At its 1920 convention, the National Association of Manufacturers unanimously adopted a comprehensive “Platform for American Industry,” which it presented to both party conventions that summer and distributed at considerable expense in pamphlet form. The preamble, authored mainly by NAM counsel James Emery, bore hardly a trace of the early NAM’s vituperative language. Instead, it struck a note of sober patriotism and judicious defense of common goals. It offered “a fervent appeal for a national revival of study, discussion and personal understanding of the nature, purpose and history of American government.” It contained a section on the “fundamentals of our Republic” that emphasized the foundation of the country upon the “recognition of the moral worth and practical value of the individual.” And, acknowledging that “the modern system of production and distribution makes us to an ever-increasing degree inter-dependent,” it gestured toward an acceptance of the necessity of reasonable rules. Balancing individual rights and the legitimate functions of collective action and government was, it recognized, “constantly a more difficult practical problem.” Thus, in the name of “public interest,” the platform called for government regulation of “all combinations.”

Quickly, however, the platform proceeded to modifications to such even-handed and universally applicable regulatory ideas. It explained that business combinations were already overregulated and taxed excessively. The real necessity was for the greater regulation of unions. In particular, the platform urged that the right to strike be “defined and limited” so as to prohibit strikes by government employees and employees of public utilities. It also called for unions to be made legally accountable, a reference to the NAM’s longtime demand that unions incorporate and become legal entities that could be sued
or fined. The platform did not explicitly mention the closed shop, though it referred to it indirectly. One of “the primary dut[ies] of government,” the platform asserted, was “to protect each person in his liberty to select and pursue any lawful business or occupation without molestation.” This was a reference to the unions’ system of apprenticeships, another persistent object of NAM critique. And, the platform added in the next sentence, employment “without respect to the membership or non-membership . . . in any organization” was part of everyone’s “personal freedom.” In other words, without quite saying so, the platform implied that the government ought to make the closed shop illegal.³

Both the universalist, reasonable language and the underlying continuity of the antiunion line of the “Platform for American Industry” were emblematic of the broader shape of the open-shop campaign in the postwar years. Open-shop activists understood that there was a need for change in rhetoric and procedure but remained committed to the prewar principle of unwavering resistance to organized labor.⁴

The disruption of the war years and the intensity of the postwar open-shop push that followed caused some contemporaries, as well as some later scholars, to interpret the postwar open-shop campaign in reactionary terms. Former president William Howard Taft, for example, argued in 1921 that the blame for employer antiunionism lay with union overreach, especially the massive strike wave after the war. Although he condemned “Bourbon employers” who “misuse[d]” the term “open shop” to disguise their recalcitrant antiunionism, Taft also insisted that union leaders’ successes during the war had made them “swollen with pride and blind in their obduracy” so that they now refused to see reason. As a direct result, Taft claimed, “the iron entered the souls of the employers, and they were led, many of them, into this fight to end labor unionism.”⁵

Taft was wrong. Employers were not reacting to new circumstances; instead, they were draping some new window-dressing on a campaign they were relaunching along well-established principles. Even before the war, many in the open-shop movement had understood that there was no quick fix to the labor problem; despite its successes, the first open-shop campaign had not vanquished organized labor. The open-shop position therefore needed a stronger institutional expression. As Walter Drew had put it in the planning for the National Industrial Conference Board before the war, what was needed was an employer-dominated “supreme court on industrial matters” rather than a “crusade.”⁶ Crusading, after all, makes one look a bit fanatical. It invites critique and ridicule. At least as importantly, it is also exhausting. A crusade-based movement is not sustainable. If the goal of decisively
vanquishing labor unions could not be achieved in the short term, it was necessary to modify one’s approach.

The NICB had been one effort in a new direction; during and after the war, it produced reams of reports on such topics as wages, labor conditions in Europe, works councils, workmen’s compensation, and profit sharing. After the war, the NAM, too, fashioned a number of new internal structures to promote a fresh expertise-oriented public image and a stronger institutional structure to support it. The NAM created first a new Open Shop Committee and then, on the recommendation of that committee, a new Open Shop Department. This department was tasked with cooperating with other organizations and collecting and disseminating information in favor of the open shop. The NAM also started a new regular pamphlet called Open Shop Bulletin, sent out to local open-shop associations and others, and invested more resources in specifically promoting the open shop. It hoped to go about its new plans in a way that was more methodical and thoughtful than its earlier efforts. In particular, the architects of the 1920s campaign believed that open-shop advocates needed to be more discreet, do more to avoid looking like hypocrites, and think more long-term.

