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Knowing Nothing: Labor, Nativism, and Class Divisions in turn-of-the century Pittsburgh

Abstract: This paper examines the labor movement in Pittsburgh between the years 1892-1919. The labor movement at the turn of the century met new challenges as a new wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe flooded the industrial sector. Organization was difficult due to class division, nativist depictions of immigrants, and management's concerted effort to keep labor disorganized. These factors coupled with the extensive reach of management's influence helped prevent any significant gains for organized labor.

"The question is always what is the role of the labor movement? How much is about collective bargaining, how much is about social change for all workers?" - Andy Stern

Historians have long wrestled with the question, why no socialism in the United States? Despite valiant attempts by laborers to gain better wages, shorter hours, and safer conditions, the movement always fell short due to the overwhelming power of outside influences. Alexander Berkman's bullet failed to silence Frick, and steel magnate Andrew Carnegie managed to escape the Homestead debacle with his finances completely intact. Regardless of the nature of their actions, organized labor was inevitably forced to succumb to the overwhelming might of American capitalism. Stern's comment reflects a narrow view of the labor movement. He neglects to factor in the importance of establishing the broader societal context that labor fits into. Nativism, or the idea that "real" Americans must protect their sacred institutions from the menacing tide of foreigners, was a major force in combatting labor's gains. Anything unfamiliar was branded hostile by an established elite class that feared a decline in their social or economic status. John Higham's book *Strangers in the Land* argued that nativism included every type of disdain towards aliens and their institutions beginning with the Illuminati and French

enlightenment ideals and arguably continuing to current times.¹ Nativism and the labor movement became intertwined due to the transmission of propaganda and knowledge to workers and ordinary citizens alike. In the United States, nativism bred class distinctions in the labor sector based on skill level and nationality alike. Management took advantage of the class divisions among workers as well as misrepresentations of immigrants to ensure that nativism and the culture of misrepresentation it fostered would create mistrust and disdain for organized labor, thus crippling any potential mass movements.

Situated at the point of three great rivers, Pittsburgh, abundant with rich mineral deposits, made it the ideal spot for establishing a steel manufacturing empire. Andrew Carnegie and Henry Frick took advantage of the area's resources and built what would become U.S. Steel beginning after the Civil War. The massive labor force needed to staff Carnegie's massive steel and ironworks plants would come from two distinct outlets. The unskilled laborers were pulled from the second wave of Eastern and Southern European immigrants who flooded America's shores in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The skilled workers were primarily English, Irish, Scottish, and German. They performed much less physically taxing jobs than their unskilled counterparts and were paid better wages in addition to shorter hours. The restrictions on organization coupled with the horrendous and unsafe conditions the unskilled immigrant laborers contended with caused immediate unrest. The most famous act of defiance came in July of 1892 when striking workers engaged in a bloody firefight with Pinkerton detectives who were hired by management to prevent any interference with production. The struggle did not end there as laborers continued attempts to organize and gain collective bargaining powers. Pittsburgh workers were incredibly active in the national strike of 1919 as well. Despite a soaring penchant

¹ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955) 3.

for dissidence, the Pittsburgh laborers lacked the resources, influence, and cohesiveness to achieve any marked gains. Nonetheless, Pittsburgh's unique ethnic makeup perfectly illustrates divisions on class and ethnic lines in both the workplace and the community itself. These divisions are what make the proliferation of misinformation in the nativist camp difficult to combat. The actions taken by managers to suppress the labor movement in Pittsburgh reveals how nativism, and the elements of secrecy and subversion that lie in its core, could create a stigma of mistrust towards organized labor.

During the national steel strike of 1919, labor journalist and industrial researcher Heber Blankenhorn joined forces with the Commission of Inquiry of the Interchurch World Movement (I.W.M.) to conduct their investigations on the course of the national strike. Blankenhorn was a labor activist who began his activism by launching a public relations campaign to aid the CIO.² His career included a stint as an official with the National Labor Relations Board as well as the Directorship of the Bureau of Industrial Research, a position which attracted the attention of the Interchurch World Movement during the beginning stages of their inquiry into the 1919 steel strike. Labor Historian Gilbert Gall identified the I.W.M. as a liberal protestant organization that sought to expose the horrific conditions laborers were forced to endure in large scale manufacturing industries.³ Some of their chief complaints included a fierce opposition to the twelve hour work day as well as safety regulations.⁴ Their curiosity and fervor for championing the working man led them to recruit Blankenhorn to conduct their inquiry on the 1919 strike, but the progressive era in which both the inquiry and Blankenhorn were set significantly influenced their attitudes and longing for truth in advertising.

² Gilbert Gall, "Heber Blankenhorn, The LaFollette Committee, and the Irony of Industrial Repression," *Labor History* 23 (1982): 246.

³ Gall, 247.

⁴ Gall, 247.

