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Lords of Capital and Knights of Labor: Worcester's Labor History During the Gilded Age

By

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Abbreviations

Bureau of Labor Statistics	BLS
District Assembly	DA
Knights of Labor	KOL
Knights of St. Crispin	KOSC
Local Assembly	LA
Central Labor Union	CLU
Lasters' Protective Union	LPU
Massachusetts Federation of Labor	MFL
Labor News	LN
Worcester Daily Times	WDT
Worcester Evening Gazette	WEG

In 1983, Roy Rosenzweig wrote an important social history: *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*. In his introduction Rosenzweig states that “his first chapter (Part 1) ... describes some distinguishing features of Worcester: the power of the city’s industrialists, the weakness of working-class political parties and trade unions, and the importance and cohesiveness of ethnic communities and organizations.”¹ In this chapter he dismisses much of Worcester’s late nineteenth-century labor movement because “the absence of worker-politicians reflects the failure of explicitly pro-labor political movements (Knights of Labor and Socialists) in Worcester.”²

¹ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in An Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge, England, 1983), p. 4.

² *Ibid*, p. 19.

He also finds little to cheer about in terms of labor organizations such as the Knights of Labor and the Central Labor Union.

It is not surprising that Rosenzweig concludes that Worcester's labor movement remained weak in subsequent decades. In the early twentieth century he finds a small labor movement, few strikes, and lack of labor communication among a diverse ethnic community. While he believes that the ethnic communities served as alternatives to trade unions and political parties, he concludes that a combination of paternalism and hard-ball tactics by an industrial elite committed to a policy of "solidarity as opposed to labor" would inevitably lead to the defeat of labor in confrontations such as the Machinists' Strike of 1915.³

Rosenzweig's grim appraisal of organized labor in Worcester is somewhat overdrawn. A further look at industrial, labor, and political development in the nineteenth century is in order. It is important to remember that the community was late in joining the first wave of the New England industrial revolution between 1810-1860. It is also important to remember that, after the Civil War, Worcester became the heart of an industrial area that encompassed the largest county in size in the Commonwealth. The Blackstone River Valley from Worcester south to the Rhode Island line was a textile swath permeated by textile machine firms, such as Draper (Hopedale), Whitin (Whitinsville) and Crompton & Knowles (Worcester). Rubber works could also be found on the Massachusetts-Rhode Island line in Millville. The shoe industry belt ran more on an east-west tangent from Westborough through Worcester to Spencer and the Brookfields. Textiles also dominated the area southwest of the city in Southbridge and Webster, and in the North County chair making (Gardner) and papermills (Fitchburg) could be found.

While Worcester had 7500 residents in 1840, its industrial development was hindered by lack of water power. Despite the opening of the Blackstone Canal in 1828, the water power problem remained a serious obstacle to manufacturing. Then in the 1840's, a combination of steam-powered buildings which provided "power for rent" to small manufacturers, the opening of the Providence & Worcester railroad, and innovative manufacturing including textile machinery, provided the incentive for the community's industrial take-off. By 1848, the community was chartered as a city. By 1850, its population had more than doubled from the 1840 figure.

³ Ibid, pp. 20-26.

Industries such as agricultural and textile machinery manufacturing were emerging alongside the more traditional ones. Several questions need to be asked: who comprised the industrial labor force? Was this work force organized, particularly in terms of the ten-hour movement that was sweeping through the Massachusetts mills and factories in the 1840's and 1850's? A recent study by Bruce Laurie is very helpful in answering these questions concerning the antebellum period. Laurie finds that "by the mid-1850s the ten-hour day was the norm in the old handicrafts and the most metallurgical pursuits."⁴

Laurie points out that "in 1844 a [master] mechanics meeting took note of sharpening unrest on shop floors over irregular work schedules and long hours, and endorsed a shorter and uniform workday."⁵ Furthermore, Laurie says that the masters "unanimously adopted the eleven hour system and then in the early 1850's established a ten-hour day."⁶ He writes that Ruggles, Nourse, Mason & Company, an agricultural machinery firm in Worcester, bowed to a petition from its workers and established the new policy in the fall of 1851. The workers in turn saluted their employers by presenting Ruggles, Nourse, Mason & Co. a fancy clock dedicated to the grant of the ten-hour day on October 16, 1851. If the master mechanics would provide their journeymen with the ten-hour day, they also more tightly structured that day in that more industrial discipline was imposed.⁷

