At the very least, unions might stop refusing to sign women up as union members when they actually struck for better conditions, as the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) had done with the young female underwear makers who successfully wrested concessions from their employer. To be sure, women also had allies among male unionists, more of whom were induced to revise their skepticism as women engaged in multiple massive strikes in the second decade of the twentieth century and as women’s unionization rate in the garment industry, for instance, began to push 50 percent. Still, convincing male unionists that women could and should be organized remained an uphill battle.

In addition to lackluster interest in organizing the unskilled and frequent explicit exclusionism on the basis of race and sex, the craft unionists wore their unionism as a badge that in their view set them above other workers. The language they used in talking about nonunionized workers often showed a palpable measure of contempt. Sometimes unionists merely took a somewhat patronizing attitude: if “the nonunionist . . . does not know how to protect himself, then we will have to protect him, even if it is against his will.” At other times, they were nonchalantly insulting: in a routine defense
of the union shop, for example, Gompers explained that agreements between employers and unions “should not be made subject to the irresponsibility or lack of intelligence of the non-unionist.” And sometimes they explicitly asserted their own greater worth: the Shoeworkers’ Journal, for example, argued that unionists were drawn from the “socalled [sic] better classes,” while “the slums represent the miscalled free workman or non-unionist.” Thus, the craft unions, ironically enough, both confirmed employer accusations that they viewed nonunion workers as needing union “guardianship” and replicated the employers’ disdainful attitude toward workers.

The vision of the union shop as governance and the emphasis on collective bargaining as providing labor an equal seat at the table held considerable potential. At the same time, they rested on a claim to respectability at the expense of other workers that ate away at the solidarity the unions claimed to foster. Such claims to respectability were also inherent in Gompers’s construction of “more” as a means for workers to pursue the finer things in life, including such classically bourgeois accoutrements as a piano in one’s parlor. While Gompers was of course right to insist that workers were as entitled to material comforts as anyone else, when combined with the patronizing or contemptuous attitudes craft unionists frequently displayed toward immigrant, African American, female, and unskilled workers, respectability traced the contours of an acceptance of hierarchical divisions that undermined the whole union project.

Too Conservative or Too Radical?

The prominent British industrial relations scholar Richard Hyman once noted,

Collective organisation is the means whereby workers create social power far greater than the sum of that which they possess as individuals, for unity and coordination replace competition and division. This power is a weapon which can be used to win real improvements in their situation: the organisation of conflict gives their discontents direction, and is thus the precondition of any significant remedy. Yet the organisation of conflict also makes their disaffection manageable by employers and by governments: for grievances are brought into the open, channelled to appropriate authorities, expressed in a form which makes compromise possible, and articulated by a bargaining “partner” with whom an agreement can be reached which employees will feel some commitment to observe.

In making labor conflict manageable, unions could gain respectability, a place at the table, and even real power. But they might have to sacrifice for
it: a regime of collective bargaining and trade agreements could strain relations between the rank and file and labor leaders, and it could fray solidarity between different groups of workers (e.g., through prioritizing not breaking contracts over supporting other workers through a sympathy strike). Manageability also undermined the disruptive potential of worker assertiveness; its chief promise to employers was, after all, the maintenance of labor peace.

Radical unions, such as the Industrial Workers of the World, sharply criticized the AFL and other “moderate” unions both for their exclusiveness and for their willingness to constrain labor militancy. For such unions, organizing needed to be inclusive. It should not be restricted by craft: as the president of the Western Federation of Miners, by far the strongest component of the IWW, had put it in 1897, “Open our portals to every workingman, whether engineer, blacksmith, smelterman, or millman. . . . The mantle of fraternity is sufficient for all.” Nor should organizing be impeded by lines of race or ethnicity: as an IWW organizer in Canada declared, “When the factory whistle blows it does not call us to work as Irishmen, Germans, Americans, Russians, Greeks, Poles, Negroes or Mexicans. It calls us to work as wage-workers, regardless of the country in which we were born or color of our skins. Why not get together, then . . . as wage-workers.”

For the Wobblies, as the IWW was also known, the goal of organizing was working-class power, not industrial peace. Trade agreements in themselves were anathema to this philosophy: all they did was hamstring workers’ freedom of action during the contract, while employers in practice remained at liberty to break the agreements. The IWW believed that it was crucial to be able to strike while the iron was hot, so to speak. Unions needed to respond to employers as the unions deemed fit, not wait for the contract to be up for renegotiation. Nor should union responses to employer actions be limited to the strike, even to the mass strike extending beyond a specific group of workers to the broader community. Union responses should instead encompass all forms of day-to-day resistance, ranging from sabotage to slowdowns. To focus on collective bargaining, that is, haggling within a capitalist, employer-dominated framework, such critics argued, distracted workers from the more important project of building a truly democratic and just society. If the union was to focus on a wage scale, it had better be one that represented the “full product of workers’ work” and one that the union could enforce, not negotiate with the employer. The Wobbly theorists insisted that collective bargaining between workers and capitalists could never be a negotiation between equals. Thus the whole foundation of the trade agreement as equalizing power relations between workers and employers was, in their view, misleading.
Although the IWW is better known for its revolutionary politics and dramatic tactics—and the repression directed at it—than for securing pragmatic gains for its members, the Wobblies’ emphasis on broad-based working-class power over trade-based negotiation did not necessarily mean that they forswore practical improvements in favor of dreamy-eyed revolutionary goals. Like other strikes, those backed by the IWW aimed at securing essential bread-and-butter improvements for the workers—wage raises, decent working conditions, relief from employer coercion—even if limited resources or poor strategy caused many a strike to fail. Nor was rebuffing trade agreements necessarily tantamount to eschewing durable and effective organization-building. For example, Peter Cole has demonstrated that in the 1910s Local 8 of the IWW successfully maintained an extraordinary interracial organization among Philadelphia longshoremen. Local 8 did not sign contracts, but it asserted power by other means. To be hired on an IWW dock, a worker had to be a paid-up member—a union official would frequently be present when workers were hired to ensure this, and this demand could also be enforced by a strike threat. And since solidarity among the IWW longshoremen was high, the workers could make use of strategic work stoppages to enforce demands or rectify deteriorations in work conditions.