In a memo from roughly 1921, the NAM laid out its vision for the open-shop campaigns of the future. To start with, the memo rejected the idea of a new national open-shop organization, as previous efforts in that vein had invited charges of a “capitalistic conspiracy.” Unless the public believed “the actions of employer associations to be spontaneous and absolutely necessary,” it might withdraw its support and instead back the union side. In addition, campaigns needed to sound convincing. In the past, open-shop proponents had contradicted themselves too flagrantly, praising the open shop as nondiscriminating in one sentence and vowing never to employ union members in the next. Open-shop advocates had also pretended to be above self-interest, hammering unconvincingly on employers’ desire to protect workers’ individual rights while avoiding any mention of the dent in employer profits that unions represented. Now, the economic advantages of the open shop would be acknowledged, and their (alleged) benefits to the society at large would be made a selling point. Finally, open-shop advocates had earlier failed to take the long view; now, more attention would be focused on efforts that might not pay off the next day but that would bear plentiful fruit in the years and decades to come.

This chapter opens by considering the postwar political and societal landscape and employers’ analysis of it. It next turns to shifts in how employers dealt with their workers, exploring modern personnel management, welfare programs, and company unions; to an extent, the NAM advocated such
programs to try to lend its language of fair dealing some ballast. Finally, the chapter examines the segment of the open-shop campaign that formed the bulk of the NAM's expenditures of time and money: publicity. The 1920s publicity push, in accordance with the new emphasis on preparing for the long haul, aimed at entrenching employer ideas everywhere from churches to colleges. In this, it presaged the sophisticated and far-reaching campaigns of the post–World War II era.\(^\text{11}\)

**The Business of America Is Business?**

At the opening of the 1920s it was not at all obvious that the decade would be remembered for people sitting on top of flagpoles, “flaming youth” dancing the Charleston powered by bathtub gin, and President Calvin Coolidge declaring that “the business of America is business.”\(^\text{12}\) On the contrary. Overall union membership in 1920 stood at a record five million workers. In 1919 a larger number of workers than ever before had participated in strikes: a general strike in Seattle put workers in control of the city of over three hundred thousand people for nearly a week in February, and in late September and early October some quarter of a million steelworkers walked out in a strike that, in David Brody’s words, “exceeded in magnitude and scope anything in the nation’s experience.”\(^\text{13}\) Added to such unprecedented rank-and-file militancy was a wave of something even more alarming: bombs. In late April 1919 two mail bombs were delivered and over thirty more were discovered at the post office before they reached their recipients; the targets were politicians and industrialists, mainly of a particularly antiradical bent. In June more bombs exploded, including one at the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. From the timing of the bombs, their targets, and—in at least the Palmer case—literature found at the site, the authorities and the press rapidly drew the conclusion that anarchists and other radicals were the culprits.\(^\text{14}\)

The large-scale strikes and especially the bombings raised the specter of labor conflict spilling over into organized left-wing terrorism. The intensity and often violent confrontations that had attended labor disputes in the preceding decades seemed to many to make such fears plausible. Indeed, Beverly Gage has argued that violent radical resistance to the political and industrial order had formed a remarkably unremarkable part of the American experience for the first two decades of the twentieth century. Americans of that era “identified this sort of violence as part of an ongoing crisis—one that thrust the country perilously close to anarchy and civil war.” To be sure, the numbers hardly warranted such an interpretation, but as Gage points out, neither do the numbers killed in terrorist attacks in the twenty-first century
warrant Americans’ fear of such attacks or the lengths to which the society is willing to go to make them less feasible.  

That radicals and labor activists were much more likely to be on the receiving end of violence than its instigators did not necessarily allay general fears of radicalism. Like court injunctions forbidding picketing that turned a picket line into a scene of arrests and thereby made the striking workers look like criminals, the vicious state and vigilante attacks on groups like the Industrial Workers of the World throughout the war or on Socialist parades on May Day 1919 tarred their targets more than their perpetrators. Their perpetrators, after all, were soldiers, upstanding citizens, and members of conservative and respectable groups like the American Legion, and the attacks often enjoyed the acquiescence if not the approval of labor reformers and of unions that belonged to the American Federation of Labor. If men like this thought it a good idea to raid the offices of a labor or political organization, the logic seemed to go, they must have had a reason.

