

Aaron Welt

Submission For Senior Thesis, History Department, Columbia University

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The Industrial Army Movement of 1894 and Transitions in American Labor Activism

During the Gilded Age

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Abstract:

Industrialization fundamentally altered life in nineteenth century America. The free labor ideology of the era shaped labor activism by guiding it towards an “equal rights tradition,” which held that workers could use their civil and political rights to correct the ills wrought by industrialization. However, the growth of the wage-labor system, and the vulnerabilities of wageworkers during times of depression, demonstrated the outdated potential of the equal rights tradition. The Industrial Army Movement of 1894 represented a shift in American labor activism as resistance through the ballot box, strikes and courts gave way to a national approach dedicated to appropriating the power of the federal government to aid unemployed industrial wageworkers. The Industrial Army Movement built upon prior political activism of the Populist People’s Party and the Knights of Labor-affiliated Workingmen’s Parties, movements that also sought to wield political power to alleviate the dislocations caused by industrialization. Though the movement was unsuccessful in lobbying Congress to pass a government-funded jobs program to build infrastructural projects around the country, the Industrial Army Movement nevertheless represents a pivotal shift in the labor movement’s tactics and the increasingly central role the federal government would have to play in the political, economic and social life of the United States during the age of industrialization.

“We are all equal! Can it be so?  
Are the rich and happy, the poor in woe  
    The proud and the humble, the weak and the strong,  
    The champion of Right, and the champion of Wrong  
The smitten, and he who giveth the blow –  
All Equal? Can it be so?

We Are equal! Can it be true?  
Are the martyr, and he that turneth the screw  
    The man who toileth from early morn,  
    Till night shades fall and is treated with scorn,  
And he hunger and toil ne’er knew  
All Equal! Can it be true?

All men equal! Can it be real?  
That he who is crushed ‘neath monopoly’s heel,  
    And the fiend who weareth the iron show,  
    And never a pang of pity knew,  
But jeers at them who mercy kneel  
All equal! Can it be real?

All men equal! Is it a jest?  
What! The oppressor equal of the oppressed?  
    He whose palace doth pierce the skies,  
    And he who at night by the roadsides lies,  
The demon of hunger gnawing his breast –  
These men equal? Is it a jest?

All men equal! Yes, ‘tis true,  
And the poor are many, the rich are few,  
    But the rich are strong in their bags of gold,  
    And justice away from the poor is sold,  
And the poor won’t unite for their rights to sue,  
All men equal! Yes, ‘tis true

We are all Equal! Every one,  
But Equality is crushed by robber Wrong,  
    Let the toilers arise in their might,  
    And handed together press on the good fight,  
Till the welkin shall echo with truth the glad song,  
‘We Are All equal, everyone!’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> T.C. Walsh, “Equality,” *American Federationist* Vol. I (March 1894) pg. 1

## **Introduction**

In mid April, 1894 at Avoca, Iowa, Charles T. Kelley informed local reporters why he and nearly one thousand unemployed workers were headed to Washington D.C. They intended, he explained, to unite with Jacob S. Coxey and the “Commonwealth of Christ,” where Kelley hoped to lobby the United States Congress to create a publicly funded jobs program, hiring men at a living wage to build infrastructural projects. “If we can only get to Washington,” he said, “if we can let the law-makers see that we are breadwinners, honest, sincere, we will be successful in our mission, for our demands are not unreasonable.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the middle months of 1894, scores of jobless, wage-earning industrial workers descended upon Washington D.C. hoping to collectively stand before Congress to present a “petition in boots” in favor of various reforms to relieve the vast unemployment wrought by the Depression of 1893. The Industrial Army Movement of 1894 was, thus, an amalgam of working people from all over the U.S. participating in a social movement to reclaim federal authority in the name of the American working class. And like their “Generals,” as the leaders of the movement were called, these jobless workingmen believed that if the leaders of the republic could see the vast suffering of industrial workers then they would legislate for laboring people.

The immediate context that spurred this movement was the devastating Depression of 1893, which gripped the nation for four years. A bust beginning in the railroad industry dragged the national economy into freefall leading to the failure of

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<sup>2</sup> Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey's Army; A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1929) pg. 183

fifteen thousand companies and nearly six hundred banks, leaving four million citizens looking for work out of total population of sixty five million.<sup>3</sup> The resulting social calamity was unique, but highlights the major dislocations that defined the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

As the United States transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial society, traditional patterns of work and community life radically altered. Crucial to this transformation was the advent of wage payment for labor. Compensating labor in wages put industrial workers in a precarious status, painfully highlighted during times of economic distress such as the Depression of 1893. But the Industrial Army Movement was not merely a revolt against lack of wages for all willing to work, but a protest against the political, legal and social structures of the age in which employment and workplace autonomy became increasingly dependent on management of large corporations and the whims of a free market economy.

The livelihood of workers during the era was based on the availability wage-earning employment, and its absence left few alternatives. Many historians, states Geoffrey Blodgett, have felt a “profound impatience with the Gilded Age for having not yet discovered the Welfare State.”<sup>4</sup> With the Depression of 1873, and demands for public works to employ jobless men, the policy of the Grant Administration was

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<sup>3</sup> Frank B. Latham, *The Panic of 1893; A Time of Strikes, Riots, Hobo Camps, Coxey's Army, Starvation, Withering Droughts, and Fears of "Revolution"* (New York: Franklin Watts Inc., 1971)

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Calhoun, “The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics” in *The Gilded Age; Essays on the Origins of Modern America* (Wilmington: A Scholarly Resource Inc. Imprint, 1996) pg. 188

that “it is no business of the government to find employment for people.”<sup>5</sup> This continued to be federal policy throughout the period, sustained by a conviction among political and business elites that market activity underwent natural fluctuations but would ultimately provide employment for all willing to work. Even with the Depression of 1893, the concept of an interventionist state was far from accepted.

Middle-class opinion looked at the men who comprised the Industrial Army Movement with deep suspicion if not hostility. Representative of the movement’s detractors was General O. O. Howard, who argued that it would “not be difficult to find work already in demand for everyone of that rank and file.” While “gigantic efforts and sacrifices on the part of the capitalists, bankers and other business men could not avert” the financial catastrophe, these jobless marchers headed for Washington looking for handouts rather than available employment.<sup>6</sup> Many voices in the media condescendingly referred to the men who comprised the movement as “tramps,” or vagabonds who traveled the country, stealing train rides and avoiding honest work. Not only were the members of the Industrial Army Movement tramps, but, according to Howard, they were led by socialists and anarchists. As the movement began and unfolded throughout 1894, many observers feared that there would be repeats of the social upheaval witnessed in the past few decades of American life. In 1877, clashes between workers and management of several major railroads exploded in veritable revolt, leading to massive property destruction and a

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<sup>5</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) pgs. 6-7

<sup>6</sup> Major General O. O. Howard, “The Menace of Coxeyism,” *The North Atlantic Review*, June 1894, Vol. 158

few dozen fatalities. In 1886, at a demonstration in the Haymarket section of Chicago organized in support of striking McCormick factory employees, a bomb attack left eight police officers dead and two purported radicals were hanged in retribution. The year 1892 was particularly bloody, witnessing industrial violence in the Coeur d'Alenes mining section of Idaho and in the steel mills of Homestead, Pennsylvania. In the last several decades of the nineteenth century, there were tens of thousands of work stoppages involving countless workers. The trend of industrial violence, many feared, would be reignited with the massive unemployment resulting from the Depression of 1893, and the rank and file of the industrial armies appeared the most likely culprits.

But what distinguishes the Industrial Army Movement from the tumultuous violence of the era is its emphasis on law and order, sobriety and the outward image of respectability. The leaders of the movement, and the participants themselves, consciously presented the campaign as a collection of upright worker-citizens, deserving of a fair hearing from their Congressional leaders. The Industrial Army Movement of 1894 was therefore a watershed in late nineteenth century labor activism. Instead of the repeated local violence of workers attempting to control their worksites, this movement was non-violently oriented towards national political goals secured through democratic practices. The movement also symbolized the rejection by many workingmen of the "equal rights tradition," which had prevailed for much of the preceding century. This ideology held that the federal government's role in the economy should be equal application of the law and the removal of the privileged position of the wealthy from the republic process. In short,



the Industrial Army Movement marked a crucial transition within American labor activism whereby wage-earning industrial laborers sought to appropriate federal authority to direct the national economy towards the aims of the working class.

### **Origins and Visions of the Movement**

The industrialization of the United States challenged nineteenth century conceptions of labor and citizenship. Much of American thought and activity during this period was influenced by the free labor ideology, which held that productive labor be rewarded with the means of subsistence and social mobility. This ideal was one of the bases of Jeffersonian Republicanism and the political ethos of Abraham Lincoln. The free labor ideology was cogently presented by Lincoln when he stated, “Inasmuch as most good things are produced by labor, it follows that all such things of right belong to those whose labor has produced them... To secure to each laborer the whole product of his labor... is a worthy object of any good government.”<sup>7</sup> This ideology also rested on a belief that republican government depended on a public of independent citizens, in which a worker “owned his own toil,” and that each man was the full beneficiary of his productive endeavors. These tenets of the free labor society shaped the attitudes and aspirations of millions of working Americans in the pre-industrial U.S.<sup>8</sup>

The industrial process fundamentally altered the reality that the free labor ideology played in the daily lives of American workers. As laborers moved from the fields to factories in major cities, they became incorporated into a world of wages

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and The Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) pg. 136

<sup>8</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) pg. 30

and discipline.<sup>9</sup> While laborers previously enjoyed a degree of autonomy over their work, industrial wage labor undermined this independent producer ideal, introducing a new system of worker subservience, dictated by the prerogatives of management and an impersonal wage market. Wage compensation problematized the expectation that work secured upward mobility, independent production and, in economic downturns, even basic subsistence. Industrial wage work, or “wage slavery” as many labor agitators termed it, increasingly cast the free labor ideology of the preceding century as a romantic myth.