Gall argued, “Blankenhorn’s long career on the fringes of trade-unionism was a characteristic example of the uncomfortable position of the middle class intellectual in the American labor movement prior to 1935.”⁵ Blankenhorn was not a union man nor was he ever an industrial worker, but the crusade for truth and transparency that was launched by the muckrakers of the progressive era spawned a passion for fact based journalism and research. In his book *Pivotal Decades*, John Cooper noted that the period between 1900 and 1920 marked an end to limited access and restriction.⁶ The print media was a primary target for progressive reformers seeking to get to the bottom of pressing issues including strikes and the labor movement. *McClure’s Magazine* published by S.S. McClure set the standard for exposing the unethical practices of big business, and according to Cooper, this created a reform impulse across the country arousing concern for the rights of the working man.⁷ Cooper argued that muckraking inspired the public consciousness of middle class intellectuals like Blankenhorn.⁸ The curiosity and enthusiasm for reform created by the muckraking campaign led Blankenhorn to ignore the reports of the popular press and insert himself into the fray as an investigative reporter. He realized that the only to discover the truth was to directly contact those most involved with the strike including workers, their families, and company employees and contractors. Throughout his time as the inquiry’s lead investigator, he collected a plethora of revealing interviews and reports illustrating how management was able to play on the themes of American nativism and class divisions to create a disjointed work force unable to achieve solidarity.

The documents compiled by the I.W.M inquiry reveal how knowledge of the laborers and their strikes was distorted and used as a weapon of by managers and their minions to quell any

⁵ Gall, 246.

⁶ John Cooper, *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920* (New York: Norton, 1990) 68-69.

⁷ Cooper, 83-85.

⁸ Cooper, 87.

popular uprising on the shop floor. The first set of documents deals with divisions on class, ethnic, and racial lines. While the labor leadership was primarily comprised of Anglo-Americans who had some level of formal education and specific skills in the workplace, the vast majority of the unskilled labor force could not even read or write. These inherent differences were some of the many reasons that unskilled and skilled workers were alienated from one another. This alienation was not unique to the mill itself. In Pittsburgh and other similar industrial cities, immigrants lived in enclaves with members of their own nationality. A Serbian worker who held a menial unskilled position would never come in contact with the skilled Englishman who lived on the other side of town. They attended different churches, social functions, and almost never ventured outside of their own neighborhoods. The documents about class division include examples of living conditions immigrant families dealt with. These documents are situated against interviews conducted with the families of skilled workers. The skilled workers families could not understand why anybody would revolt against management and often referred to the immigrants in very unflattering terms. Their depictions of the unskilled foreign laborers reflected the language found in nativist propaganda. In pushing forward these nativist ideas in order to create divisions amongst workers, managers created an even larger wedge between skilled and unskilled laborers who were already divided on ethnic and religious lines. These divisions allowed for misinformation to be advertised as facts and fallacies to remain undetected. African American laborers were also isolated using some of the same nativist tactics employed in creating strife between skilled workers and unskilled immigrants. Black workers would be essential to organize as their sizable labor force was needed if a firm solidarity movement were to be achieved. The documents illustrate how African American laborers were employed as strikebreakers and depicted as enemies of labor when in reality they were forced to do the

hardest labor for the lowest pay. This is just another way in which misinformation stemmed from inaccurate stereotypes to create division, proliferate nativist rhetoric, and crush the labor movement.

Another key element the I.W.M. documents address is the usage of secrecy and covert action by management. Rather than make any concessions to labor, managers sent undercover men into the mills as rabble rousers seeking to strum up ethnic tensions and pit workers of different nationalities against each other. Again, the final goal of these covert actions was to prevent workers from uniting under one banner. Management also attempted to turn ethnic leaders into company informants by promising monetary compensation and workplace promotions. This treachery was perhaps the most harmful as laborers were acting against the interests of their fellow workers and often times members of their ethnic neighborhoods. This stigma of mistrust and division allowed the fire of nativism to go unextinguished. The misinformation was not, however, confined to the communities of the industrial laborers. The popular press became an integral tool in the proliferation of falsehoods as major newspapers demanded Americans to stand up to the foreign menace. Strikers' were branded Bolsheviks and Russian spies by columnists and politicians alike. The evidence on this matter even reveals how organizations loyal to the immigrants, such as the Catholic Church, were forced to denounce strikes. Newspaper articles were abundant in nativist advertisements and editorials denouncing the strike and claiming that true American citizens would never leave their work post to embark on a communist insurrection. All of the document previewed will be analyzed at length to convince any skeptic that management's tactful promotion of ethnic division and nativism, waged through secret and covert channels, fostered a culture in which labor was a dishonest enemy whose organization threatened the American way of life. Before delving into the rich

primary source material, it is important to first chronicle the history of how labor and nativism have been studied so this particular case study involving Pittsburgh can be situated with other scholarly works.

When analyzing the labor unrest and nativism in 1892-1919 Pittsburgh, one must employ strategies and ideas used from historians of both the old and new period. The former written until the 1960s focused on workers' attempts to form unions as well as strikes that occurred as a result of disputes between management and labor. The new labor history, beginning in the 1970s, examines the nature and dynamic of the working class focusing on larger ideas such as the formation and identity of the working class. The two distinct periods of labor history come together in this analysis as working-class neighborhoods were often divided on ethnic lines and were subject to different news reports and formed drastically different opinions on strikes and labor movements. The individual worker and the gains he sought cannot be divorced from the community and organizations he was a member of. The shift to the new approaches of labor and social historians took place in the 1970s, but much of the understanding of knowledge and perception of labor comes from putting historians from both periods in dialogue with one another. Labor historians from the older period such as David Brody and Paul Krause described the primary battle as being between labor and capital even if laborers did not always see it this way. They focused on the strikes themselves and the main causes for labor unrest and violence. David Brody discussed how management gave benefits to skilled workers and catered to them to create a dependency on the managerial power to ensure a secure job and higher standard of living.⁹ Management's usage of this incentive based loyalty program enticed skilled workers to turn a blind eye to the problems their unskilled brothers were faced with on a daily basis. A loyal