The National Civic Federation, of course, had since the opening of the century argued that if labor did not get its due, if employers refused to negotiate with moderate unions, radicals would take over. Now, it seemed, radicalism had reached new heights. Wasn’t this proof that the NCF had been right, and it was now high time for employers to drop their intransigence? That continued to be the argument of both the NCF’s Ralph Easley and AFL president Samuel Gompers. Easley, for example, praised the AFL for its patriotism, which he contrasted with what he said was the willingness of European unions to support the overthrow of government—but to limited effect, as the NCF was more and more focused on direct attacks on radicals. At the Industrial Conference convened by President Wilson in 1919, Gompers sounded the warning explicitly. Employers’ radical rejection of negotiation, he said, was the same line as that taken by the IWW—the “Bolsheviks of America” —and the consequences of employer intransigence would be further radicalism.

The dangers of “Bolshevism” also came up a handful of times at the NAM’s 1919 annual convention, held in mid-May. One of the guest speakers was Seattle mayor Ole Hanson, the man whom the national press hailed as a hero for having suppressed the general strike in his city. Hanson gave a talk entitled “Bolshevism and Readjustment,” in which he excoriated the Seattle general strikers and the IWW. He also offered some words of praise to the AFL for its antiradicalism and emphasized the need for the government and businessmen to ensure prosperity and high wages to ward off revolution. However, such mitigating measures formed a minor theme in Hanson’s speech, and the convention overall gave no sense that manufacturers found radicalism more
of a threat than the AFL. Similarly, the employers’ group at the President’s Industrial Conference did not echo Gompers’s warnings about “Bolshevists”; indeed, the labor men seem to have been the only ones at the conference to bring up the problem of radicals. Employers who were inclined toward the open shop focused, as before, on the problem of unions. As the labor men disapprovingly remarked, they had heard some in the employer group state that “if we just defeat the A.F. of L. we can take care of the bolshevik or anything else.”

Rather in the way that it viewed moderate labor unions as a road to radicalism, not an antidote to it, the NAM considered social reform not as the alternative but the path to socialism. Thus, the NAM took the passage of the 1921 Sheppard-Towner Maternity Act, which provided federal funding for maternity clinics in an effort to reduce high rates of infant mortality, as a sign of the insidious influence of the “Feminist Lobby.” The Women’s Joint Congressional Committee (that “feminist lobby”), the NAM claimed, was dotted with radicals, as were many of the other “interlocking directorates” of women’s organizations. Their leaders, the NAM warned, included self-proclaimed socialists and communists. As evidence of their radicalism, the NAM cited such facts as that Jane Addams and several others held pacifist beliefs, that Madeline Doty was married to the head of the American Civil Liberties Union, and that Florence Kelley had corresponded with Friedrich Engels. Such leaders had “carefully permeated the legitimate organizations of women.” The NAM should work to prevent “sincere women” from being lured onto “paths of error” by such radicals.

Though it found it useful to point to the radical credentials of the women reformers, for the NAM, it was quite bad enough to advocate any kind of social legislation. Overall, the NAM suspected that the new reality of woman suffrage might lead to more agitation for such legislation, since women were “naturally, and rightfully, interested in measures to improve the living and working conditions” of everyone, especially women and children, and therefore susceptible to ideas about social reform. At the same time, NAM president John Edgerton explained, “few even of our most intelligent women understand much about the problems of industry.” The NAM, therefore, needed to see to it that the “new great body of enfranchised women shall have proper information upon which to cast intelligent ballots.” Women’s clubs and organizations, accordingly, became a standard target of the NAM’s publicity efforts: American Industries published remarks by “representative” women to show that important women agreed with the open-shop principle, and in 1926 the NAM organized the Woman’s Bureau to recognize the new role of women in both industry and politics.
The NAM’s reactions to the radicalism of 1919–20 and to new realities like woman suffrage seem to indicate that it believed it needed to take them into account in its political calculations but that there was little cause for alarm. Such an interpretation was, perhaps, unsurprising, given the strength of the antiradical consensus among the political classes of the country. In the fall and winter of 1919–20 a wave of state suppression was directed at radical groups, whether they had any involvement with violent incidents or not. The famous Palmer raids (named for their architect, Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer) led to the arrest of thousands of leftists. Similarly, Democrats and Republicans in Congress united in refusing to seat Victor Berger, who had been elected in 1918 on a Socialist Party ticket as a representative from Wisconsin. That the Wisconsinites reaffirmed their decision in the new election that was prompted by Congress’s decision to exclude him gave the congressmen no pause, and they proceeded to exclude him again.\(^{25}\)