As labor struggled to maintain the free labor ideology of the nineteenth century, collective efforts of workers operated within a corresponding “equal rights tradition.” This ideology held that working class demands could be won through marshalling workers’ political and civil rights and that proper ordering of political and market structures would alleviate labor’s plight. This tradition treated government intervention in the economy and labor mobilization into party politics with ambivalence, and at times, rejection. This orientation of labor activism abided by a faith that workers control of extra-political spheres of life would create a just society, as the promise of free labor would rectify economic wrongs. The equal rights tradition of the beginning half of the nineteenth century is exemplified by the Working Men’s movement in major cities throughout the 1830s, with their dedication to “loco foco,” removing “aristocracy” from government and granting increased control to workers over their worksites. However, the “workies,” as they were called, and the Workingmen’s Parties of the era “offered little in terms of

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<sup>9</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, First Vintage Books, 1977) pgs. 49- 54

practical reform remedies,” or legislative goals to abet wage-earners’ concerns.<sup>10 11</sup>

The equal rights tradition evolved with the inauguration of the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor in 1869. With the Knights’ “First Principles,” established in 1872, labor began articulating a vision for public authority to regulate work hours, child labor, to collect statistics through bureaus of labor and other reforms.<sup>12</sup> But still, the Knights eschewed party politics and held government action to a regulatory role rather than a proactive agent in the wage market.<sup>13</sup> The equal rights tradition is seen once again towards the end of the nineteenth century in the distrust of Samuel Gompers and his American Federation of Labor towards worker political mobilization and state power generally.<sup>14</sup> As nineteenth century workers held onto the free labor ideology, working class political activism did not yet adopt the objectives of what sociologist T.H. Marshall called “social rights,” or a politically guaranteed minimum standard of living facilitated by government intervention in the wage market.<sup>15</sup>

Another defining aspect of nineteenth century labor activism was its frequent descent into bloodshed. As the above-mentioned instances of labor violence indicate, workers during the Gilded Age fought vigorously with management for

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<sup>10</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy; Jefferson to Lincoln* (New and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005) pgs. 413- 423

<sup>11</sup> Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism; 1865- 1901*(Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1946) ch. 1

<sup>12</sup> Sean Dennis Cashman, *American in the Gilded Age; From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1984) pg. 250

<sup>13</sup> Leon Fink, “The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Hegemony, Consensus, Hegemony, and the case of the Knights of Labor,” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 75, (June 1988) pg. 119

<sup>14</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Social Policy in the United States; Future Possibilities in Historical Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) pg. 111

<sup>15</sup> T.H. Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class,” in *The Citizenship Debate; A Reader*, ed., Gershon Shafir (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) ch. 6

control of their productive lives. These often-violent contests unfolded in localized settings, involving conflicts of village or community autonomy against managers' dictates to workers.<sup>16</sup> Congruent with the equal rights tradition, workers believed that their vision for a just society relied not so much on control of governmental policy but of the industrial process itself.<sup>17</sup> Leading into the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the locus of conflict between management and labor was not so much Congress or the ballot box as it was the confines of the factory gate.

By the 1890s, industrialization had strained working class commitment to the equal rights tradition. Sentiments aired in the labor press reveal the inadequacies of political and civil rights in rectifying the plight of the working class. Various writers in the *American Federationist*, the publication of the anti-statist A.F.L., conveyed that the basic legal and political institutions of the republic were corrupted by the wealthy. One author used a story about several university students who blew up a basement and received lenient sentences to demonstrate the control of the judicial system by the "privileged class." The author intended to "put to blush the men who declare that labor is wrong in believing that the constitutional guarantee of 'equality before the law' is fast becoming untrue, a mockery and an illusion."<sup>18</sup> In a poem written for the same journal, T.C. Walsh derided the purported

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<sup>16</sup> Gutman, ch. 5, also see description of struggles for community autonomy in Homestead (Linda Schneider, "The Citizen Striker: Workers' Ideology in the Homestead Strike of 1892," *Labor History* (The Tamiment Institute New York) 2001) as well as Marcus, Bullard and Moore (Irwin M. Marcus, Jennie Bullard, Rob Moore, "Change and Continuity: Steel Workers in Homestead, Pennsylvania, 1889-1895," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania* Vol. 111 (January, 1987))

<sup>17</sup> David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality; Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862- 1872* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) pg. 142

<sup>18</sup> "Equality Before the Law," *American Federationist* Vol. I (May 1894)

equality of American citizenship. In one verse of the piece, titled "Equality," Walsh writes,

"All men equal! Is it a jest?  
What! The oppressor equal of the oppressed?  
    He whose palace doth pierce the skies,  
    And he who at night by the roadside lies  
The demon of hunger gnawing his breast –  
These men equal? Is it a jest?"

The poet goes on to lament that while "justice away from the poor is sold... the poor won't unite for their rights to sue."<sup>19</sup> These fragments convey a changing mentality within 1890s labor activism. The rights of the American worker in the courthouse and ballot box were increasingly deemed ineffective as the wealthy and powerful usurped these core institutions of American democracy. New strategies would have to be tried to achieve the demands of the labor movement.

Indeed, to most working class Americans it seemed obvious that management increasingly harnessed political power. Beginning in 1877, when President Rutherford B. Hayes sent federal troops to uphold order on the railroads of West Virginia, the resources and manpower of state militias were utilized for the benefit of corporations. In 1892, with labor conflicts arising in the Coeur d'Alenes and Homestead, state and federal forces were ultimately called in to maintain production and effectively end workers' means of securing their demands. Unions also had the additional obstacle of court injunctions, which frequently deemed work stoppages and other union tactics as "conspiracy," necessitating state repression of labor activism. Increasingly throughout the era, the labor movement struggled as management called upon state and federal forces, as well as private security firms

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<sup>19</sup> T.C. Walsh, "Equality," *American Federationist* Vol. 1 (March 1894) pg. 1

such as the Pinkerton Detective Agency, to quell worker agitation. The ability of managers to utilize state authority jolted the labor movement and demonstrated the outdated nature of the equal rights tradition. Especially after Homestead and, crucially, the Pullman Strike of 1894, workers in many parts of the country lost faith in equality before the law as the safeguard to economic liberty. By century's end, labor adopted a national, political approach, often committed to "class struggle," as is seen in the rise of the Socialist Party and the political career of Eugene V. Debs.<sup>20</sup>

These developments highlighted the necessity of political solutions for those marginalized by industrialization. In the countryside, as agriculture became incorporated into industrial capitalism, a political insurgency took shape in the Populist Movement. Farmers all over the U.S., especially the Mid West and South, sought political solutions to growing corporate power of banks and railroads as the nineteenth century ideal of independent land ownership became a distant reality for many.<sup>21</sup> Populists viewed their effort as a political revolt to uphold "pre-industrial republicanism... which linked freedom and independence with control over productive resources and portrayed the state as defender of the public good."<sup>22</sup> As displayed in the Omaha Platform of the People's Party Convention in 1892, Populists called for the increased use of federal authority to curb excessive business power and uphold the interests of laborers and farmers. In this sense, the Populists were a

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<sup>20</sup> Marcus, Bullard, Moore, pgs. 61-75

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment; A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press Oxford, 1978) also see Steve Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism; Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) ch. 6

<sup>22</sup> Steve Hahn, pgs. 2-3

crucial voice for reclaiming nineteenth century free labor ideology and served as a precedent for the aims of the Industrial Army Movement.

Industrial workers, like farmers, were also becoming aware of the need for political solutions to the social conditions of the Gilded Age. And like their Populist brethren, “an eighteenth century republican political inheritance still provided the basic vocabulary” for their protest.<sup>23</sup> However, working class political agitation throughout the 1880s focused on local rather than federal power, demonstrated by the municipal victories of the Knights of Labor and its political party manifestations. As historian David Montgomery argues, much of nineteenth century labor activism was based on the equal rights tradition, maintaining that proper structuring of a free labor wage market could correct social ills, while providing a limited role for state intervention.<sup>24</sup> However, by the 1880s many industrial communities had been won over by labor-based political parties. While in power, these workingmen’s parties wielded political instruments to address the concerns of their working-class constituents, including limited use of police force during strikes, eight hour days for municipal employees and, crucially, public employment during economic downturns. The experience of workingmen’s parties throughout the 1880s provided another precedent for the non-violent, politically-oriented activism seen in the Industrial Army Movement.

The crucial step that Coxey’s Army and the Commonweal took was moving the political demands from the municipality to the national center of authority.

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<sup>23</sup> Leon Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy; The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1985) ch. 1-3

<sup>24</sup> David Montgomery, ch. 4

Observing the industrial armies in 1894, Thorstein Veblen concluded the movement represented working-class recognition of its “vital economic relation to the general [federal] government and through the general government to all the rest of the community, without intermediary of any lower or local body.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, industrial wage work and the Depression of 1893 painfully demonstrated “that the availability of jobs was not determined locally, but, rather, that jobs were created through a national mechanism... the self-regulating market created by railways and industrialization.”<sup>26</sup> Along with national unemployment, jobless workers all over the U.S. struggled with the paltry poor relief provided by municipalities that barely, if at all, covered their living expenses.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> Thus, moving beyond the limited resources of local government, the industrial armies headed towards Congress, the locus of national sovereignty. Significantly, the Industrial Army Movement was the first march on Washington in the nation’s history, making it a symbolic demonstration of the shift in working class activism moving from local to nationwide political plains.<sup>29</sup>

The social transformations of industrialization, and the political currents they motivated are the deep-rooted origins of the Industrial Army Movement. This, however, is lost in the existing historiography of the movement, which focuses on the political acumen of its leaders, notably Jacob Shechler Coxey, and generally

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<sup>25</sup> Thorstein B. Veblen, “The Army of the Commonweal,” *Journal of Political Economy* Vol. II (June 1894) pg. 456- 61

<sup>26</sup> Anne Mayhew, “Polanyi’s Double Movement and Veblen on the Army of the Commonweal,” *Journal of Economic Issues* Vol. 23 (June 1898) pg. 559

<sup>27</sup> McMurry, pg. 10

<sup>28</sup> “Work Not Charity,” *American Federationist* Vol. 4 (June 1894)

<sup>29</sup> Carlos Schwantes, *Coxey’s Army; An American Odyssey* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) pg. 270



refers to the movement as simply “Coxey’s Army.”<sup>30</sup> This title fails to appreciate the vast social forces that motivated thousands of jobless workers to partake in the movement. Political and other developments of the last decade of the nineteenth century animated these men, fueled by a belief in the capacity for republican government and proper utilization of federal power to create a more just industrial process.