The Wobblies did not have a monopoly on either organization on the basis of industry, or militant tactics, or a radical political outlook. Industrial unionism, as well as socialism, held broad appeal across the union rank and file. As John Laslett has pointed out, even some craft unionists were drawn to industrial unionism, as well as socialist ideas, because they seemed like appropriate responses to the economic and industrial changes taking place. Many machinists and boot and shoe workers, for example, began to suspect that maintaining control on the basis of skill would simply become unfeasible as the craft became more and more mechanized and deskilled. This was true even in unions with a conservative leader and conservative origins, such as the International Association of Machinists: the union’s president remained adamantly opposed to socialism, but “by the turn of the century most of the union’s leading officials were socialists.” Socialism also appealed to workers who found trade unionism to be too much of an uphill struggle, too slow and too ineffective against employer intransigence. Only state action seemed to hold realistic promise in solving the problems they faced.

Besides complaining that the AFL’s focus on craft unionism and on the trade agreement was too narrow, socialist and other left-wing critics of the AFL’s leadership also zeroed in on the affiliation of Samuel Gompers and other AFL leaders with the NCF and, through it, with some of the largest businessmen in the country. At the American Federation of Labor’s 1911
annual convention, multiple resolutions called on the convention to condemn the NCF and demanded that AFL officers rescind their association with it. Although the resolutions were defeated, the brisk debate that accompanied them—and that took up more than one full day—aired the sense of many of the delegates that the NCF corrupted labor’s leaders by inducing them to hobnob with men who expressly attacked unions in their companies while offering panegyrics to conciliation at NCF dinners. A few years later, a similar scene played out at the hearings of the US Commission on Industrial Relations (USCIR) as Morris Hillquit, a labor lawyer and prominent socialist, and Samuel Gompers clashed over the goals and strategy that would best advance labor’s cause. To Gompers’s growing irritation, in his cross-examination Hillquit—accompanied by much clamor among the audience—lobbed question after question about the NCF at Gompers. Did Gompers really believe he could change employer minds through the NCF? Did trade unionists in other countries consider participating in such cross-class organizations? Was it even “proper,” Hillquit wanted to know, “for an official representative of the American Federation of Labor to cooperate with well-known capitalists for common ends?”

Gompers responded to Hillquit with the same line that he and others had taken at the AFL’s 1911 convention to defeat the resolutions calling for labor officials to resign from the NCF. The NCF, he insisted, was merely a forum—it in no way dictated his views or action, and neither he nor other labor leaders were children easily bedazzled by capitalists’ wiles. Nor did speaking to capitalists compromise his convictions or get his “skirts besmirched.” Much of the point of the labor movement, after all, was to speak to capitalists—to make demands of them. Who cared if capitalists were hostile? That was to be expected; but then, friendship was no prerequisite for discussion. Indeed, as Gompers said in a much-quoted quip, he would “appeal to the devil and his mother-in-law to help labor if labor can be aided in that way.” All this was an integral part of the AFL’s pragmatism, Gompers argued—of securing improvements by sticking to the “terra firma” of what was actually happening rather than “build[ing] castles in the air.”

The AFL leadership’s defense of associating with the NCF implicitly leaned on the conviction that craft unionism and trade agreements were no less militant or powerful than socialism or industrial unionism. They drew, after all, on the tradition of craft rulemaking. The trade agreement, in this view, legislated standards that the union then imposed on the employer. That was what the closed shop accomplished: union control of at least parts of the work relationship. The potential power inherent in this approach was considerable. In fact, in the view of many of labor’s middle-class allies, it was excessive.
Far more palatable in their view was the aspect that men like Ralph Easley emphasized: imposing order on industrial relations by imposing order on the rank and file.

For Easley, the attraction of working with labor’s leaders was not only that trade agreements had the potential to result in “rational” labor relations and orderly conduct in accordance with signed contracts. It was also that those leaders could be talked to as individual people, not as members of the abstract entity of “workers.” Although he understood that unionism derived its power from organization, Easley valued informal understandings between individuals above procedures and structures. Individuals were hampered by structures—even if those structures were meant to guarantee a fair voice and democratic representation. In this sense, the Left’s critique of union officers’ association with the NCF hit the mark: the NCF did not intend to involve union leaders as the legitimate representatives of their organizations or even of the labor movement more broadly construed. It aimed to involve them as “individuals.” As Easley explained to one of the business members involved in organizing a new branch of the NCF: “We get the labor side . . . by picking out the most conservative and best members [of unions] and inviting them as individuals, not as officials. The committee selected by a central [labor] body would simply be a nuisance, as it would not feel that it was acting for itself, but for another body, and would have to go back to the central body every time before acting. You get all the strength of a labor situation when you get their best men to come into a movement as citizens.”

It does not seem to have occurred to Easley that to function, the trade agreement system that the NCF was so fond of as a means of averting industrial war required rank-and-file involvement; without collective structures and accountability, labor leaders would be unable to lead. For Easley as for many other middle-class reformers, the attraction of the trade agreement as a system of coordinated and rational conflict management in industry constantly clashed with a liberal vision of individuals as the measure of all things. In this vision, problems would be solved not by developing appropriate collective governance structures but by individuals reaching understanding and harmony through rational discussion. Whether employers were willing to reach any sort of an understanding with unionists, however, was very much open to question.