An internal NAM memo that was probably written sometime in early 1922 approached the postwar situation and future prospects with equanimity. Although it blamed employers for having “become overconfident and self-satisfied” before the war, so that public opinion had swung toward support for the closed shop, it did not seem particularly alarmed. Instead, though it noted the “necessity of the intensive work that began in 1919,” it estimated that from “1919 to 1922, the sentiment of the public has been very strongly in favor of the open shop.” It also listed the many successes of the open-shop movement’s postwar iteration. The first victory, in fact, had been the defeat of the Seattle general strike and the “resulting overthrow of closed shop conditions in that city.” This was followed by further victories for the open shop in San Francisco and throughout the Southwest.\(^{26}\)

The NAM’s view that there was little cause for alarm but that vigilance was warranted was shared by its peers. In September 1923 the NAM sent out a survey about the likelihood of radical gains in the 1924 elections to eighty-three industrial associations. In the 1922 elections, after all, the Democrats had made significant gains in both the House and the Senate, the Farmer-Labor Party had elected one senator and two representatives from Minnesota, and even the twice-refused Socialist Victor Berger now entered the House. Moreover, with the constraints of wartime conformity now in the past, there seemed to be an overall revival of Progressive politics and talk of a broader Farmer-Labor coalition for 1924.\(^{27}\) The NAM therefore wanted to gauge business assessments of the situation as well as potential business support for a campaign to “counteract such [radical] tendencies.” The results were reassuring: from the fifty-three replies it received, the NAM concluded that most businessmen did not see radicalism as a “serious and permanent
danger.” They did, however, consider “anti-radical activity a form of ‘insurance’” that they thought it necessary for the NAM to pursue and that they were willing to support.28

On the whole, then, the NAM’s 1920s political line was a fairly direct continuation of its prewar views. Despite the upheavals that ushered in the new decade, the NAM registered little worry about extremists; its main goal, as before the war, was to protect the right to manage from its mainstream challengers.

A Softer Touch: Personnel Management and Company Unions

In keeping with the effort to infuse its open-shop rhetoric with credibility by demonstrating its goodwill toward workers, the NAM took a new interest in personnel management. The promotion of personnel management held a central position among the early recommendations of the NAM’s Open Shop Committee. Indeed, in the first set of recommendations the committee made, three out of the four recommendations concerned improving personnel management. They emphasized the need “to stimulate a wider appreciation among employers of their obligation with respect to the human factor in industry,” to exercise care in the selection of foremen and other supervisory personnel so as to impart the right “spirit” to relations with workers, and “to encourage . . . better methods of employment and allocation of men in industry.”29 Of particular importance in this effort to make employment practices at once more humane and more scientific was the role of the foreman. Framed as a question of efficiency, duty, and good public relations, foreman training aimed to smooth things between workers and management: foremen “must interpret the spirit of the management to the workers” and should do so with care, because “if they are unfair and autocratic the workers will assume that the management possesses these same characteristics.”30

The NAM’s new emphasis on foreman training and “the human factor in industry” fit into a broader effort across industry to modernize personnel management. By the early 1920s the language of management had become imbued with the idea that “professional” and thought-out personnel policies were the modern way, while the autocratic foreman represented the unenlightened past. Proper modern employment relations involved “understanding” and some variant of consulting with one’s employees, or at least appearing to do so.31 These ideas had multiple roots, among them workers’ demand for unions and industrial democracy, worker welfare plans (themselves often developed in response to union threats), and efficiency-oriented scientific
management theories. Moreover, in the 1920s, “modernity” itself was a selling point, while the corporation, newly dominant, was badly in need of a humanizing touch. Better, more humane personnel management potentially provided the answer to multiple problems.  

Ideas about worker services and professional personnel departments had been percolating in some quarters for a while. During World War I, practical considerations made employers look at these ideas with new interest. Labor scarcity made it harder to extract production from workers and to maintain discipline: labor turnover increased, productivity plummeted, and absenteeism skyrocketed. Perhaps, after all, professionals could institute measures that would increase worker satisfaction and ameliorate such problems. By 1920 a quarter of firms employing 250 or more workers had a personnel department, a significant increase. Similarly, the number of professional personnel managers grew manifold. Even more directly, the war promoted employee representation. The National War Labor Board had required that employees be allowed representation but had stopped short of requiring that such representation consist of bona fide unions. Thus, hundreds of companies had instituted employee representation plans. When the war ended, the existence of such plans allowed employers to claim that they were all for employees having a voice and only opposed the outside interference of unions.

Employee representation plans—plans that offered workers a route to participation without relinquishing management control—also allowed companies to lay claim to the newly popular language of “industrial democracy” (see chapter 8). That language, amorphous as it was, seemed to legitimize the idea that industry was not the sole domain of the businessman but a joint project subject to some kind of democratic influence. That might mean unions; it might even mean state control. Quite self-consciously, management therefore set about instituting forms of democracy of its own.