Jacob Coxey did play an important role, albeit a singular one. Originally from Massillon, Ohio, he conceptualized the movement several years before it occurred. In 1891, he wrote an original draft of his “Good Roads Bill,” calling for the Secretary of War to appropriate half a million dollars for an army of laborers, hired at \$1.50 for an eight-hour day, to build roads across the country. Shortly after, he formed the J.S. Coxey Good Roads Association and allied himself with professional labor activist Carl Browne of California. Over the next several years, the two worked together to gain recognition in political, labor and media circles. The Depression of 1893 created the conditions for Coxey and Browne to launch a “petition in boots,” and manifest their political ideas as a social movement. Beginning in March of 1894, Coxey sent out word of his proposed demonstration on Washington, in which the signatures in favor of his good roads bill would be represented by actual unemployed workingmen standing before the Capitol. Coxey’s message spread

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<sup>30</sup> This is demonstrated not only in the popular reference to the movement as “Coxey’s Army,” but also in the fact that the two major “biographies” of the movement are both called “Coxey’s Army.”

Donald L. McMurry, *Coxey’s Army; A Study of the Industrial Army Movement of 1894* (Seattle London: University of Washington Press, 1929)

Carlos Schwantes, *Coxey’s Army; An American Odyssey* (Lincoln London: University of Nebraska Press, 1985)

nationwide and nearly a dozen industrial armies across the country formed, vowing to meet Coxey and his men May 1<sup>st</sup> in Washington D.C. By April of 1894, the Industrial Army Movement was in full swing, becoming a subject of constant media attention and national scrutiny.

The weakness in the argument that Coxey was the most powerful, inspirational leader of the movement is best demonstrated by the fact that the majority of participants came not out of Massillon but from the West Coast of the United States. Beginning in autumn of 1893, unemployed wage workers all over the Pacific Rim organized into bands in order to gain free rides upon railways. These nascent industrial armies formed independently of Coxey's activism in Ohio and the mobilization of unemployed workingmen is solidly of western origins.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the first half of 1894, at least seven different industrial armies of unemployed workers set out from Los Angeles, San Francisco, Tacoma, Seattle, Butte, Portland and Great Falls. The unique industrial development of the West, and its political history, demonstrate how the industrial armies formed and the overemphasis given to Coxey in their formation.

The immense influence of federal government power in the history of the American West bred fertile ground for the national political demands of the Industrial Army Movement. National government authority was the basis for Anglo-American settlement, first in driving off native peoples from their lands, and then in building the railroads, dams, reservoirs and canals necessary for modern development in its arid areas. Additionally, the national government had long been a

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<sup>31</sup> McMurry, pg. 15- 20

large owner of public land in the West. Patricia Limerick describes the West as “a particularly illuminating case study in state power,” where “the operations of the federal government are crucial and central.” The economic development of the West, heavily prone to volatile booms and busts, had also been tempered by federal intervention.<sup>32</sup> The heavy-handed role played by the national government in American settlement of the West made its citizens more ready to use federal power in addressing the social ills wrought by Depression.

Another condition unique to workers in the West is what historian Carlos Schwantes calls “the ideology of disinheritance.” Related to the free labor ideology, this idea conveys the sense of disillusionment that many unskilled, industrial workers of the West felt as the promise of upward mobility and individual success were stymied by low wages, corporate control of production and loss of independent producer status. The ideology was most often framed in republican values and was directed simultaneously at corporate power, corrupt government and cheap Chinese labor. The frustrations of Western workers – often laboring in some of the deadliest industries such as lumberjacking, mining and railroad construction – led to their mobilization into labor and political groups operating on the local level. In the 1880s, radical worker activity was generally channeled through Knights of Labor affiliates and the International Workingmen’s Association, which educated workers in the relationship between economic and political power. The best demonstration of these lessons took form in the actual mobilization of state and federal authority in cracking down on these radical labor groups. For

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<sup>32</sup> Patricia Limerick, *Something in the Soil; Legacies and Reckonings in the New West* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) pgs. 23-26

example, after vigilante squads attempted to expurgate Chinese laborers from Tacoma, Washington, federal authorities quelled the operation under the authority of the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871. While this act of “frontier vigilantism” was a particularly untoward instance of labor mobilization, it nevertheless demonstrated Western worker radicalism, its highly political nature and its confrontation with federal authority.<sup>33</sup>

The nature of Western workers themselves made them easy recruits for the Industrial Army Movement once the Depression of 1893 devastated the West. Frontier ideals of individual success frustrated “wage slavery” made for a highly transient labor force easily mobilized for radical activism. The industries peculiar to the West, where workers often lived in isolated camps and were frequently treated as “human machines” in labor-intensive work, pitted laborers at odds with wage compensation and management discipline. Western workers frequently protested with their feet, evident in the fact that the average duration for work in Western industry in 1914 was fifteen to thirty days in lumberjacking, sixty days in mining, thirty days in canning, ten days in construction and only seven days in harvesting.<sup>34</sup> Even had workers chosen to abide by management discipline, employment was not steady and subject to intense drifts in market activity. The transient nature of work in the West abetted the development of a particular lifestyle, sometimes called “hobo” but certainly similar to the “tramp” title frequently given to the Industrial

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<sup>33</sup> Carlos A. Schwantes, “Protest in a Promised Land: Unemployment, Disinheritance, and the Origin of Labor Militancy in the Pacific Northwest, 1885-1886,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 13 (October 1982) pgs. 373-390

<sup>34</sup> Carlos Schwantes, “Images of the Wagerworkers’ Frontier,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* Vol. 38 (Autumn 1988) pgs. 38-49

Army rank and file. This lifestyle entailed stealing rides aboard railroads, wandering from town to town in search of temporary employment. By the 1890s, there were somewhere between forty to sixty thousand tramps throughout the U.S.<sup>35</sup> In short, the nature of work and life in the industrializing West made ready recruits for the Industrial Army Movement as the Depression of 1893 swelled the ranks of jobless, migratory workingmen.

What motivated these Western workers to organize this campaign across the country, which had always carried tenuous hope of success, has hardly been settled by historians. Yet the proclamations of the marchers themselves reveal plenty. Some interpret Western radicalism exemplifying a class struggle between management of frontier industries and workers organized in the large, industrial unions such as the Western Federation of Minors, the Western Labor Union and later the Industrial Workers of the World.<sup>36</sup> Others see a “peculiar vision of millennial harmony” in the Industrial Army’s demands, predicated on simple notions of economic redemption that would allow “Americans [to] literally purchase their way into utopia.”<sup>37</sup> Class struggle and, even less so, religious fervor played marginal roles in what was ultimately a political movement. Rather, the constitutions drafted by the industrial armies themselves reveal a republican faith that good government ought to uphold the rights and interest of the industrial, wage-earning class. Marching out of Los Angeles in February 1894, under the leadership of Lewis C. Fry, Fry’s Army drafted a

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<sup>35</sup> McMurry, pg. 13

<sup>36</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, “The Origins of Western Working-Class Radicalism, 1890- 1905,” in *The Labor History Reader*, ed. Daniel J. Leab (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985) pg. 230- 253

<sup>37</sup> Orville Vernon Burton, *The Age of Lincoln* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) pgs. 351-352

constitution that reflected the class-consciousness of its authors while adorning their demands in the republican rhetoric that was common to the era. The Preamble states that

We... As patriotic, American citizens, have organized ourselves into an Industrial Army, for the purpose of centralizing all unemployed Americans at the seat of Government (Washington D.C.) and tender our services to feed, clothe and shelter the Nation's needy, and to accomplish this end we make the following demands on the government:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Government employment for all her unemployed citizens
- 2<sup>d</sup>. Prohibition of foreign immigration for ten years
- 3<sup>d</sup>. That no alien be allowed to own real estate in the United States

The Constitution had additionally asked, "Why is it that those who produce food are hungry? Why is it that those who make clothes are ragged?" In essence, this industrial army constitution framed the class grievances of small farmers and industrial laborers in the rhetoric of republican rights, demanding protections for these groups through the authority of the national government.

One such marcher in Fry's Army was Bernard Baes. Originally from Belgium, Baes had traveled extensively, like many Western migrant laborers, living in Wisconsin before settling in Chicago and somehow making his way to Los Angeles to take part in Fry's Army. He had worked as a coachman and was a scrupulous employee, earning letters of recommendation from employers as "sober and trustworthy." Baes became the Secretary of Fry's Army and his roster of marchers reveal the industrial, wage-earning status of nearly all the participants, who represented over a dozen states and several nationalities. It was likely not religious, utopian visions that motivated Baes, as one letter addressed to him in 1894 reveals the author's grief that he had "forsaken his religion." The evidence suggest, rather, that Baes like many of the other unemployed workingmen of Fry's Army protested

the economic plight of those who had earned their keep – being “active, industrious, willing and trustworthy” as another employer described Baes – and yet were jobless victims of the Depression of 1893.<sup>38</sup>

The ambitious proposals of Fry’s Army were matched by the other large contingents. Beyond his Good Roads Bills - which were introduced to Congress throughout the 1890s but never close to passing - Coxe had a vision of widespread federal authority being used to develop all municipalities across the country. As reported by Henry Vincent, a journalist who followed Coxe’s Army and became its official biographer, Coxe wanted federal money to pour into every town to build schools, courthouses, infirmaries, libraries and every conceivable public service. This “system of public improvements,” paid for with non-interest bearing bonds, would “settle the money question” since it would substitute a cash system for a credit or script system.<sup>39</sup> Elite opinion disdained the idea of government issuing fiat money to be spent by any small town governments for projects it believed would benefit its citizens. Secretary of Agriculture J. Sterling Morton described the idea as a theory derived by “vagrant economists,” and stated, “No one, with good reasoning faculties, can even attempt to defend an inconvertible currency.”<sup>40</sup> The cabinet member did not approve of Coxe’s scheme, but the Ohioan’s followers marched to Washington to see such a program implemented.