⁹ David Brody, *Steelworkers in America; the Nonunion Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960) 91.

skilled workforce would prevent any large scale solidarity movement as the unskilled workers could easily be replaced. This was another way class divisions were formulated in the workplace. According to Brody and other historians of the older period, a lack of cohesive organization was the main reason that strikes like the one in Homestead in 1892 failed.¹⁰ Historian Bruce Nelson argued that these organizational failures were often time due to the fears different ethnic groups had of sliding further down the social and economic scale.¹¹ Pinkerton detectives and local militias may have physically stopped the strikers in their tracks, but it was the mechanics of class division that prevented a lasting successful strike.

Labor historians must also carefully consider divisions based on race, ethnicity, economic and social class, and skilled versus unskilled workers. For this reason, labor historians have often focused on how peoples of different races and nationalities coexisted in the workplace and community. Many historians argued that ethnic tensions were strummed up by managers seeking to prevent a massive labor movement. In *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh*, John Hinshaw argues that immigrants were viewed as mistrusted subversives and black migrant workers moving into industrial cities also assumed this role of distrusted foreigner.¹² This is important because when immigrants were on strike and away from the workplace, management needed to depict someone as the distrustful scheming subversive. The overarching theme of labor historians working on this topic was that there always needed to be some sort of subversive element to make labor untrustworthy. It is here where the scholarship on class divisions between laborers and the documents on covert action and secrecy become

¹⁰ Brody, *Steelworkers in America; the Nonunion Era* 66.

¹¹ Bruce Nelson, *Divided We Stand: American Workers and the Struggle for Black Equality* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) 13.

¹² John Hinshaw, *Steel and Steelworkers: Race and Class Struggle in Twentieth-Century Pittsburgh* (Albany: SUNY, 2002) 128.

relevant in the same context. When no subversive element existed, management exhausted all its resources in creating one. It did not matter if the laborer was Italian, black, or Slovak, some group was going to be singled out and marginalized so that labor could never unite.

In creating stereotypes and misconceptions about low skilled immigrant workers, management and their nativist allies sought to create a definition of whiteness that encompassed more than the color of one's skin. In a 2001 essay, Eric Arnesen noted that all works involving the history of labor and race relations in the workplace needed to consider the question, what does it mean to be white?¹³ Workers not only considered the whiteness of other workers, they introspectively examined their own whiteness in relation to other laborers. This means that a worker who may have assimilated to American cultural practices faster than someone else who is of the same ethnicity could consider himself "whiter" than the other man. Skin color was not all that constituted whiteness for these workers, and as more mitigating factors were introduced into the whiteness debate, the easier it would be to create divides between workers. This idea was reiterated by historian Matthew Frye Jacobsen. In his book, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobsen he argues that having lighter color skin did not make one "white".¹⁴ His idea was that society created many of the qualifications needed to be accepted as white; biology had little to no influence on race.¹⁵ He argued, "An earlier generation of Americans saw Celtic, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon, or Mediterranean physiognomies where today we see only subtly varying shades of a mostly undifferentiated whiteness."¹⁶ As cities like Pittsburgh became increasingly ethnically diverse, it became harder for the eye to see racial differences. Racial differences

¹³ Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness And Historians' Imagination." *International Labor & Working-Class History* 60 (2001): 9.

¹⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998) 9.

¹⁵ Jacobsen, 9.

¹⁶ Jacobsen, 10.

became increasingly stressed by stereotypes and misinformed depictions of immigrants. The architects of these caricatures were nativists who were operating under the omniscient guise of big business.

American nativism was an entrenched foe that played upon prejudices and sought to divide people along ethnic and religious lines. Nativists relied on false perceptions to increase their following, and their messages evolved as did the composition of the immigrants entering the United States. Jacobson explained that once the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe flooded the shores, nativists focused on political fitness and began to subcategorize white groups based on perceived capabilities.¹⁷ It is no coincidence that the nativists' political party was once called the Know-Nothing party. The party's name was a catchy term to emphasize the secrecy of their meetings and platform, but in reality, the party's constituency was misinformed and actually knew nothing about the people and organizations it condemned. Even though the party itself was long defunct by the early twentieth century, the theme of knowing nothing lived on in a new generation of nativists condemning a new wave of immigrants.

Arguably the most famous text on nativism is John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. Higham argued that the identity of the nativists' enemies changed frequently but the constant theme was that forces gaining momentum abroad would seek to infiltrate the sacred American arenas and replace core American values such as family and Protestantism with unfamiliar foreign customs.¹⁸ Historians have traced nativism back to the 1790s. As a result of the radicalism of the French Revolution, great "patriots" fought

¹⁷Jacobson 42-43.