Perhaps the best-known of these plans was the one at Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company, hailed in the popular press as the “broad-minded, humane, sensible and statesmanlike conception” of industrial relations that “marks a new era in American industrial life.” As was often the case, the Goodyear employee representation plan was part of a comprehensive human relations approach involving a modern personnel division and a comprehensive welfare program, including a large selection of classes on business and industry, a gymnasium and an athletic field, and a sizable factory hospital. Most remarkably, however, it had an elaborate structure that imitated the US government in a none-too-subtle effort to underline its democratic credentials.

The Goodyear employee representation plan, called the Industrians, provided for an Industrial Assembly, divided into a Senate and House of
Representatives. The Goodyear factory was divided into forty “precincts,” each of which got to elect one representative to the House; four precincts made up a “district,” which got to elect two senators. Every worker who was an American citizen, was over eighteen, and had worked at Goodyear for six months had a vote. The Industrial Assembly had “legislative power” to make changes in wages and working conditions and adjust grievances; the manager had veto power but could be overridden by two-thirds of both houses.  

Of course, the plan made sure that management retained the final say. It reserved for management all executive power that was not specifically given to the assembly. It also apparently did not accord the assembly any control over hiring and firing. After all, Goodyear executives argued, as long as workers did not risk their capital, management retained the right to make the decisions that could affect capital. A prerequisite for a functioning “industrial republic” was management’s ability to “carefully select its working force” to ensure that its workers had a fair and cooperative spirit (which ideally would also characterize those who put up the capital).  

Goodyear, like many of the companies with the most prominent welfare and employee representation plans, was a member of the NAM. The NAM had in 1914 decided to create the Committee on Industrial Betterment, partly to amplify its work on such “constructive” projects as accident prevention and partly to keep an eye on social legislation in the states. Over time, the committee modestly endorsed various welfare ideas. At the 1919 NAM convention, the committee suggested offering benefits like group life insurance as “a constructive demonstration of the employer’s interest in his employees and their families” and reported on efforts on accident prevention and re-employment of those injured at work or in the war. It also reported favorably on implementing employee representation plans in large companies. Yet the NAM’s enthusiasm for employee representation plans as well as for other measures of worker involvement, such as profit sharing and including workers on company boards, was distinctly limited. Many of its members worried that representation plans might make workers arrogant and eventually lead to strikes; that they would not be welcomed by workers, who preferred to leave management to managers; that they would be abused by workers who would only look after workers’ interests on boards; or that workers would simply spend their profit-sharing earnings on extravagances. Besides, there was a danger in promoting even management-led employee representation: it seemed to imply that employees were, in fact, entitled to representation. That might be taken by labor unions or the public as an endorsement of the need for organized labor. At the 1919 convention, William P. White, one of the members of the Committee on Industrial Betterment,
raised precisely this point, insisting that the committee report should not be misconstrued as an endorsement of labor unions and proceeding to offer lengthy remarks on the evils of organized labor.44

Fears that employee representation might be more trouble than it was worth were perhaps not entirely misplaced. Workers were sometimes able to use the representational structures provided by such plans to wrest important concessions from the company.45 Moreover, the very fact of a representative structure that was to be consulted about certain management decisions posed some risk: in submitting its proposal to a deliberative body, management invited discussion and therefore dissent. Even if it could then override the representative assembly’s decision, having to do so would rather defeat the purpose of using representation to gain greater harmony through cooperation.46

In the NAM’s activities, personnel management and foreman training quickly faded into the background. While they came up in occasional speeches held at the annual conventions, they never formed a prominent topic in, for example, American Industries or the NAM’s other materials. More generally, too, the enthusiasm for employee representation plans faded. The proliferation of employee representation plans peaked in the mid-1920s; after that, the tenor of the times turned more conservative, and as the AFL’s power waned (helped along, of course, by the NAM’s open-shop drive), company-managed representation no longer seemed as attractive. Although the popularity of the plans among large companies meant that the number of workers covered kept growing through the 1920s, Bruce Nissen points out that “by 1928, more companies were discontinuing plans than were instituting them.”47