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<sup>38</sup> Industrial Army of the United States. Papers. University of Washington Library Archive, Seattle

<sup>39</sup> McMurry, pg. 28

<sup>40</sup> J. Sterling Morton, “Protection and the Proletariat,” *The North American Review* Vol. 158, (June 1894) pg. 641

Charles Kelley, leading an industrial army out of San Francisco, fashioned a unique program that combined a federal jobs program with the Western tradition of homesteading. Under his scheme, unemployed workers would be hired by the state for three years to build irrigation systems to open new lands for cultivation, and after three years buy the converted plots. This plan, as Kelley put it, would turn “homeless wanderers into steady farmers and property owners.”<sup>41</sup> The idea revealed the lingering faith in the free labor ideology of private ownership of land and production, while it based its future success on federal government investment.

In addition to the Western and Coxe’s Army, contingents formed from the long-industrialized Northeast and New England. An industrial army was created in Boston and led by Morrison Swift who, unlike most industrial workers, had been educated at Williams College and in Germany before becoming a labor agitator. Swift’s political vision was statist and was known in the Boston press as a socialist agitator. The Boston group eventually met up in New York with armies from Connecticut and Rhode Island and drafted a similar petition to that of Fry’s Army. Their constitution called for widespread federal government intervention, including the provision of farms and factories to all parts of the country where there was unemployment, the nationalization of all railroads, a federal commission to investigate whether all trusts should be nationalized and an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would “affirm the right of everyone to have work.”<sup>42</sup> Like the demands of the Western armies, this document framed class-based grievances in republican language, seeking rectification in federal government authority and the

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<sup>41</sup> McMurry, pg. 183

<sup>42</sup> McMurry, pgs. 227-228



Constitution. The Western and Eastern armies conveyed different visions, the former based more in recreating the romantic promise of prosperity in the West while the latter bent more towards overtly socialist ideology. Yet the two movements of unemployed laborers fit into the same movement, not just in their journey for political vindication of their grievances, but in the common sense of vulnerability that wage-earners all over the U.S. felt and experienced during the Depression. Also in common was that by April of 1894, all the armies from over a dozen locations throughout the U.S. were headed toward Washington D.C. to demand Congress aid American workers.

### **A Respectable Movement**

As the procession unfolded a deluge of condescension, scorn and general ill-will poured out from the media, politicians and others who were likely not directly affected by the Depression and widespread unemployment. Criticism of the movement generally took two, and at times contradictory forms. One strain saw the Industrial Armies as farcical, composed of feeble-minded and easily exploited tramps who were not to be taken seriously. This argumentation also viewed the movement as an anti-democratic force that was imposing its will through intimidation upon the nation's legislatures rather than through legitimate change achieved through the ballot box. One reporter of *The Chautauquan* saw "the rank and file of the Coxey army" as men who "have no settled place of residence and no visible means of support, liable to arrest and vagrancy... commonly called tramps." The reporter stated frankly, "These movements have their farcical side and in part are not to be taken seriously;" rather they were an unsavory response to the poor

market conditions, but would not ultimately impede “the march of civilization” and the “measured trend of social progress.”<sup>43</sup> Thomas Byrne, Superintendent of the New York Police Department concurred. “These idle, useless dregs of humanity – too lazy to work, too miserably inefficient to earn a living,” in Byrne’s opinion, sought to provoke reform not through the “legitimate way, by securing enough votes to elect their representatives,” but through intimidation of the U.S. Congress. Like the aforementioned reporter, Byrne viewed the Industrial Armies “with somewhat the same feeling of amusement with which we watch the horse-play of the clown in the circus ring.”<sup>44</sup> Removed from the social devastation experienced by industrial wage-earners during the Depression, middle class opinion saw the movement as a collection of the least desirable citizens of the nation, shirking responsible employment in order to engage in anti-republican political antics.

Others viewed the industrial armies as not just a menace but also a danger to public health. Dr. Alvah H. Doty, the chief of the Bureau of the Contagious Diseases with the New York Board of Health, worried greatly about the “hygiene and cleanliness” of the mobilized unemployed marchers. Dr. Doty forewarned that it was “easy to understand that as a means of increasing contagious diseases throughout the country, Coxeyism is an agent of the most vicious type.”<sup>45</sup> The New York bureaucrat combined a middle class skepticism of the moral character of the marchers – arguing that the “great majority of them would take part in any

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<sup>43</sup> “Social Unrest and Disorder,” *The Chautauquan; A Weekly Newsmagazine*, May 1894: 19, 2; pg. 223

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Byrne, “Character and Methods of the Men,” *The North American Review* (June 1894) Vol. 158, No. 451, pg. 696

<sup>45</sup> Alvah H. Doty, “May Spread Smallpox; Coxeyites Likely to Scatter Disease Throughout the Country,” *The New York Times*, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1894

movement which would insure them plenty of food and drink and protection from work” – with a contemporary bourgeois obsession with public health and cleanliness.

Accompanying this elite disdain was the specter of industrial violence so common to the Gilded Age. Critics also decried the movement with expectations of property destruction, violent mobilization of workers and bloodshed. The reporter for *The Chautauquan* believed that the movement’s roots lay in the lax treatment given towards the Haymarket rioters, which gave “official encouragement to the common enemies of society.” Superintendent Byrne asked if these armies did not constitute “threatened civil war” and expected that once the leaders of the movement deserted their followers in Washington D.C. blood would run through the nation’s capitol. This illegal movement, he argued, ought to have been stopped before it had reached Washington, just as the “Great Rebellion of 1861” had been. Although these fears were exaggerated, and time would prove inaccurate, they were based upon common perceptions of a particular social strata observing American society in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Many elites saw the era’s industrial unrest as the result of unrealistic political and economic expectations of native-born factory workers and the political radicalism carried over from Europe by the mass of new, immigrant laborers.<sup>46</sup>

One who shared these fears was the sitting President. Grover Cleveland began his political ascendancy as a reform Democrat in the patently corrupt scene of

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<sup>46</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon; The United States 1877-1919* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987) Introduction, Ch. 1, especially her discussion of American perceptions of the Paris Commune, pgs. 20- 24

post-Civil War New York State politics. Many hoped that Cleveland could alter the social ills of the 1880s and 1890s, but his two terms in office proved conservative. He surrounded himself with officials coming largely from the business establishment, such as Attorney General Richard Olney, a leading railroad lawyer, Secretary of War Daniel S. Lamont, from the Continental National Bank of New York, and his advisors Daniel Manning and William C. Whitney. Even before the Depression of 1893, Whitney had written to Cleveland that “...the impression of you got by the people is that you do not appreciate their suffering and poverty ... and have your ideas informed by Eastern money power, etc. – the usual twaddle....” Cleveland applied an austere approach to governance, rejecting federal support of social insurance programs and tariffs for American manufacturing. But his commitment to laissez faire ideology dissuaded him from federal initiatives to alleviate working class and Populist grievances, rejecting bi-metallism and maintaining parsimonious government spending after the onset of the Depression of 1893.<sup>47</sup> The President’s conservatism made him wary of reports coming in of unemployed workers throughout the United States organizing and heading towards Washington, sending federal agents to tail Coxe’s Army as it organized in Ohio. The Secretary of the Treasury sent a Secret Service unit to infiltrate Coxe’s men, as did the Chief of the Pittsburgh Police.<sup>48 49</sup> The District of Columbia militia drilled and

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<sup>47</sup> Hofstadter, pgs. 232-238

<sup>48</sup> Alyn Brodsky, *Grover Cleveland; A Study in Character* (New York: Truman Talley Books St. Martin’s Press, 2000) pg. 307

<sup>49</sup> Schwantes, pg. 25

prepared for a possible invasion of the capitol.<sup>50</sup> While federal agents were mobilized to counter the first signs of unruliness from the industrial armies, police headquarters in dozens of municipalities were similarly put on high alert.

But observers who actually communicated with the men in the industrial armies gathered very different conclusions. A. Cleveland Hall, an academic at Johns Hopkins University, met up with the Coxe contingent in Rockville, Maryland and believed the men he interviewed to be genuine, jobless laborers who were marching out of belief and necessity. “These men are not tramps, but for the most part unskilled, uneducated workmen; men just above the tramp class, who are the first to suffer during times of Depression and the last to regain employment.” Additionally, the marchers strove to avoid offers of charity and traveled as “an army of peace, resolved to obey the laws even when they considered them unjust.” Hall also believed that the movement had an educational effect on its participants, forcing them to engage in serious thought of political and economic issues, though, to the author’s regret, often leading their sympathies toward socialism.<sup>51</sup>

A. Cleveland Hall’s illustration of the army from Massillon is consistent with a survey of Kelley’s Army coming out of San Francisco. While marching through Iowa, President Aylesworth of Drake University questioned seven hundred sixty-three men, out which four hundred twenty-five named eighty-three different trades they had previously worked in, the most common being miner. The investigation also showed that over two thirds of Kelley’s Army were native born Americans, and out

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<sup>50</sup> Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington; The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002); pgs. 26-27

<sup>51</sup> A. Cleveland Hall, “An Observer in Coxe’s Camp,” *The Independent*, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1894

of the foreign born portion most had come from England or Germany (though there were workers from Poland, Russia, Greece Turkey and Argentina counted). Politically, two hundred-forty who responded stated they were Populists, two hundred-eighteen were Republican, and one hundred ninety-six were Democrat and only eleven independents. That over fifteen percent claimed to have no religion at all suggests interpretations of the industrial armies as a religiously-inspired movement are misguided. An interviewer from the *Iowa State Register* found that from a sample of twenty five men, six claimed they would return to work only for “union” or “standard” wages, while twelve named wages ranging from one to two dollars a day, and seven claimed they “were willing do to any work offered.”<sup>52</sup> The insider reports from the various contingents reveal that the movement was hardly composed of deadbeats, but instead wage-earning industrial laborers made vulnerable to penury by market downturns.