¹⁸Higham, 4.

for the passing of the Alien and Sedition acts to root out radicals.¹⁹ In the 1840's, Irish Catholics ran into a wall of Anglo-Saxons that resented their Catholicism. The Irish flocked to urban areas, and the overcrowded cities were seen as dens of iniquity ripe with confidence men and dubious ruffians. A generation later, the Irish were replaced by the Slavs and Italians. Higham contended that industrial capital saw this new wave as a great source of cheap labor that would keep costs at a minimum and profits sky high.²⁰ Management needed a way to keep this new wave of immigrants in a subjugated role and out of the reach of progressive industrial organizers. It became a battle of the progressive information seeking muckrakers and the misinforming managers. Ultimately management would prevail as Higham noted that skilled and unskilled workers already established in the United States were taught to deride these new foreign laborers and separate themselves from them.²¹

The class struggles and nativist ploys discussed by a chorus of respected historians can be best seen in its entirety in turn of the century Pittsburgh. The misinformation and stereotypes were a way to ensure labor solidarity was dead before it had a chance to truly materialize. The primary source material provides examples from both the workplace and community of the divisions nativism helped cement. The work done by Heber Blankenhorn illustrates how class division and nativism are directly proportional. Ethnic groups were inherently separated by barriers such as language. African American workers were inherently separated because of their race. However, these divisions were furthered by nativist rhetoric and propaganda. The less familiar someone was with a certain group or race, the easier it was to disseminate blatant fallacies about them without raising an eyebrow. One could not disprove something about a

¹⁹ Higham, 8.

²⁰ Higham, 45.

²¹ Higham, 45.

group that was completely foreign to him. Nativism caused greater divisions which in turn allowed even more spiteful words to be spread about the supposedly subversive elements. It was a vicious cycle that Blankenhorn and I.W.M inquiry sought to expose. The first example examines how discriminating practices in the workplace as well as depictions of black workers created a further divide between them and other laborers.

Discriminating practices in the workplace and prejudices held by labor leadership greatly hindered the inclusion and organization of immigrant and African American workers. African American workers were subjected to discrimination by foremen and plant managers. This much was not a surprise to their leaders. What was troubling, however, was the level of discrimination caused by misconceptions that African American laborers faced from labor leadership. The I.W.M. inquiry conducted an interview with Eugene Jones, the Director of the League for the Advancement of Colored People. In his testimony, Jones argued, "The organized labor group in America has committed one of the greatest blunders any group of that kind could commit in neglecting the proper consideration of practically one-seventh of the labor supply of the world."²² Jones is introducing an important and alarming statistic. While black workers were seen as a small minority of scabs and enemies to the labor movement, they actually constituted a sizable chunk of the labor force. If a solidarity movement was going to exist, then organized labor would have to include them in their ranks. The large supply of African American workers were cast off and many times deemed unfit for organization. This idea of blacks being unfit for organization was formulated out of an expansive network of preconceived notions about African Americans. One interviewed steel manager states, "The colored man is not very responsible to trade unionism. He seems to feel he can best solve his problem by breaking down the white

²² Interview with Mr. Eugene Jones, folder 18, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-4.

working man.”²³ This statement does a fine job of revealing the idea that blacks were simply strike breakers that looked to take advantage of the miseries of white workers. Due to these prevailing fallacies, trade unions did not even bother to make attempts to include black workers in their ranks.

By depicting the African American workers as a strike breaker, the immigrants who were striking came to hate the black workers for hindering the effectiveness of the strike itself. Bruce Nelson explained that one of the main tactics used by management was to employ black workers during strikes to create animosity towards the entire race.²⁴ This was another effective strategy used by management. By employing blacks as strikebreakers, managers diffused some of the strikers' energy and attention. The black workers became an enemy rather than the managers whose terrible practices caused the workers to walk out in the first place. The African American worker deflected some of the heat and filled a void that was left by the absence of the immigrant workers. They assumed the role of dangerous intellectually inferior subversive while the Slav was freezing in his one room apartment. A double edged sword was confronting African American laborers. They were alienated from the unskilled workers because stereotypes said that they could not be organized. They were also alienated from skilled laborers because of race and class differences. Therefore, managers had achieved their goal and completely estranged black workers from all other laborers. One seventh of the labor force was a pariah and the group that lost the most from this was labor. Stereotypes were not unique to African American workers as immigrant workers faced some of the fiercest nativist opposition.

²³ Interview with Mr. Eugene Jones, folder 18, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-5.

²⁴ Nelson, 36.

The nativist stereotypes were not just held by laborers and labor leadership. Immigrants were held in the lowest esteem in American households as well. This was an important part of the culture of nativism as the household was where families discussed current affairs and shared stories and information they had gathered from other sources. In order to show how nativist thinking could create such power opposition to organized immigrant labor, Blankenhorn and the I.W.M. conducted interviews with several Pittsburgh families whose male heads worked in the steel mills. Some interviews were done with ethnic families who had fathers on strike while others were done with the families of skilled workers. One of these interviews was done in 1919 with the wife of a skilled Scottish laborer. The family lived in a comfortable six six-room home in Pittsburgh's McKeesport neighborhood, which was primarily Scotch-Irish at the time. The woman was obviously ignorant of the conditions that immigrant families lived in due to the nativist propaganda that she was exposed to. When the interviewer asked the woman if she thought a family could survive on four dollars and fifty cents, the wages of Slavic workers, she said, "I do not see how they could live on it at all."²⁵ The introduction of this new information introduced the Scottish woman to the plight of the immigrant for the first time. Nativism's success relied not only the spread of rumors and misinformation but also the most concerted efforts to keep the truth far from attainability. Class divisions caused by economic inequalities like the one described helped create separate worlds. While the woman she indirectly condemned the sinfully low wage, she proceeded to insert a touch of nativist rhetoric by adding that she was referring to an "American" family's ability to live on nearly nothing.²⁶ She claimed, "The foreigners had such a low standard of living that they save a great deal."²⁷ This statement revealed a preconceived notion that the immigrant families were so primitive and used to terrible

²⁵ McKeesport Scotch Summary, folder 38, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 4.