The brief prominence of the question of personnel management and employee representation in the NAM’s deliberations is a testament to the uncertainty of the postwar moment. As one manufacturer noted at the 1919 convention, “It is a time of readjustment, and that readjustment must come slowly and gradually.” Convinced as he was that strict antiunionism was “the sentiment of a very great majority of the manufacturers of this Association,” he nevertheless felt that “it may not be politic at this time” to give public expression to it.48 Better to focus on the softer themes of personnel management. In fact, although recommendations two through four in the Open Shop Committee’s first set of recommendations concerned personnel management, recommendation number one concerned the tone that should be adopted in publicity work.49

No amount of advertising employer benevolence, however, could quite allay public suspicions if employers failed too flagrantly to live up to their professed ideals of treating their workers well and not discriminating on
the basis of union membership. Many in the NAM leadership and among its professional staff were aware of this problem. As some speakers at the NAM’s Open Shop Conference in 1922 somewhat wryly noted, the NAM’s Open Shop Department should perhaps try harder to “educate the employer to his duties to worker and public—to make the Open Shop in practice actually what it claims to be.” But that was easier said than done; indeed, it was even difficult for many NAM leaders to be consistent in their claims about what the open shop really meant with regard to unions. For example, John Edgerton, elected NAM president the previous year, had in the first months of his presidency given statements emphasizing that refusing to hire union men contradicted the open-shop principle and “gives comfort to those who falsely claim” that the open shop equaled antunionism. As the NAM’s 1922 convention discussed the report of the Open Shop Committee, however, Edgerton openly contradicted the committee’s tone. The committee had insisted that the open shop ought to be combined with “constructive methods” and had “urge[d] . . . that those entrusted with the guidance of the affairs” of the NAM “give earnest consideration” to the committee’s earlier resolutions on promoting the “human factor” in industry. When Edgerton rose to give “the views of your President on this subject,” however, he offered a ringing defense of his right to refuse to hire unionists, complete with disease metaphors almost identical to those employed by David Parry in launching the open-shop offensive almost two decades before. Where Parry had compared unions to typhoid fever, sneaky yet deadly, Edgerton compared his right to not hire a union man to his right to not let someone with leprosy or tuberculosis work alongside his employees. It was not a question of “denying the right to that man to have leprosy or tuberculosis” but of being obliged to “protect [the other employees] against infection.”

As Edgerton’s language indicated, the new line on modern personnel management wobbled badly under the weight of old-line antunionism. In fact, in these remarks Edgerton arguably went even further than had been traditional among open-shop proponents, who had generally insisted that an open-shop employer did not inquire about a man’s union membership any more than about his membership in the Masons or about his religious affiliation. Edgerton, by contrast, argued for an explicit right to discriminate on any basis whatsoever, admitting that he would refuse to hire a person whose religious or doctrinal views he found objectionable. With regard to unions, Edgerton (who was from Tennessee) professed his satisfaction that there were few unionists in his part of the world—but, he declared, “I do not hesitate for one moment to say to you that if it comes to choosing between a union man and a non-union man, all other things being equal, I will select the non-union man every time.”
Entrenching the Business Viewpoint

As it had been before the war, publicity was one of the least friction-prone and most agreeable pursuits for the NAM. Unlike new personnel policies, publicity required little more than money. And where new ideas on personnel management might point toward a need for self-criticism, publicity was all about showing how right the manufacturers were.

In the postwar era, the NAM was much better aware of the challenges of publicity than it had been early in the century. Its experiences with press work had apparently taught it that getting into mainstream, wide-circulation magazines was “easier said than done” and that trying to bully local newspapers into printing what the advertisers liked could easily “boomerang.” Newspaper publicity was therefore not a primary objective of the Open Shop Department—though it reported that it could also “claim credit” for “145 3/4 columns” worth of it in 1921, plus that it had assisted several magazine writers with material for their articles. To have a long-term impact on general opinion, however, the NAM was convinced that it had to gain a better foothold among the opinion-makers of the country. A key component in the NAM’s publicity strategy in the postwar era, therefore, was cultivating better interlocutors for the employer point of view. The open-shop message would be far more appealing if it could be funneled through those who already possessed moral and intellectual authority.