Laurie also finds that labor reform and antislavery went hand-in-hand in Worcester and elsewhere in Massachusetts through the mechanism of the Free-Soil Party in the late 1840's and early 1850's.⁸ The ten-hour movement was supported by the Free-Soilers in part because they in turn wanted labor support. Their focus on the issue

⁴ Bruce Laurie, "The Fair Field of the 'Middle Ground': Abolitionism, Labor Reform and the Making of an Antislavery Bloc in Ante Bellum Massachusetts" in Eric Arneson, Julie Green, and Bruce Laurie (editors), *Labor Histories* (Urbana, Illinois, 1998), p. 54.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 57.

coincided with the Boston machinists' strikes in October of 1850.⁹ Laurie also believes that this strike energized the ten-hour movement in the machine shops and foundries in in-land communities such as Worcester: he sees the metal operatives as a labor aristocracy that could control production more than textile operatives.¹⁰

But no ten-hour law was passed until 1874 and it is Laurie's position that many manufacturers undercut the movement by granting an eleven-hour day in 1852 and 1853.¹¹ Among manufacturers there had never been broad-based support for hours reform, and by late 1853 it became apparent that the Free-Soil inspired coalition government that had pushed the issue for several years was breaking up. "Conscience" Whigs and rural Democrats opposed labor reform.¹² The Know-Nothings, who subsequently controlled state government in the 1850's, also failed to get the ten-hour day enacted.¹³

However, in the aftermath of the Civil War there were renewed efforts to bring about the ten-hour day in 1866, and groups as divergent as the journeymen tailors and the carriage makers began to meet to form a Workingmen's Association. By 1867, labor reform meetings were regularly held in Worcester and the Labor Reform League was formed in Massachusetts.¹⁴

By 1868, the Knights of St. Crispin (KOSC) were organizing throughout central Massachusetts. Don D. Lescohier argues that "The shoe industry at the end of the war was evidently in a most chaotic condition."¹⁵ On January 22, 1869 the *Worcester Evening Gazette* pointed out that the "Knights of St. Crispin are increasing in all parts of

⁹ Ibid, p. 59.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 58.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 61.

¹² Ibid, p. 60.

¹³ Ibid, p. 61.

¹⁴ See *Worcester Evening Gazette*, 1866-1867.

¹⁵ Don D. Lescohier, *The Knights of St. Crispin, 1867-1874* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1910), p. 24.

the State.”¹⁶ By May, 1869 it was announced that the KOSC now had 102 lodges and thirty thousand members in Massachusetts.¹⁷ The reform impulse in Massachusetts included the establishment of a Labor Reform Party, which again called for the ten-hour day which had recently been denied by the State Senate as “inexpedient.”¹⁸ The legislature did establish a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 1869, but labor unrest continued as the journeymen tailors in Massachusetts struck successfully in September and the Worcester tailors remained on strike in October.¹⁹

In the November elections, the Massachusetts Labor Reform Party succeeded in gaining 29 seats in the house and one in the Senate.²⁰ Perhaps a turning point in labor resurgence was the Worcester shoemakers’ “lockout” of 1870: the employers wanted a 10% reduction of wages for six months, while the Crispins wanted the reduction to be for three months. An incident in which a group of strikebreakers were chased by a group of Crispins and iron workers in January led to the arrest of six men for conspiracy. At the same time, the KOSC continued its fight to be incorporated in Massachusetts.²¹

The three month “lockout” was ended in late March by an agreement between the Crispins and the manufacturers: the KOSC made concessions on the size of the work force, and the manufacturers made concessions on rates, especially for bottomers.²² While labor continued to fight for the ten hour day in the legislature, the Crispins finally gained incorporation, despite opposition from shoe manufacturers such as Rice of Shrewsbury and Earle of Worcester. Rice called for the “open shop” and Earle wanted “no restrictions on the numbers of apprentices.”²³ The

¹⁶ *Worcester Evening Gazette*, Jan. 22, 1869.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, May 13, 1869.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, June 10, 1869.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, September - October, 1869.