Fears of unemployed workers unleashing violent class warfare were ultimately proved false. The participants and the leaders of the industrial armies consciously fashioned a movement that was orderly, non-violent, respectful of private property and congruent with middle class norms of behavior. However, they did not adopt bourgeois standards of conduct but were, rather, demonstrating a tradition of working class respectability rooted in skilled craft union norms. As the various contingents marched to the capitol, they presented themselves as a disciplined force of workers actively disavowing the stigma of industrial violence that had made national headlines over the past decades. By doing so, they hoped to

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<sup>52</sup> McMurry, pg. 187-188

present themselves before the republic's leaders as dignified worker-citizens, worthy of federal aid.

Carlos Schwantes asserts that the Commonweal demonstrated "Spartan vigor" in its procession towards Washington.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, each of the armies took special efforts to ensure the image of the movement would not be tarnished by rowdiness or seemingly indecent behavior. At the outset in Massillon, Coxey and Browne vetted the original recruits, accepting only those who appeared out-of-work laborers and rejecting those perceived to be beggars. The leaders also disqualified foreign workers because of their popular association with European radicalism.<sup>54</sup> Daily routines were regimented by Coxey and Browne including daily shaving of beards and having the men drill and exercise. The press was deliberately given access to the armies when they were grooming to demonstrate the men's dedication to hygiene.<sup>55</sup> When arriving in different towns, Coxey's Army would surprise local law enforcement with their discipline and compliance with police demands. In the march from Massillon to Washington, there were no arrests made.<sup>56</sup>

The contingent from Los Angeles demonstrated similar efforts to maintain order, sobriety and respectability. Members of Fry's Army were also vetted and had to sign an oath stating,

"I have sworn to support the constitution of the United States and the Industrial Army. To obey all orders that may be said, sent, or handed to me by those authorized to do so... To never violate any law of the United States or such state or territory in which I may be, or aid or abet any riotous conduct. To respect the right

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<sup>53</sup> Schwantes, pg. 52

<sup>54</sup> McMurry, pg. 49

<sup>55</sup> Barber, pg. 24

<sup>56</sup> McMurry, pg. 91

of property and law and order. To never act in any manner to bring discredit upon the Industrial Army or the United States.”<sup>57</sup>

Like the other armies, Fry’s Army won over cities with their discipline and integrity.

The men also complied with middle class standards of hygiene and public health, such as in Terre Haute, Indiana, where despite some of the recruits’ resistance the army was vaccinated in accordance with the laws of the state. One reporter stated that the marchers had impressed the city reporters “by the excellent camp discipline observed and by the cleanliness and intelligent appearance of the men.”<sup>58</sup>

Working class respectability was the prerogative of both the leaders of each army and the democratic will of the participants themselves. With only scarce exceptions, the marchers upheld law and order while the leaders facilitated the image of respectability to host communities and the media. Charles Kelley, leading unemployed men out of San Francisco, faced difficulties in controlling some of his West Coast contingent. Kelley also filtered recruits, accepting only one hundred fifty men out of many hundreds in Council Bluffs, Iowa and the men took a similar oath as Fry’s Army.<sup>59</sup> In an effort to maintain the purity of his ranks, General Kelley kept tabs on the men by giving them membership cards and insignia, which they were required to show before going to sleep.<sup>60</sup> Like Fry’s Army in Omaha, Kelley’s Army arrived in Ogden, Utah to skeptical locals only to win local sympathy through discipline, a prayer service and appeals to local railroad workers’ antagonism to

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<sup>57</sup> Industrial Army of the United States. Papers. University of Washington Archives. Seattle

<sup>58</sup> *Indianapolis Journal*, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1894

<sup>59</sup> McMurry, pg. 165

<sup>60</sup> Schwantes, pg. 116



railroad managers.<sup>61</sup> However, maintaining discipline over the nationwide journey proved taxing, sometimes requiring punitive discipline. In Iowa, after traveling halfway across the continental U.S., General Kelley kicked out a ranking member for public drunkenness.

Such measures were necessary for the survival of a movement that was always viewed with deep suspicion and even fear from elite circles. Yet, these measures, and the fundamental character of the Industrial Army Movement were rooted in labor activist and Populist traditions of the late nineteenth century. The strands linking the industrial armies with Knights of Labor activism is highlighted in the alcohol policy of both political currents.

Craft unions had long advocated temperance as a means to improve the lot of workers. Rather than adopting middle class perspectives of sobriety and domesticity, “temperance radicalism” was a working class initiative to repel management control of working class culture and inculcate a sense of dignity in workers, who it was hoped would demand greater control of industrial society once abstaining from drink.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, the Knights of Labor restricted liquor distributors from its ranks. Craft unions generally had strict rules against on-the-job and public drunkenness, especially in the more dangerous professions. For instance, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers took a number of steps to promote sobriety among its members including hosting gatherings in dry lodges, refusing to pay insurance claims of members injured while intoxicated and frequently expelling

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<sup>61</sup> Schwantes, pg. 118

<sup>62</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will; Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pgs. 105-116

members for public drunkenness.<sup>63</sup> Union discipline often pitted skilled members against unskilled workers in the same worksite and temperance was never fully instilled in the work and leisure habits of the latter group. Nevertheless, labor leaders took great strides to fashion an American working class imbued with self-control to demand greater respect as laborers. Thus, Eugene Debs when Secretary-Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen praised the virtues of the sober worker, noting that "... if [the temperate man] grasps the throttle of an engine there will be no sleeping at that post... No drink touches his lips while he is making his run. Clear-brained, keen-eyed, strong armed he stands at his post... Duty does not call to him in vain."<sup>64</sup>

Another facet of late nineteenth century propriety that the industrial armies abided by was exclusion of women from political activity. For the most part, the industrial armies shunned women, especially the leaders who constantly thought of the image the movement presented to the media. Ambiguous female relations with marchers became an item of tabloid coverage when Coxey temporarily allowed Edna Harper and Anna Hooten to accompany the army, even while they stayed in separate tents or hotels.<sup>65</sup> The pair was sent home immediately upon stories appearing in the press of sexual relations between Coxey and Hooten.<sup>66</sup> Rejection of

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Michel Taillon, "What We Want is Good, Sober Men: Masculinity, Respectability, and Temperance in the Railroad Brotherhoods, c. 1870-1910," *Journal of Social History* Vol. 36 (Winter 2002) pgs. 319-338

<sup>64</sup> "The Square Man," *The Locomotive Firemen's Journal*, Vol. 6 (January 1882) pg. 16

<sup>65</sup> Schwantes, pgs. 123-27

<sup>66</sup> Carlos Schwantes, "Western Women in Coxey's Army in 1894," *Journal of the Southwest* Vol. 26 (Spring 1984) pgs. 5-20, pg. 12

women was not just for the media's sake, but most likely found sympathy among the industrial, male marchers.

However, like labor activism generally in the period, the Industrial Army Movement presented a modicum of entrance into political activity for some women. Susan Levine argues that Knight of Labor's union organizing opened avenues for women wageworkers to preach their own brand of labor protest, albeit one built around the language of domesticity.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Populism offered women larger space for political engagement.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, women came up with their own arguments for why they should be able to participate in the Industrial Army Movement. Women auxiliaries were formed and aided the Western bodies on their journey eastward. One such auxiliary was formed in Chicago by Lucy Parsons, the wife of Haymarket Riot martyr and anarchist Albert Parsons. One woman, Anna Ferry Smith, was elected president of an industrial army marching out of Oakland, though it did not end up leaving California. There are also stories of women disguising themselves as men in order to take part in the Industrial Army Movement.<sup>69</sup> The movement provided women with some refuge from the daily confinement to domesticity and a brief entrance into the world of radical political activism.

The Industrial Army Movement exhibited working class respectability wherever they went. Any lapse in discipline could alarm authorities already

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Levine, "Labor's True Woman: Domesticity and Equal Rights in the Knights of Labor," *The Journal of the Knights of Labor* Vol. 70 (September, 1983) pgs. 323- 339

<sup>68</sup> Jane Taylor Nelsen, *A Prairie Populist; the Memoirs of Luna Kellie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992)

<sup>69</sup> Schwantes, "Western Women in Coxe's Army," pg; 5-20

apprehensive of the “the commune” during the depths of the Depression of 1893 and the misery it harbored. Indeed, the Industrial Armies lived with the daily reality of police obstructionism or, even worse, repression at the hands of state or federal militias. Discipline, for the most part, was maintained in order to complete the political project begun by the Knights of Labor and the Populist Party in the prior decades: to leave behind the equal rights tradition of the nineteenth century and create a more just industrial order using federal authority.