²⁶ McKeesport Scotch Summary, folder 38, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 4.

²⁷ McKeesport Scotch Summary, folder 38, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 4.

conditions that their low wages would not have negatively impacted them. It is amazing how the woman quickly qualified her sympathy for the low wage earner and then felt compelled to deride foreigners as if to cement her own status as an American. Nativism needed passionate ignorance to succeed and generalizations like the one's articulated by the Scottish woman echo that very passionate ignorance.

Her feelings are not unique but rather provide a sound example of nativist sentiments found in this time period. The stereotypes found in the Scottish woman's interview would not have been possible if laborers were not divided on skilled and ethnic lines. The degree of influence nativism had on her was dependent on how removed she was from the immigrants' environment. Higham reasoned that many of the Slavic workers in western Pennsylvania did not have any unique stereotypes attached to them but were nonetheless met with the same disdain as other immigrant groups.²⁸ He said, "Slavic and Magyar laborers impressed public opinion at large simply as foreigners par excellence: uncivilized, unruly, dangerous."²⁹ By "foreigners by excellence", Higham was arguing that a main characteristic of the kind of nativism immigrant workers in Pittsburgh faced was driven primarily by vague generalizations. There were not drawings or cartoons depicting the immigrants as had been done in the past. This argument is reinforced by the Scottish woman when she disparaged the immigrants, citing their, "drinking habits and general manner of life."³⁰ One would be hard pressed to find a more all-encompassing indictment than to accuse a group of a disgusting "general manner of life". The evidence was not there but as long as the Scottish woman had perceptions of what the immigrants were like and accepted these perceptions as reality the nativists had succeeded.

²⁸ Higham, 88-89.

²⁹ Higham, 89.

³⁰ McKeesport Scotch Summary, folder 38, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 3-4.

The truth of the matter was that popular depictions of immigrants were significantly divorced from reality. Blankenhorn and other progressives in the intellectual community sought to emphasize how misguided these nativist conceptions were. To highlight the vast misnomers in the nativists' arguments, Blankenhorn also conducted interviews with struggling immigrant families. The families of immigrant workers were subjected to hardships that other workers and community members could not begin to fathom and would never be able to fathom because of the separation of communities that nativism ensured would never be breached. A steel curtain divided the laborers on class and ethnic lines allowing nativist lies to be accepted as facts. The vivid details of the living conditions for many immigrant working families outlined in the report would have shocked many in the public, but as the Scottish woman put forward, the immigrants were content with intolerable conditions. In November of 1919, an inquiry report described the conditions facing the immigrants. It noted that the apartments often had no water and were located in trash infested alleyways.³¹ Overcrowding was a common theme with families of eight having to share two rooms and struggling to provide enough food to even sustain life.³² Eastern European immigrant neighborhoods were so isolated and marginalized because of management's proliferation of nativism. The facts about actual living conditions that surely would have evoked sympathy and a call for change went unaddressed. The Scottish woman began to show signs of sympathy when learning about the terrible wages. Imagine what she would have thought if she saw the horrid conditions women and children had to endure. These are the conditions Blankenhorn and the progressive truth seekers were devoted to exposing. The progressives realized that nativism's stranglehold could only be broken by illuminating the vivid details of the immigrant laborer's experience in the workplace and at home.

³¹ Families and Living Conditions, folder 38, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 11-15.

³² Families and Living Conditions, folder 38, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 11-15.

Nativism was not restricted to negative stereotypes and preconceived beliefs about immigrant groups. The most powerful tool of the nativists was the ability to illicit fear by portraying immigrant workers as subversives intending to cripple the American way of life. In the 1919 national strike in particular, nativists played on fears of radicalism and communist insurrection following the Russian Revolution and First World War. Accusations about alleged secret plots by immigrants were commonplace and contributed to the already strong culture of mistrust towards foreigners that historians like Higham discussed. Blankenhorn and the I.W.M. entered the mills and interviewed government immigration inspectors charged with finding radicals in the workplace and communities. In the minds of progressive muckrakers like Blankenhorn, what one read about the secret plots of radicals and subversives in the popular press was in need of major investigation. One of the most revealing interviews was done with inspector W.W. Sibray, the United States immigration inspector for Western Pennsylvania. In this particular document, Blankenhorn's primary focus was to determine whether or not there was any validity to the claims that immigrant laborers were engaging in secret subversive activities. The findings would reveal that underhanded deception, a characteristic of nativist depictions of immigrants, was not being committed by the workers. It was being utilized by managers and nativists.