²⁰ *Ibid*, Nov. 3-4, 1869.

²¹ *Ibid*, January-February, 1870.

²² *Ibid*, March 23, 1870.

²³ *Ibid*, May 22, 1870.

Crispin Conspiracy case of January was also dropped. However, according to John P. Hall, the real issue of the day was the introduction of the McKay sewing machine, which would speed up production and cut the number of employees needed in the industry.²⁴

Attempts to pass an eight hour bill for public workers failed in the legislature and attempts to restrict the use of “coolie” labor in Massachusetts also failed.²⁵ Eastern shoe-makers had discussed bringing Chinese labor into the boot industry, and in 1872 Galvin T. Sampson of North Adams did so.²⁶ “A brief and unsuccessful strike of wire workers in Worcester in November, 1870 brought accusations of violence against the striking workers.²⁷ By the close of 1870, the Republicans were in firm control of the state house, and the Crispins were attempting to form cooperatives. The KOSC was weakened by the loss of national strikes, including New York, while the state Crispins focused on establishing burial funds.²⁸

In his monograph *The Knights of St. Crispin 1867-1874*, Don D. Lescohier states that this organization which had grown rapidly in Massachusetts in 1867-1868 peaked in December, 1870. By then Massachusetts had eighty-five active lodges, and Lescohier argues that Worcester, which had been one of the first organized shoe centers, persisted through the strike of 1870 as a KOSC base.²⁹ Lescohier points out that the 1870 Worcester strike, involving 1200 men and lasting three months, had cost the Crispins \$175,000 in wages. The employers demanded individual contracts and thus “were virtually demanding that the men give up their union, collective bargaining, and the right to strike, which they knew the men would not do.”³⁰ In fact, the men were willing

²⁴ John P. Hall, “The Knights of St. Crispin in Massachusetts, 1869-1878” *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 18 (June, 1958), p. 163.

²⁵ *Worcester Evening Gazette*, June 23-24, 1878.

²⁶ Lescohier, *KOSC*, p. 36.

²⁷ *WEG*, Nov. 5, 1870.

²⁸ *Ibid*, Aug. 18, 1871.

²⁹ Lescohier, *KOSC*, pp. 6-7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 42.

to accept a seasonal reduction of 10%, as long as the union retained its control of wage bargaining.³¹ The Crispins also confronted “independent contractors, such as the one in Milford, who went to Worcester during the 1870 strike, and “took the work from the manufacturers and agreed to do it for a certain price and then give it out to persons in Milford at a certain price. The difference was my profit.”³²

The cost of the 1870’s strikes led to the decline of the Crispins beginning in 1871, and “it was particularly rapid after the crushing defeat of the Lynn lodges in 1872.”³³ The Lynn manufacturers ended a two year agreement on prices with the Crispins, refused to employ them, and forced a confrontation that led the organization into such financial disarray that by 1874, one of the delegates to the Grand Lodge meeting in Philadelphia called it, “the funeral of the KOSC.”³⁴ Although Lescohier also discusses the attempt to rejuvenate the order between 1875 and 1878, he finds it had little success except in towns in Massachusetts.³⁵ John P. Hall argues that the revived order was significant in Massachusetts. His position is confirmed by Carroll D. Wright, who states that among the thirty-one new lodges founded, a number of them were in the Worcester area, including West Boylston, Milbury, Marlborough, North Brookfield, Spencer, Webster, and Worcester.³⁶

Wright, in his *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration* (1881) is particularly impressed by the efforts of Unity Lodge No. 32 of Lynn to engage in arbitration, and states that these efforts paved the way for the eventual establishment of a Massachusetts Board of Conciliation and

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, p. 48.

³³ Ibid, p. 9.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 10.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 10-11.

³⁶ Hall, “KOSC”, p. 172; Carroll D. Wright *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration* (Boston, 1881) p. 97.