One group that the NAM particularly targeted was the clergy. “The furnishing of sound information to the clergy” mattered for two reasons. First, the clergy had significant moral authority and stature as a “molder of public opinion”—increased, in the NAM’s view, by the fact of woman suffrage. Second, the NAM worried that the clergy had begun to lean toward labor. In the years before the war, Labor Sunday—the practice of giving pro-labor sermons at churches on the Sunday before Labor Day—had grown in popularity, and the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) had involved itself in investigating strikes (see chapter 8). After the war, the churches seemed only to be shifting in a more prolabor direction. The council’s Social Service Commission participated in the Interchurch World Movement (IWM) to bring together the many Protestant denominations, to help them raise funds, and to do its own fundraising to enhance church influence in a variety of social questions. When the Great Steel Strike of 1919 brought out hundreds of thousands of largely immigrant workers, the IWM’s Industrial Relations Department decided to investigate the strike. The report that it issued the next year vindicated the strikers. It documented the antiunion practices of U.S. Steel, highlighted the dangerous working conditions and twelve-hour
shifts that steelworkers endured, and dismissed as steel company propaganda claims that the workers were radicals or Communist dupes. In its “Christian Findings,” the report recommended the eight-hour day and the right to unionize. It also called for establishing minimum wage commissions and starting a federal investigation of the use of detective agencies in labor disputes. Finally, the report pointedly “recommend[ed] to the press that it free itself of the often all too well founded charge of bias, favoring capital as against labor.”

A few months after the steel strike report came out, the Federal Council of Churches warned “Christian employers” against the open-shop campaign, which, it said, gave the impression of being “inspired in many quarters by . . . antagonism to union labor.”

The open-shop employers were, to put it mildly, upset. The NAM and other employers accused the IWM of timing the steel strike report strategically so as to provide fodder for the 1920 Labor Sunday sermons. They also objected to the open-shop statement issued by the FCC. While employers acknowledged that the statement also condemned the closed shop as “inimical . . . coercion,” they complained that that condemnation was not stated prominently enough and that the council’s ideas of the open shop were rooted in ignorance. The clergymen, employers said, should come visit factories and talk to employers to learn the true state of affairs.

Shifting the FCC toward its own views became an explicit NAM goal, and it cooperated with local employer groups to supply clergy with more appropriate literature to inspire their Labor Day sermons. By 1922 the NAM’s Open Shop Department claimed that it had succeeded in the “modification of the antagonistic attitude” of the council, though it admitted lack of “similar success with the National Catholic Welfare Council.”

Claims of success may have been rather premature; the FCC continued to speak in favor of labor, and the tradition of Labor Sunday continued and even strengthened. Open-shop advocates did, however, manage to block Labor Sunday speakers in specific locations and perhaps succeeded in shifting the views or at least the practices of individual clergy. In Detroit in the fall of 1926, for example, invitations to labor speakers to preach from the city’s pulpits in conjunction with the AFL annual convention were canceled by local churches as a result of a campaign by the Board of Commerce and the Building Trades Association. And financial pressure took its toll: the IWM folded within a few years due to a decline in donations in the wake of its steel strike report, at least in part because many businessmen withdrew their funding.

Another group the NAM believed it important to influence was students and especially educators. University-level educators, like clergy, were “molders of public opinion.” Even more importantly, every day they shaped the
“social philosophy” that thousands of future teachers imbibed in university classes on economics, government, and sociology. This effort to educate the educators highlights the way in which the 1920s campaign differed from the cruder publicity efforts of the open-shop campaign’s early years. It was the NAM’s most deliberately farsighted publicity effort; as an Open Shop Department report noted, “We feel that even though several years may be necessary for the carrying out of this plan, . . . the benefits obtained, indirect as they may be, will prove highly beneficial.”

The NAM opened its campaign to target educators and students with a major undertaking, the compilation and distribution of the Open Shop Encyclopedia for Debaters, first published in February 1921 and revised twice by May of the following year. By the third edition, the encyclopedia ran to over three hundred pages and provided the prospective debater with anything but impartial information and arguments on strikes, union apprenticeship rules, and the “irresponsibility of unions.” The encyclopedia took advantage of the enthusiasm for competitive debating among high school and university students. Beginning in the 1890s, college debating had grown from intramural debating clubs to intercollegiate competitive debates, inaugurated by an 1892 debate between Harvard and Yale. By World War I debating had spread across the country, and the immediate postwar years saw intense growth in collegiate debating, as well as the spread of the contests to high schools and junior colleges. Though some, such as Theodore Roosevelt, condemned debating as training for glibness without principle, debaters had a certain stature on campuses, and at least some debates were held before enthusiastic and sizable audiences. Coached by experts in the new discipline of public speaking, members of debating teams could spend months in intense research to prepare for a competitive debate. Either the encyclopedia or other pro-open-shop material was sent to thousands of debaters, and the debating teams of a handful of universities, including Princeton and Harvard, received personal visits from NAM officers. As a result, the NAM claimed, the side advocating the open shop won three-quarters of the debates, which were “heard by millions of people.”