Blankenhorn began his line of questioning by asking Sibray, "Have you found any official connection between people arrested on the charge of being radicals, or seditions, and the steel strikers."³³ Sibray's response portrays the immigrant laborers in a much more favorable light, illustrating the misinformation about the radical revolutionary intentions of immigrant laborers. Sibray began by stating, "Up to the present time I have yet to find a single radical that

³³ Testimony of W.W. Sibray, folder 10, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-3.

has anything to do with the steel strike.”³⁴ The audience of this document would have been immediately baffled by Sibray’s initial claim. The first response recorded in the document calls into question all sources painting foreigners as radicals while also critiquing the sources of political strife beginning with the Red Scare. While the Palmer raids and nativist propaganda engulfed the public in paranoia and skepticism, a federal investigator stated unequivocally that the nation’s fears and mistrust of organized labor were erroneous. The notion of the secret foreigner and secrecy in its entirety bred further division as the connotations associated with secrecy caused mistrust and wariness of the immigrants keeping them isolated from other workers. Sibray proceeded to reveal that, “These corporations are loaded up with “under cover” men who must earn their salaries, and they go around and report the cases to the detectives for the large companies.”³⁵ It is important to analyze the language of this statement as the term “under cover” has a certain connotation intended to portray the company as sneaky or devious. This turns nativism right on its head. Instead of the foreigners engaging in secret plots, managers were in fact engaging in the very activities they accused the immigrants of taking part in further illustrating how nativism was a farce. The interview then shifted to the covert actions steel corporations took in order to influence public officials and control the community.

When asked if the companies had influence over law enforcement and elected officials, Sibray responded, “In a city like Homestead where the steel company pays nearly all the taxes, and has practically the whole say - so as to who will be the mayor, they do control the public officials.”³⁶ A widely held belief of nativists in 1919 was that foreign born radicals would gain control of government officials and usher in a revolution for communist rule. The public was led

³⁴ Testimony of W.W. Sibray, folder 10, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-3.

³⁵ Testimony of W.W. Sibray, folder 10, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-3.

³⁶ Testimony of W.W. Sibray, folder 10, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-3.

on to believe that the government and its servants of republican law were leading the crusade against communist radicals, but Sibray's interview reveals that big business pulled all of the strings and had a firm grasp on the puppet officials. Management was behind the nativism and secrecy in both the private and public spheres. They controlled and distorted information effecting individual ideas about the immigrants as well as controlling local government. The steel company was not merely a business located near the community; it was the switchboard for the community itself. Misinformation was crafted and spread through the wide network of channels big business influenced, and all of these actions were carried out without public knowledge. The true subversion was taking place inside the managers' board room not in the ethnic social halls. The question of the credibility of the source need not be asked as the report came from a federal investigator whose job entailed purging radicals from the ranks of the citizenry. He found no discussion of revolutionary plots on the shop floor, but discovered instead that managers were operating outside ethical codes and doing so behind closed doors.

Although Sibray reported no subversive action within the mill, he tactfully refrained from supporting the legitimacy of the labor movement in its entirety. When asked what he thought the purpose of the strike was, Sibray replied, "I believe absolutely that what Mr. Gompers says this strike is for is true."³⁷ Sibray tactfully implied that the strike was not aiming at a communist insurrection but rather the ushering in of workers' rights and an open shop. It is important that Sibray referenced Gompers rather than the individual workers actively engaging in the strike. He sided with labor leadership, not labor, and there is a significant difference between the two. Gompers was a conservative American-born cigar maker not a Slavic plate roller who had only been living in the United States for six months. Gompers symbolized the same labor leadership

³⁷ Testimony of W.W. Sibray, folder 10, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 1-3.

that disqualified blacks from trade unions due to their inherent deficiencies. Established labor elites had been effectively swayed by nativists and helped further the nativist agenda even if they did not realize it. By siding with Gompers, Sibray sided with nativism even though his own senses told him that no radical movements were being planned by the immigrants. He saw nothing, he heard nothing, but the culture of nativism was so strong and so entrenched that Sibray could not avoid falling victim to the same misrepresentation that he helped to disprove.

When detectives like Sibray brought back reports indicating that no radicals were present in the ranks of the strikers, big business took its clandestine program to a new level. Managers yearned for some sort of results for their behind-the-scenes affairs, and the proof they received was often vague and a product of hearsay. Hearsay was one of management's best channels for spreading its nativist indictments of foreign born laborers. Hearsay was so effective because merely planting the idea in one's head that subversive activities may be going on was enough to accomplish the goal of casting a shroud of illegitimacy over the labor movement. Many of the I.W.M. reports from undercover men expose how under cover men created false reports about immigrant activity based on hearsay and flimsy evidence that was easily refutable. One such example was found in the report of agent "X-199" in which the agent detailed an explosion that was heard near one of the steel mills. The agent said, "There is a possibility of there being some bombs in the strikers' possession as a woman told me she received information that there were quite a few bombs in the strikers' possession."³⁸ The agent was implying that the explosion heard near the mill was caused by the immigrant strikers who reportedly were in possession of some explosive devices. The rumor that the agent heard from an unidentified old woman, whose existence must also be questioned, was distorted to depict the strikers as violent agitators and

³⁸ Commission of Inquiry on Undercover Men by Robert Littell, folder 39, ts., Heber Blankenorn Paper, University of Pittsburgh, 2-3.

subversives once again creating contempt for the strikers and their movement. This is once again an example of how information could be distorted and disseminated to serve management's interests. If the immigrants were in possession of dangerous weapons that could threaten to damage property and lives in the city then they would be reviled by other workers creating further divisions between the workers. As the misinformation and rumors grew stronger, the light of solidarity dimmed.