Arbitration.³⁷ But the period was not as prosaic for the Crispins as Wright's depiction of the KOSC's Lynn Board of Arbitration. Hall argues that "weaknesses of organization and finance caused the downfall of the union,... [particularly] because money was not collected and spent on fighting the grievances (wages and job control) which really concerned the shoemakers."³⁸

Workers did not fare much better in a number of other industries. One textile manufacturer was accused of working underage youths for excessive hours at fifty cents per day. In Worcester in 1876-77, the hod-carriers struck unsuccessfully as did workers at Ames Plow when faced with a wage reduction of 10%. One of the most difficult employers in terms of wages and hours in the Worcester area was Washburn & Moen. As Nick Salvatore points out, as in earlier strikes, those in 1868 and 1870 involved only a small portion of workers and thus failed.³⁹ The 1871 strike led to a reduction in hours, although Salvatore questions whether this had been accompanied by a reduction in wages.⁴⁰ When Washburn & Moen attempted to reduce wages in 1877, the wire workers conceded, in part because only part of the labor force was affected.⁴¹

In 1880 there would be additional labor problems for the firm; 250 men at Washburn and Moen's Quinsigamond Iron Works began a 45 day strike in December because their wages were reduced 10%.⁴² While the strike failed, it may have contributed to the attempt of the Knights of Labor (KOL) LA 4979 to organize the firm. Attempts to gain pay increases at Washburn & Moen in the 1880's are also worth noting.⁴³

³⁷ Wright, *Industrial*, p. 104.

³⁸ Hall, "KOSC," p. 174.

³⁹ Nick Salvatore, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Weber* (New York, 1996), pp. 155-156.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 178.

⁴¹ *WEG*, May 1,4,7, 1877.

⁴² Salvatore, *We All Got History*, p. 254; *WEG* Dec. 21, 23, 24, 1880; *Worcester Daily Spy*, Dec. 20, 1880 and January 14, 1881.

⁴³ Freeman Saltus, "1888-1938: A Short History of 50 Years of Achievement by the Worcester Central Labor Union," *Labor News*, Oct. 21, 1938.

While the MABLS found that over half of the states' strikes/lockouts from 1881-1886 took place in Boston, there were significant strikes of masons and tenderers in Worcester rubber workers in Millville, and carpet dyers in Clinton, involving hundreds of workers and lengthy duration.⁴⁴

The Millville rubber strikes of 1885 are important, particularly the second one which lasted 112 days from June 29 to October 19 and cost the workers \$80,000 in wages.⁴⁵ While the workers gained eighteen cents in daily pay, the employer also brought in 200 permanent strike-breakers. This long strike by LA 3967 for higher wages led to DA 30 paying the Millville strikers \$1110.47 by January 1886 and, considering further payments at its April meeting, an appeal for assistance was granted, and by its July meeting \$600 from the assistance fund had been sent to the local assembly. The Executive Board in July also granted authority for an appeal by the local assembly for aid to pay off its debts.⁴⁶

However, LA 3967, along with three other local assemblies (4651, 6502, 6558), petitioned DA 30 "to sanction our withdrawal from this DA in order that we may organize under a charter from the General Assembly, KOL, as a National Trade Assembly of Rubber Workers..." and was turned down at the July meeting.⁴⁷ Subsequently on March 21, 1887 LA 3967, along with a number of other local assemblies, petitioned for a charter for a National Trade Assembly of Rubber Workers to the General Executive Board. After two weeks without a reply from the GEB, one of the locals # 3354 threatened to surrender its charter by April 8 along with the other local assemblies and to form open unions with the

⁴⁴ *Massachusetts Bureau of Labor Statistics 19th Annual Report*, Dec. 1888 (Boston, 1888), pp. 66-72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 26-27.

⁴⁶ See *Eighth Annual Report*, District Assembly No. 30 KOL, January, 1886, held in Lowell and *Quarterly Report(s)* District Assembly No. 30 KOL, April and July, 1886, held in Boston and Worcester.