### **Reclaiming the People’s Property**

From a different perspective, discipline was never maintained in the Industrial Army Movement. The most controversial legal terrain the movement trespassed was the issue of “train-stealing.” Unable to pay the thousands of dollars required to transport scores of unemployed workers from the West Coast to Washington D.C. the leaders and participants marched by foot and used trains wherever possible. When local or state governments were unwilling or incapable of paying the unemployed men’s railway fares, stealing a ride became a common solution. This was easy enough for many workers, especially in the West, where mobile laborers frequently “tramped” from city to city in search of temporary employment. Additionally, many of the industrial army rank and file were unemployed railroad workers themselves. Bernard Baes’s roster from Fry’s Army reveals several workers whose craft would be useful in steering a train, including a “train man,” railroad workers, engineers, machinists and a brakeman.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Industrial Army of the United States. Papers. University of Washington Library Archives. Seattle

A train-stealing incident in Montana led to one of the few fatalities of Industrial Army Movement. In April 1894, two hundred members of the Butte Miners' Union, some with families facing starvation, organized a Montana industrial army and elected William Hogan as leader. Among the miners were several unemployed railroad workers, likely affected by the strike against the Northern Pacific that began that year. The men, determined to travel to Washington and join Coxey and the other armies, successfully absconded with railway cars and headed east. The Northern Pacific quickly won an injunction from Judge Hiram Knowles, prompting U.S. deputy marshals to pursue the stolen train and detain the men.<sup>71</sup> Hogan's Army was stopped in Billings and while the unemployed workers were being arrested, one was fatally shot.<sup>72</sup>

The tragedy in Montana was a jarring lesson in federal power for the movement. It not only underlined the importance of discipline in the ranks but the crucial role political power played in labor activism. The Republican Governor of Montana, John E. Rickards, had taken an aloof stance once the Northern Pacific contacted him, which inadvertently led to heavy-handed federal repression. But in other instances, political power was yielded to the benefit of the industrial armies. In states where Populists leaders held executive office, unemployed marchers successfully stood up to railroad corporations. Populism served as a fundamental current pushing the armies towards Washington, both physically and ideologically.

In many ways, the Industrial Army Movement was a facet of Populism. Several of its major leaders, including Jacob Coxey, grew into political activism

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<sup>71</sup> Schwantes, Ch. 10

<sup>72</sup> "Battle with Coxey's Followers," *The National Police Gazette*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1894

through Populist agitation. But what united the two movements most was their commitment to gaining federal assistance for the “union of the labor forces” of the nation.<sup>73</sup> The Omaha Platform illustrates the intersection between Populism and the industrial armies, such as the Land Plank – that land “should not be monopolized for speculative purposes, and alien ownership of land should be prohibited... and held for settlers only” – which was incorporated into the preamble of Fry’s Army’s Constitution. Additionally, the calls for free coinage of silver were integral to the visions of Coxe and especially the miners of Hogan’s Army. The Industrial Army Movement extended the demands of the Omaha Platform to include the grievances of the unemployed worker, demonstrated in General Kelley’s scheme of land reclamation. Demanding that the federal government hire jobless workers to build irrigation systems to open up new lands for settlement, Kelley combined the Populist ethos of republican citizen ownership of private homesteads with the political project of federal relief for unemployment. Of the rank and file, surveys of the different armies reveal high levels of Populist Party affiliation. But even if the Industrial Army Movement did not originate as an official Populist endeavor, its procession to Washington solidified its commitment to and representation of the Populist revolt.

The Industrial Army Movement put the words of the People’s Party into action. While the Omaha Platform stated, “that the time has come when the railroad corporations will either own the people or the people must own the railroads,” it

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<sup>73</sup> “People’s Party, Omaha Platform,” in *The Radical Reader; A Documentary History of the American Radical Tradition* ed., Timothy Patrick McCarthy and John McMillian (New York and London: The New Press, 2003) pgs. 250- 252

was the train-stealing industrial armies that actually confronted corporate railroad power. Though train-stealing had ended tragically for Hogan's Army, other contingents successfully pilfered rides with the aid of Populist Governors. Marching out from the desert in Southern California, the nearly one thousand men in Fry's Army quickly became convinced that train transportation was necessary. Lewis Fry had himself been a mechanic for the Southern Pacific Railroad but was fired and blacklisted following a labor dispute. When the army arrived in Yuma, Arizona, Fry and his men tramped a Southern Pacific line carrying citrus fruit east, to the mild protest of the train's crewmen. The train and its unwanted passengers travelled through Arizona, New Mexico and most of Texas, receiving hospitality from the cities in which they stopped. However, Southern Pacific management sought an immediate halt to the train, eventually receiving a court injunction ordering Texas Rangers to be dispatched to protect railroad property. Fry's Army was subsequently stranded in the desert without food or water after the railroad refused access to its company tanks along the dry, barren, Texas country.<sup>74</sup>

The Southern Pacific had to obtain an injunction because of the unwillingness of Texas Governor James Hogg to cooperate with the company's pleas to protect its property. Hogg was elected in 1890, running as a "reform Democrat," with large support from the state's agricultural sector. Though he would later prove a disappointment to the radical element of the Texas Populists, he was never a friend of the railroads, and had, in fact, built his political career upon the ire among Texan

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<sup>74</sup> Schwantes, pg. 87- 93

farmers towards railway corporations.<sup>75</sup> Upon hearing the abandonment of Fry's Army in the desert, Hogg decried the Southern Pacific;

"When a railroad hauls tramps or unemployed penniless men into this state it cannot dump them into the barren desert and murder them by torture and starvation ... Nor will I allow [Fry's Army] to be shot down on Texas soil by an armed force whatsoever, no matter how much the Southern Pacific or other enemies of the state may howl about the Commune."<sup>76</sup>

Hogg expressed public sympathy for the unemployed army, demanding the railroad take the men eastward on their journey to Washington. Meanwhile, Fry's Army, diminished to five hundred men, was languishing in the desert, surviving on two cows and five hundred pounds of flour. Hogg remained resolute and eventually the Southern Pacific caved, which ultimately brought the Army to the state capital in Austin. Fry and his men wanted to thank the Governor personally, but he refused. In an open letter to Coxe followers in Texas, Hogg wrote, "Of all chimerical schemes, unpatriotic steps or foolish freaks into which American citizens have ever been allured, this 'National Tramp' is the most pitiable and inexcusable."<sup>77</sup> It appears Governor Hogg was more interested in exploiting public sympathy for the Industrial Army Movement and enmity of the railroad companies in order to boost his image, rather than abetting the plight of unemployed workers. Upon hearing this response, the Industrial armies were likely just as disappointed with the moderation of the Hogg Administration as Texan Populists would eventually become. Nevertheless, his intransigent stand against the Southern Pacific demonstrated the potent force political authority could play when yielded to assist workers. It was similar political

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<sup>75</sup> Goodwyn, pgs. 147-152

<sup>76</sup> Schwantes, pg. 95

<sup>77</sup> Schwantes, pg. 97



force that the marchers ultimately hoped would be won once they had stood before Congress.

One of the largest obstacles facing the Industrial Army Movement were the myriad vagrancy laws adopted by many localities across the country. Participants and leaders at several points throughout the march were arrested on such charges, including General Fry in El Paso, Texas. Kelley's Army faced a similar problem as it trained into Colorado. The Southern Pacific Railroad had again stranded an industrial army, this time in Ogden, Utah. Governor Caleb West, who was far less effective than Hogg in standing up to the railroad, initially complied with a Court injunction allowing him to use the militia to force Kelley's Army eastward. However, the workingmen's organizations in Ogden, a city with a large population of miners and railroad workers, raised funds to feed the army and sent the mayor of the city to convince the group to march east, which the army agreed to. The men then commandeered a Union Pacific train heading towards Colorado but Kelley and his men began to worry about one of the state's stranger vagrancy laws, which fined a railroad \$200 "for each pauper it brought into the state." Kelley wired Populist Governor Davis Waite asking if the trainload of unemployed workers would be met by the state's militia. Over his Administration, Governor Waite had been a reliable Populist, gaining the loyalty of the large number of miners in the state and introducing legislation to regulate the railroads.<sup>78</sup> He replied to Kelley "any citizen of the United States has the right of passage through Colorado." Speaking later to a crowd in Denver about Kelley's Army he stated that "Their cause is just and they

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<sup>78</sup> Goodwyn, pg. 184-185

should be aided.... Were I to call upon to order out the militia against them, I probably would do so, but it would be only as a commissary Department.”<sup>79</sup> Similar to Governor Hogg, the ascendancy of Populist leaders such as Governor Waite into political office demonstrated how the machinery of government could aid workers and labor activism.

This lesson was only reinforced in Kansas, a state steeped in Populist tradition. Populist Governor Lorenzo Lewellyn sent his personal assurance to an industrial army marching through the state that no state militias would impede their path. Governor Lewellyn had described the Industrial Army Movement as “more than a petition, it is an earnest and vigorous protest against the injustice and the tyranny of the age,” making personal donations for camp provisions for one industrial army. Lewellyn’s sympathy may have been personal as he had been a tramp in Chicago a few decades prior to Coxey’s Army. In Kansas, as in Colorado and Texas, a Populist Governor abetted the marchers, suspending vagrancy laws and giving private support to the movement.<sup>80</sup>

Prominent Populist leaders greeted the industrial armies in various cities. In Topeka, the People’s Party League greeted Kelley’s Army with food and provisions.<sup>81</sup> Also meeting up with the marchers in the Kansas capital was Mary Lease, who had famously urged Populist farmers to “raise less crops and more hell,” extending her rhetorical flare in support of the Industrial Army Movement. Lease excused the marchers’ train stealing, stating that “almost every railroad had stolen from the

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<sup>79</sup> *Washington Star*, April 24, 1894

<sup>80</sup> Schwantes, pgs. 199-201

<sup>81</sup> McMurry, pg. 161

people represented by the industrial armies, and thieves cannot expect sympathy if the owners recover stolen property.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, in Des Moines, Iowa, a People’s Party Political Club headed by the party’s 1892 Presidential candidate, James B. Weaver, organized a reception for Kelley’s Army when it arrived in the city. Throughout the marchers’ stay in Des Moines, the Populists acted as host and Weaver sought railroad transportation for their journey to Washington.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to the Populist revolt, the other political current aiding the industrial armies towards Washington was organized labor, notably the Knights of Labor. As mentioned earlier, by the early 1890s, the Knights of Labor had moved into the political realm in the form of various workingmen’s parties, which while in power took measures to ease the plight of industrial wage-earners. The industrial armies were attempting to complete the political project undertaken by the workingmen’s parties, to harness federal authority to protect industrial wagers. When the marchers of the industrial armies travelled through many working-class cities local workingmen’s organizations exhibited a remarkable degree of labor solidarity. Even those still employed despite the Depression sympathized with their jobless counterparts and supported the political goals of the Industrial Army Movement. The *Journal of the Knights of Labor* stated that “While the Knights of Labor has not given official assistance to the Coxey movement, it has not discourage it, nor will it,” because the political goals of the Commonwealth overlapped with the Knight’s Preamble and Constitution.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, many of the