In the same I.W.M. report from undercover men, another agent, Z-16, confirmed that no instances of revolt were observed or overheard from the ethnic labor organizers. He noted, "There were no disorders and the labor leaders told the men to keep quiet and to avoid making a disturbance."³⁹ The difference between these two reports deals with the manner in which information was acquired. Agent Z-16 presented a report based on his direct involvement on the shop floor while X-199's report was purely a product of hearsay. Like Sibray, agent Z-16 interacted with foreign born laborers. He got a unique chance to go behind the steel curtain and immerse himself into the world of the immigrant laborer. His report showed no signs of nativist misinformation or stereotypes because he had an opportunity to transcend the realm of class separation caused by nativism. The accounts of Sibray and X-199 cannot be highlighted enough. They were able to exit their experiences with a different perspective than many Americans were afforded. By talking with immigrants and directly viewing their daily life experiences, a reevaluation of nativism was taking place. This reevaluation of nativism was what the Blankenhorn papers and the I.W.M. craved. The interviews with men who had personal interactions with immigrants provided the muckrakers with facts and reports unaltered by management's underlings. Agent X-199 represented the information sought by the muckrakers

³⁹ Commission of Inquiry on Undercover Men by Robert Littell, folder 39, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, a-10.

while Z-16 contributed to the existing culture of misinformation and doctored reports influenced by outside forces with an obvious horse in the race.

The crafty managers would not let the threat of organized labor rest only on management's ability to misinform and create divisions based on ethnic stereotypes. There existed a need for action to compliment the nativist language. A report from the I.W.M. inquiry described the steel trusts using undercover men to start ethnic disputes between Serbian and Italian workers. Both ethnic groups were participating in the national strike at the time the detective agency was hired. The corporation felt that they could use ethnic tensions to end the strike. A company representative told the undercover men, "We want you to stir up as much bad feeling as you possibly can between the Serbians and Italians. Call up every question you can in reference to racial hatred between these two nationalities. Urge them to go back to work or the Italians will get their jobs."⁴⁰ This revealing quotation shows that secret and violent insurrections were being planned by management's clandestine force. The Serbs and Italians had overcome enough of the the ethnic divisions between them to successfully strike together and become a problem for management. This report illustrates how management's knee jerk response was to devise a plan that would use stereotypes and ethnic tension to create division between the united ethnicities so that the strike would fail. The strategy of divide and conquer was effective for management because the ties between the Serbs and Italians were weak in this case. The Serbs lived together, attended Orthodox mass, spoke their native language, and built up "little Belgrades" in rust belt cities. The Italians and other ethnic groups did the same. The language barriers, and fact that Serbs and Italians called different neighborhoods home, allowed the undercover men to easily deceive immigrant workers. The bond they forged in striking together

⁴⁰ Steel Trust Spy Chiefs Try to Start Race Riot, folder 39, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 2-4.

was broken by the overwhelming effectiveness of management in creating ethnic tensions and divisions between workers.

Management's indirect culpability in dividing workers often allowed big business to emerge unscathed in the court of public opinion. The secrecy and covert affairs architected by management were always carried out by a third party middle man so management could always keep its hands clean. Whether it was the Pinkertons in 1892 or some other agency, management never directly absorbed the wrath of the immigrants. In the I.M.W. report about the Serbs and Italians, it was discovered that the Sherman Service, a Pinkerton like detective service, was called upon to ensure that the workers became divided and violent.⁴¹ If labor ever discovered that spies were used to incite riots, the middle man agency assumed the role of villain. This was exactly the case with the Sherman Service in 1919 Pittsburgh. A letter to the *Chicago Herald* from Chicago labor leader E. Nockles on November 2, 1919 stated, "There is no doubt in my mind that the Sherman Service was engaged in stirring up riots. Its operatives destroyed or advocated the destruction of property and aroused antagonism between different groups of strikers."⁴² The I.W.M. inquiry reported that, "No evidence of the connivance of the steel companies was brought out."⁴³ Once again, the steel companies escaped the scrutiny of the workers, the public, and the law. Without a doubt, the accepted social beliefs about secrecy and the immigrants' propensity for radicalism contributed to the steel companies Houdini act. Management was unrivaled in its ability to implement the covert action that immigrants were accused of. Sherman men and Pinkerton men terrorized workers, not Carnegie or Frick's people.

⁴¹ Steel Trust Spy Chiefs Try to Start Race Riot, folder 39, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 2-4.

⁴² Steel Trust Spy Chiefs Try to Start Race Riot, folder 39, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 4.

⁴³ Steel Trust Spy Chiefs Try to Start Race Riot, folder 39, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 4.

Management had the capital and resources to emerge unharmed while knowledge of these misdeeds never reached the public's ear.