⁴⁷ *Quarterly Report* DA 30 KOL, July 1886, p. 69.

support of the CLU of New York. Philip Foner states that #3354 left the KOL by April 30, 1887.⁴⁸

In the *Quarterly Report of District Assembly, No 30, K of L July 19-22, 1886*, there are numerous reports of the conflicts that took place in Worcester County in 1886. It is clear that the Bigelow Carpet Mill lockout in Clinton was a serious problem for the KOL. As LA 4471 (Clinton) reported, "After several attempts to arrange the matter (lockout) in which the agent betrayed a very arbitrary and autocratic spirit, he finally consented to re-open the works if the men and women would make personal application for work."⁴⁹ LA 3118 added "Information having been received of the revengeful spirit and unexampled meanness of Agent Bigelow in boycotting his help, the Board requested the officers of the Local Assembly at Clinton to furnish a list of the blacklisted members, with their affidavits."⁵⁰ From BLS data the Bigelow lockout/strike lasted 42 days, involved over a 1000 workers, led to 57 "new" employees after the strike, including 40 "from other places."⁵¹

In the shoe industry LA 3191 (West Brookfield) reported that the Spring 1886 strike there had been settled by the Local Board of Arbitration.⁵² The shoe industry problems in the county were further addressed at the DA 30 quarterly meeting:

The intimate business relations of the manufacturers in these places made it necessary to combine action for raising the scale of prices. After persistent work a scale of prices was established at Worcester, and the Westboro manufacturers subsequently made advances satisfactory to their employees. The contract (so called) at Spencer was an obstacle to

⁴⁸ *Proceedings*, 11th General Assembly, KOL (Minneapolis, October, 1887), p. 1299; Philip Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* Vol. 2 (New York, 1975), pp. 159-160.

⁴⁹ *Quarterly Report* DA 30 KOL, July, 1886, p. 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 55.

⁵¹ MA Bureau of Labor Statistics 19th Annual Report, 1888, pp. 30-33.

⁵² *Quarterly Report* DA 30 KOL July, 1886, p. 54.

completing arrangements in that town. The matter was finally submitted to arbitration, and the obnoxious contract was broken.⁵³

While the West Brookfield settlement is worthwhile, it is also important to note that at least one firm, McIntosh & Co., had originally protested the price list leading to the April strike. According to the BLS, the West Brookfield strike was only “partly successful,” but in fact four of the five firms which struck increased the daily pay while the other one discharged its ten strikers.⁵⁴

The strike of the shoe-treers and crimpers for higher wages involved nine firms in Spencer. While the strike lasted almost three months, the January 1886 DA 30 Quarterly Report called for a uniform labor price list in towns and cities where a heavy class of boots and shoes are manufactured: “Let it be pressed Knights of Spencer, the Brookfields, Worcester, Milford...”⁵⁵ The January Report also proclaimed that the Brockton lockout of 1885 had been won by forcing the manufacturers into arbitration.⁵⁶

By late 1886, however, the Massachusetts KOL’s strength in numbers and arbitration and strike victories would be tested. The Knights by then had some 80,000 members in DA 30 and another 10,000 in DA 77 (Lynn) as well as 10,000 allies in the Lasters’ Protective Union (LPU). Both organizations had grown sizably since the late 1870’s.⁵⁷

In Worcester County, the KOL had more than 10,000 members and local assemblies continued to sprout like mushrooms. The KOL’s victories in early 1886 and their joint ventures with the Lasters’ Union since 1885 may have paved the way for the Great Worcester County Shoe Strike of 1886-1887 where the manufacturers chose to address the issue of winter pay in December of 1886 by undercutting the union price

⁵³ Ibid, p. 59.

⁵⁴ *BLS 19th Annual Report, 1888*, pp. 30-33.

⁵⁵ *8th Annual Report*, DA 30 KOL, Jan. 1886, p. 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 44-45.

⁵⁷ See Table 1.

list, e.g. David Cummings & Co., and by establishing individual contracts rather than bargaining with union committees.⁵⁸ Nineteen of the firms throughout the county⁵⁹ jointly established this policy and posted it by January 25 and 26, 1887.