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<sup>82</sup> *Topeka Daily Capitol*, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1894

<sup>83</sup> McMurry, pgs. 184-189

<sup>84</sup> “Only to Petition,” *The Journal of the Knights of Labor* Vol. 13, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1894

marchers themselves had worked in industries heavily organized by the Knights and other trade unions. A survey of the rank and file at the tail end of the Industrial Army Movement, by which time many participants had left, revealed no less than three hundred fifty-four Knights of Labor members.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout the nation, areas with sizable working class populations were sympathetic to the movement.<sup>86</sup> Generous welcomes greeted Coxey's Army as it marched through the heavily industrialized Allegheny mountain range and surrounding areas. In New Liverpool, Ohio, over a hundred striking potters, many of them skilled German workers, extended a message of support to the unemployed army. Just across the Pennsylvania border in Beaver Falls, a city with a long tradition of trade unionism, workers gave such assistance to Coxey's Army that one *Pittsburgh Post* writer observed, "There is existing between workingmen an affinity that on such occasions as this makes them all of kin... the great preparations that had been made was entirely due to the fact that many of the working men here had an honest desire to give to their kind."<sup>87</sup> Many local unemployed opted to join the march to Washington. There were similar scenes in Allegheny City and Pittsburgh, despite heavy police presence arrayed to deter any potential outbursts of working class radicalism. In a rally in support of the industrial army marchers, local organizations of boilermakers, bakers and patternmakers each displayed their

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<sup>85</sup> McMurry, pg. 252

<sup>86</sup> Schwantes, pg. 53

<sup>87</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, April 2, 1894

union insignia. Schwantes states that, “Not since troops had returned to Pittsburgh from the Civil War had the area been the scene of such enthusiasm.”<sup>88</sup>

In Pittsburgh, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor James R. Sovereign hosted a rally for the marchers, in which he condemned the vagrancy laws that the city’s police attempted to use against Coxey’s Army.<sup>89</sup> Kelley’s Army, marching through larger swaths of industrial America, came into greater contact with Knights of Labor support. In Omaha, Kelley was the invited guest speaker at a Knight’s gathering to discuss the question of “the principles of civil government and political economy.”<sup>90</sup> In Council Bluffs, Iowa, representatives from the Central Labor Union, the Nebraska Federation of Labor and the Knights of Labor were delegated the responsibility of hosting Kelley’s Army, providing them entertainment and assistance to any ill marchers.<sup>91</sup> In St. Louis, the city’s Trade and Labor Council, the Knights of Labor and the German Arbeiter Verbund also provided for the marching unemployed workers.<sup>92</sup>

All these currents of political and labor activism intersected in Homestead, Pennsylvania in April. The army’s march through Homestead was a demonstration of the transformation the American working class had made from the equal rights tradition to the national political focus of Coxey’s movement. Into the early 1890s, the Homestead community had been largely controlled by workers and its union, the A.F.L.-affiliated Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steelworkers. The

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<sup>88</sup> Schwantes, pg. 55

<sup>89</sup> “Outrageous Arrests,” *Journal of the Knights of Labor* Vol. 13, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1894

<sup>90</sup> McMurry, pg. 167

<sup>91</sup> McMurry, pg. 177

<sup>92</sup> Schwantes, pg. 195

steelworkers had also forged a long-standing alliance with the Republican Party, based on a shared commitment to high import tariffs and the equal rights tradition embodied by the party of Lincoln. In the 1892, the iron mill workers were decisively beaten by Homestead plant managers Henry Clay Frick and Andrew Carnegie. When Frick refused to agree to a collective bargaining agreement with Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steelworkers, the workers at the steel mills violently resisted management's attempts to requisition control of the factories. Though the steelworkers believed they had acted patriotically, upholding their republican rights as workers and citizens by repelling Pinkerton Agents with rifles, Democratic Governor Pattison ultimately ordered the state militia to protect company property and allow for the maintenance of production, spelling defeat for the striking workers.<sup>93</sup>

During the strike, workers believed that the intervention of state troops would actually benefit their cause, as they were confident the militia would uphold equality of the law and worker control of the factories. Upon defeat, however, the workers learned that the law was actually meant to protect the property of management and their local efforts were powerless against the strength of the Carnegie steel corporation. A decisive shift in worker ideology ensued. Even as the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steelworkers disbanded and control of local politics went to management, workers in Homestead moved into more radical terrains of resistance. The equal rights Republican Party was abandoned, temporarily for the Democrats but later for the Populist and eventually the Socialist

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<sup>93</sup> Linda Schneider, "The Citizen Worker: Workers' Ideology in the Homestead Strike of 1892," *The Tamiment Institute* (2001) pgs. 47-66

Party of Eugene Debs.<sup>94</sup> In 1894, the ideological transformation of Homestead steelworkers contributed to the town being a hotbed of support for Coxey's Army.

As Coxey and his men marched into the beleaguered steel town in early April, they were greeted with a banner reading "Homestead Believes in Coxey's Good Roads Bill."<sup>95</sup> A massive crowd filled the town's streets to get a glimpse of the marchers and show their support. At a meeting held in the local Opera House, wagonloads of supplies were given to Coxey's Army for the remainder of the trip to Washington. Homestead became a large recruiting ground for the industrial army as well. Elmer E. Bales, a former advisory member for the Amalgamated Association recruited unemployed steel workers to the join the movement. McMurry claims that at Homestead, Coxey's contingent reached its largest number of recruits, estimated between five hundred to seven hundred members.<sup>96</sup> Marcus, Bullard and Moore state that the large-scale support in Homestead for the Industrial Army Movement resulted from the workers seeing "Coxey's March as an opportunity to link their complaints about the company with a broader social movement."<sup>97</sup> This is no doubt true but the town's mobilization indicates an ideological alignment as well. The workers at Homestead supported Coxey's Army because their defeat demonstrated how political and civil rights did not lead to worker's control in the factory, and that state power was needed to assist wage-earners in the evolving industrial economy.

Flush with new recruits from Homestead, Coxey and his men marched onward to Washington. There, they would present their petition in boots with actual

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<sup>94</sup> Marcus, Bullard and Moore, pgs. 61- 75

<sup>95</sup> Schwantes, pg. 61

<sup>96</sup> McMurry, pg. 92

<sup>97</sup> Marcus, Bullard and Moore, pgs. 69- 70

unemployed workingmen standing before the republic's leaders as physical evidence of the devastation the current economic system reaped on America's villages and cities. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, they would test their great experiment to see whether average American citizens could lay claim to the "people's property," as the marchers termed Congress, and alter the legal and social structures of the preceding century in favor of wageworker protections.

### **Conclusion**

In August of 1893, just after the onset of the Depression, violence erupted in the streets of Chicago. Though the city was hosting the extravagant Columbus Exposition celebrating four hundred years of European civilization in America, the gratuitous poverty resulting from the economic downturn could not be hidden. Trainloads of unemployed from neighboring towns brought in people looking for work at the exposition, most of who would be disappointed and left homeless in Chicago's streets. Municipal aid was drying up and the Knights of Labor Committee of Relief and Public Safety was inadequate to provide for the thousands of unemployed workingmen throughout the city. By late August, four hundred laid-off packinghouse workers, chanting "We want work," began battling with police. Nine ended up wounded, but the outbreak was one of several violent episodes on the Chicago lakefront packinghouse that summer. Nearby these riots was the inauguration of the Congress of Labor, which hosted speakers such as Florence Kelley, Samuel Gompers and Terence V. Powderly. The evidence of the social ills plaguing American society was visible for the Congress goers, illustrating the



volatility unleashed by the Depression of 1893.<sup>98</sup> Around the same time, Secretary of State Walter Gresham warned that “the symptoms of revolution” were ubiquitous.<sup>99</sup>

The violence in Chicago that summer was a foil to the type of activism that the Industrial Army Movement actively sought to foster. The *Chicago Tribune* denounced the unemployed packinghouse workers as “Anarchists and loafers’ who were agitating for insurrection rather than looking for work.” The industrial armies tried to avoid that tarring brush, more or less maintaining order, sobriety and an image of dignity as they marched across the nation. The culmination of all these efforts was to take place in Washington D.C. on May Day, where Congress would see the “honorable men and breadwinners” and legislate a government jobs program to relieve the unemployed.

As the army entered the capital city, they had nearly run out of food and faced the real possibility of starvation. On April 30th, tensions ran high in the Massillon ranks, as there was inadequate food and shelter for the marchers while Coxe and Browne spent the night in a hotel.<sup>100</sup> However, food eventually arrived and on the bright, sunny morning of May 1<sup>st</sup>, the five hundred followers of Coxe’s industrial army set forth for the Congress building. An estimated twenty thousand spectators lined the streets of the capitol hoping to catch a glimpse of the men. One correspondent described the crowd as sympathetic to the marchers and, as one interviewee stated, “that nearly all the people he knew were on Coxe’s side.”

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<sup>98</sup> Dennis B. Downey, “The Congress of Labor at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* Vol. 76 (Summer 1983) pg. 132

<sup>99</sup> Stuart Creighton Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation; The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982) pg. 8

<sup>100</sup> “Almost Mutiny in Coxe’s Army,” *The New York Times*, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1894; pg. 1

Coxey's Army also garnered the support of Washington's African American community. The night before, an industrial army of all black workers, led by Ferdinand Warner, joined up with Coxey's contingent and accompanied them into Washington. Upon entering the capitol, a crowd of black spectators cheered in support of the marchers, one of who told a reporter that "The working people are on his side."<sup>101</sup> These demonstrations of sympathy continued the pattern of working-class solidarity with the industrial armies into the nation's capitol.