Management found a way to present the immigrants as subversive spies, but the caveat was that the immigrants were spying at the behest of company managers. Management recruited ordinary foreign born laborers to spy on their fellow countrymen. An excerpt from the *Pittsburgh Post* detailed how M.P. Maverék, a Hungarian labor organizer, sold out knowledge of labor activities to company management. The *Post* charged him with handing over the names of laborers that attended a mass rally in exchange for an increase in wages.⁴⁴ Maverék was a member of the Hungarian community and was obviously respected since he was chosen to be a keynote speaker at several events promoting labor organization. Workers hostility to this betrayal was immediate and violent. The article described how that Maverék was seen at an ethnic hall and thrown into the streets by angry workers who had become privy to his espionage.⁴⁵ He was accosted with death threats, but the real damage had already been done. The workers backlash towards Maverék displayed their intolerance with the very subversion they were so often accused of. The workers wanted to shake the stereotype of the sneaky foreigner, but management used men like Maverék to make the foreigner appear not only sneaky but also disloyal. If he would betray his own countrymen then what is to say he would not betray an organized trade union. The deceitfulness that the immigrants were fighting to distance themselves from had permeated their own ranks.

Management's influence extended beyond the individual workers and labor leaders. Management was able to exert its might over political and media outlets to transport the message

⁴⁴ "No Compromise in Sight," *Pittsburgh Post* 24 June 1892.

⁴⁵ "No Compromise in Sight," *Pittsburgh Post* 24 June 1892.

of nativism across the country ensuring that every American could be adequately misinformed on what foreign born laborers desired for the United States. The purpose of nativist and anti-labor articles in newspapers was to spread misinformation to every American whether they were involved in the industrial sector or not. Citizens who did not live in one of the cities where the national strike had gained momentum relied on the press and their local politicians to inform them of what was occurring throughout the country. The labor movement and the fears ascribed to its potential success was foreign to many Americans, but the nativist misinformation campaign brought over many “moderates” into the pro-business camp. A particularly disturbing article from *The Nation* in 1919 was collected by the I.W.M inquiry. The article listed several headlines and blurbs from Pittsburgh papers calling on the public to denounce the foreign radicals and combat them by refusing to join the national strike. It quoted an advertisement in the *Chronicle Telegraph* that read, “Masquerading under the cloak of the American Federation of Labor, a few Radicals are striving for power. They hope to seize control of the industries and turn the country over to the Red rule of Syndicalism.”⁴⁶ The power of this advertisement lied in its various implications. Most Americans reading the advertisement likely had no idea what syndicalism was or the AF of L for that matter, but phrases like seize control and Red rule undoubtedly elicited fearful emotions from readers. When management controlled the information outlets, nativism and misinformation based on ethnic stereotypes faced no opposition. Sibray’s report on the absence of radicals in the workplace was not appearing in newspapers. The sensationalized threat of the foreign radical created a national opposition to labor.

Politicians joined in the nativist movement and played on misconceptions to garner support for the opposition to organized labor. The Sibray interview detailed previously in the

⁴⁶ Pittsburgh’s Prostituted Press, folder 34, ts., Heber Blankenhorn Papers, University of Pittsburgh, 6-10.

analysis told of the influence big business held over elected officials. The political figures swept up by the nativist fervor were not only from rust belt cities like Pittsburgh. Seattle mayor Ole Hanson was as fervent a nativist warrior as there was in local politics. Hanson's beliefs and the knowledge he imparted on those he spoke to at rallies proved an invaluable resource for disseminating nativist propaganda. His fiery speeches influenced the headlines of the major news outlets in Seattle to sport headlines like, "NO COMPROMISE! No Compromise Now Or Ever!"⁴⁷ This attitude doomed labor and curtailed any hope of bringing the two sides together at the negotiating table. It echoed much of the same sentiment found in the statement "We will not negotiate with terrorists." The labor movement was a forerunner to modern terrorism in the eyes of Americans like Hanson. Sensationalized journalism and language could make people believe anything, like their country was under attack from a resourceful foe that they could not see or detect traces of. Luckily for the American people, men like Ole Hanson were committed to stamping out radicals.

The case of the labor movement in Pittsburgh between the years 1892-1919 does not fully answer the question of why no socialist movement ever succeeded in the United States, but the sources analyzed do provide an answer as to why labor was always on the outside looking in. Management had superior resources and finances and could always engineer a way to keep labor in a subjugated role. At the turn of the twentieth century immigrants set up communities throughout cities and brought much of their culture with them. Neighborhoods developed distinct identities and interactions and marrying between members of different ethnicities was uncommon. The divisions on ethnic lines were also divisions on class lines and skilled lines. The more recent wave of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were employed as unskilled

⁴⁷ Murray 63.

laborers and in turn received lower pay. When organized labor threatened the profits of major industries, already existing divisions within the labor force were emphasized. By alienating the lowest classes from the rest of the skilled labor force, an irreparable rift was created that would halt labor's momentum. Nativism would be the tool to widen the divide as class division and nativism were intertwined. Their success would seal labor's demise. It is difficult to say what would have given labor the upper hand in their ongoing battle with management. Perhaps not even a world of reformers like Blankenhorn could have mustered enough support to uproot management's stranglehold of control. However, there is no doubt that the history of American labor, class struggle, and nativism are intertwined. Each one influences how the other is remembered and studied through history.

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