The ramifications of this new policy were not clear to the BLS. While the BLS could identify the lockouts and strikes that occurred in Worcester County it was much less prescient about the causes. The BLS stated that the Worcester County Shoe Strike of 1887 occurred because there was “disagreement regarding new scale of prices.” The strike not only encompassed nineteen firms employing 4,000 workers in Worcester, Spencer, and North Brookfield but also lasted over 200 days between December of 1886 and June 21, 1887. The BLS’s data reveals that two of the striking firms closed permanently in March and April of 1887, and that almost 2,000 new employees were hired, including two groups of 30 and 600 employees who “were brought from other places.” The group of 600 partially replaced the workforce of 1150 that struck Batcheller in North Brookfield (the BLS does not employ the term lockout for any part of the 1887 strike as it states that the strike was “ordered by labor organizations.”) It also concludes that the employers loss was \$151,000, while the employees lost approximately \$700,000 in wages and received under \$250,000 in assistance (presumably mainly from the KOL & LPU). The BLS did not distinguish specifics as to firms or type of boot and shoe work, but it did distinguish between male and female strikers: 3,400 (M) and 734 (F) and new workers 1605 (M) and 249 (F) 45.⁶⁰

Norman J. Ware indicates that DA 30 supported the strike, but the General Executive Board did not.⁶¹ By early February arbitration was proposed, but the State Board of Conciliation and Arbitration had only been established in 1886 and lacked enforcement powers. Both sides

⁵⁸ WEG December 21, 1886 and January 21, 1887 and BLS, *18th Annual Report*, 1888, pp. 34-37. See Table 2.

⁵⁹ WEG, January 26, 1887; Norman J. Ware, *The Labor Movement in the United States 1860-1895* (New York, 1929), p. 205.

⁶⁰ BLS, *19th Annual Report*, 1888, pp. 34-37. See Table 2.

⁶¹ Ware, *Labor Movement*, p. 205.

quickly suffered severe financial losses.⁶² DA 30 sent in \$2,000 of aid by March and later pointed out that the lockout/strike had cost the order between \$60,000 and \$70,000, as well as costing the workers nearly \$2,000,000.⁶³ Several shoe firms also closed during the dispute, including H.B. Fay & Co. and J.H. & G. M. Walker. In April 1887, the DA held its quarterly convention in Springfield, where it endorsed the strike and levied an assessment to provide assistance.⁶⁴ In May, a mass meeting was held in Lynn, where a subscription was started by the New England LPU to aid the Worcester strikers.⁶⁵ Pressure mounted for a settlement, but the SBAC did not directly intervene until mid-June. The labor representative to the SBAC, Richard Barry, pressed the strikers to sign a petition for immediate board action.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, a letter from DA 30, dated June 17, 1887, told the Worcester Joint Board “that you are instructed to notify the men locked out to get work as soon as possible as we are unable to render them the financial support they should receive.” James Riley of LA 785 read the letter.⁶⁷ Under these circumstances the settlement reached on June 21 left the manufacturers “free shop” individual contracts in place. Two Worcester newspapers, the *Evening Gazette* and the *Daily Times*, blamed the KOL for the failure of the strike, particularly the General Executive Board.⁶⁸

While the lasters and bottomers (LPU) in Spencer and LA 2446 in North Brookfield voted to stay out, by June 24 the bottomers in Spencer were returning to work and there were reports of the weakening of the lasters and bottomers elsewhere.⁶⁹ As *The Worcester Evening Gazette* of

⁶² *WEG*, February 16, 1887.

⁶³ *Proceedings*, 11th General Assembly, KOL, 1887, 1694.

⁶⁴ *WEG*, April 21, 1887.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, May 20, 1887.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, June 14, 15, 17, 1887.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, June 20, 1887; *Worcester Daily Times*, June 20, 1887.

⁶⁸ *WEG*, June 22, 1887; *WDT*, June 23, 1887.

⁶⁹ *WEG*, June 24, 1887.