In the immediate postwar years, the question of the closed versus open shop was prominent among topics of competitive debates. Overall, the topics reflected the burning domestic and foreign political questions of the day: in 1922, for instance, the eight subjects selected as “representative” and “sure to be of interest to debaters for some time to come” by the University Debaters’ Annual included the Kansas Court of Industrial Relations, unemployment insurance, the sales tax, independence for the Philippines, recognition of Soviet Russia, naval disarmament, government ownership and operation of
coal mines—and the closed shop. Indeed, the closed or open shop made the list of eight in 1920, 1921, and 1922.70

University educators were an even more important target than debaters. In a debate, after all, each position is by definition at least worth considering. Even if the open-shop side won the majority of debates, that still allowed the closed-shop side to emerge victorious at some debates and probably left at least some listeners of the debates convinced of the value of the closed shop even at the debates won by the open-shop side. Unlike debaters, university educators had the power to make the open shop a matter of common sense and standard theory. Thus, the NAM worked to put its materials and people at the disposal of university educators. By 1922 the NAM’s Open Shop Department reported that “practically all of the college and university teachers of sociology, government and economics receive our publications,” and in many states the material supplied by the NAM was also being lent out by universities to schools across the state.71 At Harvard’s Graduate School of Business Administration, “students of labor problems” were, according to the NAM, required to read its open-shop literature.72

Getting educators to use the NAM’s open-shop literature required, of course, that that literature actually look like information rather than vitriol. That indeed was the NAM’s goal in the new iteration of the open-shop campaign. As James Emery explained at the opening of the decade, the NAM should strive to get beyond “abstract argument on the principles involved” and instead “overwhelmingly demonstrat[e] by facts and figures that the open shop condition secures a larger return to the worker, a lower cost to the consumer and a greater opportunity for American production to enlarge its facilities, better its services, expand its competition with other nations,” and generally provide regular Americans with more “comforts and luxuries.”73 The open shop, in other words, was simply good for everyone.

In addition to printed matter, the Open Shop Department sent its personnel to give speeches at universities and associations. The 1922 report noted that the department manager, Noel Sargent, had that year given a total of forty-three addresses on the open shop: eighteen at universities and the rest at meetings of organizations ranging from the Economic Club of Pittsburgh to the American Economic Association. Not without glee, the department pointed out that the American Federation of Labor had “declared it was absolutely necessary to counteract our work in educational institutions.”74

The NAM’s publicity campaign in the 1920s reflected trends it had begun pursuing before the war; it was also a harbinger of things to come. In a development that had begun with the NAM’s focus on accident prevention around 1908–9, the organization increasingly, though somewhat intermittently, tried
to position itself as a reliable, creditable source of information. As was the case with the issue of personnel management, though, efforts to soften or professionalize the publicity campaign ran up against reality. The goal, it was clear, was to promote the open shop. To do so it might be politic to not be too vociferous in the open shop's defense, and it might be politic to bring the realities at the workplace more in line with the professed ideals. But most of the membership had limited interest in changing their workplace procedures, and many of them were unwilling to curb their rhetoric. The more research-oriented staff of the NAM, as well as some of its members, mostly labored in vain to convince the old-line open-shoppers that change was needed.

After about 1922 the intense phase of the open-shop campaign seems to have died down, and in 1925 the NAM replaced its Open Shop Department with the more neutrally named Industrial Relations Department. However, when that department attempted to tone down the combative language of the Declaration of Labor Principles, originally drafted in 1903 at the start of the first open-shop campaign, the effort failed. Whether the advocates of a softer line were correct in their assumption that a more neutral position would make the NAM more effective, however, is far from clear. In the early twentieth century its hardcore opposition to labor had served it well; in the 1920s, too, there were indications that a hard line was more efficacious against labor than soft-pedaling. Lizabeth Cohen, for instance, has argued that welfare programs and representation plans, intended to pacify workers and convince them of corporate benevolence and labor-capital harmony, potentially backfired on employers, convincing workers that a “fair employer should take responsibility for the welfare of his work force” while providing those workers with little evidence that their employer was actually doing so. Employers had inadvertently legitimized standards they were not able or willing to meet.

In the 1930s new organizations of industrial workers and the alliances of those organizations with political parties and the state presented employers with unprecedented challenges. As the Great Depression gnawed at the prestige of capitalism, and labor and the New Deal redoubled the challenge to business authority, the NAM recommitted itself to its vociferous antiunionism and opposition to state intervention on workers’ behalf. It was soon clear that this line again served the NAM well: its ideological clarity appealed to a significant segment of the business community, and the NAM’s membership, as well as its income, soared.