However, also greeting Coxey's Army were three to four hundred police forming a human barrier between the marchers and the Capitol Dome. Carl Browne had received a letter the day before from the sergeant of the Washington police warning that an attempt to make a speech on the steps of the capitol would be grounds for arrest, which it in fact was, based on an 1882 law. But preparations for the industrial army surpassed mere police supervision, as federal troops at local barracks were put in a state of readiness and the Treasury Department was flanked with weapons to repel a mob invasion. Police chiefs also expressed their fears of the city's black population, nearly half of whom were unemployed, becoming carried away with the unemployed marchers' political fervor.<sup>102</sup> As Coxey's Army made its way before Congress, the center of national authority appeared less as "the people's property," and more as an entrenched fortress shielded by bayonets and nightsticks.

The foreboding display of an armed police force did not dissuade Coxey and Browne from fulfilling their mission of presenting their grievances and solutions

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<sup>101</sup> "The Coxey Army at Washington; From a Staff Correspondent," *Outlook*, May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1894

<sup>102</sup> Schwantes, ch. 11, pg. 180

before Congress. But as the political agitators headed towards the steps of the legislature, they were rebuffed by police. After a moment of confusion, the police had enough and chased down Browne, which precipitated a melee. Shortly afterward, "The police lost their heads. They charged into the crowd, beating everyone within range; mounted officers rode down men, women and children, people dropped to their knees, dazed by repeated blows from billy clubs."<sup>103</sup> Coxe managed to escape, but he was charged with trespassing on Washington property, for setting foot on park grass, and was sent to prison to await trial. Thus ended the movement's hopes of gaining entrance to the capitol building.

Coxey's arrest provoked uproar in the nation's labor press, which came down heavily upon the Washington D.C. police. The *Knights' Journal* condemned the police "brutality," which was really "lawlessness in the guise of law." The incarceration of Coxey and Brown for merely ascending the steps of Congress was an illustration of "the degradation to which American citizenship has sunk."<sup>104</sup> Populist Senator William Allen of Nebraska served as Coxey's defense during his trial and introduced a resolution to the Senate to form a committee that would investigate the arrest of Coxey and Browne "to prevent a repetition of such outrages on the rights of American citizens hereafter."<sup>105</sup> Coxey, Browne and another leader of the Commonweal were all convicted, though the *Journal* dismissed the trial as a "farce," and proclaimed that just as Coxey was sentenced, "So was John Brown hung."<sup>106</sup> The

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<sup>103</sup> Schwantes, pg. 179

<sup>104</sup> "Commonweal Conquers," *Journal of the Knights of Labor* Vol. 15, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1894,

<sup>105</sup> United States. Cong. Senate. 53<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, S. 171. Washington: GPO, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1894

<sup>106</sup> "Coxey Sentenced!," *Journal of the Knights of Labor* Vol. 18, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1894

conviction of the top leaders of the Commonweal spelled the demise of the movement, but the whole affair offered labor more evidence that republican institutions were corrupted and usurped by the wealth.

With their leaders in jail, Coxey's followers set up camp and waited for the armies from the West to arrive, surviving on relief from the municipal government and citizens of Washington D.C. Over May and June, the capitol swarmed with the nation's unemployed as Fry's and other armies decamped. But the jobless that had already settled viewed newcomers as competitors for dwindling supplies and food, and morale quickly dissipated. Worst of all, Congress did nothing to relieve the plight of the unemployed workers outside their windows or in the nation at large. Congressman Bourke Cockran of New York dismissed the poor and hungry tramps camping in Washington as "a good joke. [Coxey] and his so-called army are simply ridiculous... If the 28,000,000 working people really indorse the Coxey idea I think they should have chosen better representatives."<sup>107</sup> The Industrial Army Movement, the hope of the nation's unemployed industrial workers, had made it to Washington, but only as a tired, hungry and defeated group of citizens.

As the summer of 1894 wore on, provisions began to run out at the camps and the numbers of dwellers steadily decreased. The hopes of the jobless marchers faded quickly as food was given in smaller and fewer portions, while some campers were arrested for vagrancy and placed in poorhouses. Yet the men maintained their poise and discipline, respecting the property of locals near the camp and avoiding arrest, even though jail would secure regular meals and shelter. By August, it

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<sup>107</sup> "Bourke Cockran's Idea of Coxeyism," *The New York Times*, May 1st, 1894

became clear Congress was not going to legislate a public jobs program. However, the campers did not clear out voluntarily but were evicted by Baltimore and Virginia police. The only embrace the national government bestowed upon the unemployed industrial armies was cold indifference and police repression. But by the middle of that summer, a different story had taken the nation's attention and highlighted the revolutionary importance of the non-violent army that was at that very moment retreating from Washington.

The Pullman Strike that erupted in early May was an example of the old type of labor activism that the Industrial Army Movement had tried to move beyond. Pullman railroad workers, organized by the American Railway Union, had suffered from the Depression of 1893, having their wages reduced to one to two dollars a week. Many Pullman workers lived in the heavily paternalistic Pullman village, where daily life was organized under the watchful eye of company management. When wages were slashed and rents, which were automatically deducted from workers' salaries, remained high, a work stoppage ensued. Beginning on May 12<sup>th</sup>, striking Pullman workers attempted to exhibit control of their workspace, blocking nearly all railroad traffic into Chicago. Like other instances of labor agitation of the period, Pullman workers demonstrated their frustration with voluntary strikes, local efforts of resistance and violent property destruction. This strategy courted disaster. Legal precedent in the late nineteenth century was strongly dedicated to free labor and equal rights ideals, treating organized labor's attempts to regulate the wage market and worksites as violations of management's claim to property and the

individual's right to freely contract their labor.<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, in early July, Attorney General Olney successfully obtained a court injunction against the A.R.U. for blocking delivery of federal mail. The following day, President Cleveland ordered fourteen thousand federal troops to disperse the crowd and maintain railway service to Chicago, despite the objections of Democratic Governor Altgeld. Less than a week later, the Pullman strike had been violently suppressed, and the clash between workers and U.S. troops had led to the deaths of thirty-four of those involved.<sup>109 110</sup>

The violent Pullman Strike capped off a nearly two-decade era marked by similar acts of labor militancy. And as the strike in Chicago demonstrated, this category of labor activism repeatedly resulted in overbearing state suppression. The Pullman Strike along with the Industrial Army Movement was a turning point in labor activism, which is demonstrated in Eugene Debs's turn towards national politics. After Pullman, Debs and many others believed attempts by workers to exert control over their workplaces, violently or even non-violently, would only perpetuate frustration and bloodshed. The equal rights tradition and labor's strategy of controlling production without appropriation of federal authority had proven a failure for American workers. The limitation of state action to merely equalizing application of the law thwarted working class aspirations as the belief in the republican right to control over one's worksite clashed with management's legal

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<sup>108</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, "The Federal Judiciary, Free Labor and Equal Rights," in *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s*, ed., Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist and Nick Salvatore (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999) pgs. 159- 177

<sup>109</sup> Painter, pgs. 121-125

<sup>110</sup> Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs; Citizen and Socialist, Second Edition*(Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007) pgs. 127-134

claims to sole authority over its property. After a brief stint with the Populist Party, Debs formed the Socialist Party of America and would run for national office several times over the next decades, garnering the support of millions of working class Americans. The national political goals of the Socialist Party revealed a new era in American labor activism, one that saw the intervention of federal authority as necessary to protect the status of industrial wage-laborers.

The Industrial Army Movement facilitated the transition from the equal rights tradition to labor's mobilization for federal government power. It was this campaign of unemployed industrial workers that highlighted the necessity of national political authority to shield wage-earners from the unpredictable market forces that wrought volatile consequences for American wageworkers. Illustrated in the visions of Coxey, Fry and Kelley is a realization that a national, wage market based on free labor principles would be tolerable for workers only if the national government operated as a protective agent for laborers. They viewed such a political development as necessary to maintain the integrity of the American republic. One could dismiss the strategy of the Industrial Army Movement as too institutionalized and accommodating to the free market and individualist principles that governed politics and society during the Gilded Age. But what is crucial to remember is that the movement's demands sought to overcome the dominant legal concepts era, based on abstract notions free labor and equality before the law. The movement also presaged the massive growth of federal intervention in the wage market during the twentieth century, and even the government jobs program of the

New Deal. For that, the Industrial Army Movement is a landmark in American labor activism.

The strategy of the Commonweal integrally shaped its procedures and behavior. The ever-looming possibility of federal suppression that travelled with the industrial armies necessitated discipline within the ranks. Thus, the leaders and the participants themselves marshaled the tradition of working class respectability to win the affection of the media, national political leaders and the American people. The Industrial Army Movement, in its essence, was a fresh attempt by workers from all over the United States to claim the republic they believed had been taken from them by the wealthy and powerful, and to have their democratic government protect their dignity as workers and as American citizens. That the movement unfolded with comparatively few arrests and fatalities indicates, in some sense, the success of the Industrial Army Movement.

It would be easy to view the movement as a failure. No national, government jobs program ensued, no inflationary measures were enacted and no Congressional legislation resulted from the movement. But this is an indictment of Gilded Age politics and the conservatism of the Cleveland Administration and the two dominant parties in Congress. The Industrial Army Movement was the first march on Washington in the nation's history. Standing before the nation's leaders, hungry and homeless, the participants of the movement acted as representatives of the nation's unemployed and working poor. That they were met with police clubs and an indifferent national legislature reveals the sobering realities of life in Gilded Age America. General Charles Kelley told the *Ottumwa Daily Courier* in May of 1894 that



the industrial armies “are not an agitative body, we are a living, moving object lesson. You can look at us and say there is a condition and not a theory.”<sup>111</sup> There was, actually, both a theory and a lesson. The theory was the possibilities opened by working class control over the American political system. The lesson was that cultural, political, legal and social barriers stood between that theory and its practice. Coxey’s Army and the Industrial Army Movement of 1894 tested the democratic capacity of the American political system, and its shortcomings are a lesson for all students of American history.

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<sup>111</sup> Schwantes, pg. 222