June 27 reported, “the bottomers and lasters at Spencer are having great difficulty finding work and as they were being replaced by lasting machine, only outside bottomers were finding work.”⁷⁰ The NELPU appealed for funds to workers nationwide, and condemned the KOL for lack of support of the strike. Despite a mass meeting held in Brockton to aid the lasters and bottomers, where the KOL was again censured for ordering its men to work, the NELPU called off the strike on July 1 and the workers returned under “free shop” status.⁷¹

When DA 30 met in July, it was worried about the shoemakers forming trade unions after the disastrous strikes in Brockton and Worcester County.⁷² The Lasters’ Union replied to the KOL’s assistance statement by pointing out that it had expended \$1 to the KOL’s \$1.24, but that the KOL outnumbered it by 7-1 and owed it over \$3,000.⁷³ By October, after a June 4 meeting in Brockton, National Trade Assembly 216 was at logger-heads with DA 30 concerning dual unionism among shoemakers,⁷⁴ the CLU was forming in Worcester⁷⁵ and the Massachusetts Federation of Labor (AFL) was holding its second convention of the year in Boston.⁷⁶ The *History of the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor 1887-1935* states that

The Massachusetts Federation, however started from the beginning to be the state branch of the American Federation, and it was chartered in the same year that it was organized (1887) the fact that the state branch was in part founded to offset the

⁷⁰ Ibid, June 27, 1887.

⁷¹ Ibid, June 25; July 1, 1887.

⁷² Ibid, July 22, 1887.

⁷³ Ibid, July 27, 1887.

⁷⁴ Ibid, October 6, 1887; Ware, *Labor Movement*, p. 208.

⁷⁵ WEG, October 13, 1887; WDT, Aug. 23, 1887-Oct. 27, 1887.

⁷⁶ *History of the Massachusetts State Federation of Labor 1887-1935*, (Worcester, 1935), p. 18.

influence of the Knights of Labor, then in great prominence, also accounts for its affiliation.⁷⁷

The largest union represented in the organization, with four of the 43 delegates and claiming 13,000 members, was the Lasters' Union.⁷⁸ Indeed at the second convention in October of 1887, some of the resolutions included support for the Lynn lasters in their battle with Patrick P. Sherry as well as for the Brockton lasters in their conflict with William Douglas.⁷⁹ At the proceedings of the 11th General Assembly to the KOL in Minneapolis, October 4-19, 1887, the Worcester County Shoe Strike was addressed. Interestingly, an earlier request dated July 12, 1886 by the leather workers of Salem and Peabody (DA 77) for assistance because of a long lockout was also finally addressed.⁸⁰ The references to the Worcester County Shoe Strike of December, 1886 to June, 1887 are worth noting in that they too appear to be post hoc. DA 30 wanted a boycott of E & H Batcheller, West Brookfield, for its blacklisting of KOL members and pointed out that while this order "had been approved by the GEB some months ago. For some reason it has never been promulgated to the order at large..."⁸¹ DA 30 pointed out that the strike had cost the order between \$60,000 and \$70,000, as well as costing the workers nearly \$2,000,000. The KOL's Report of the Committee on Strikes and Boycotts supported DA 30's call for a boycott of Batcheller Brothers.⁸² Yet this same body supported Powderly's call that the Assistance Fund be abolished and that strikes and boycotts be subject to more discipline by Locals and Districts.⁸³ Ironically, at the same time, DA 30 requested that the KOL help pay the \$9000 per week

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 99.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 18.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 19.

⁸⁰ *Proceedings*, 11th GA KOL, 1887, p. 1303.

⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 1487, 1694.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 1694, 1764.

⁸³ Ibid, pp. 1765-1766.

it needed for its 2700 members who the Worcester strike displaced.⁸⁴ In addition, KOL LA 4979, one of Worcester's largest assemblies, disbanded in 1887 after unsuccessfully trying to organize Washburn & Moen.⁸⁵

By the time that the 12th General Assembly of the KOL met in November 1888 in Indianapolis, DA 30 had been amalgamated into the Massachusetts State Assembly, where it protested changes in district assembly numbering as well as taxation without representation.⁸⁶ The Massachusetts KOL had dropped to under 10,000 members.⁸⁷ The KOL suffered another loss when Powderly attempted to expel H.J. Skeffington from the organization at the convention. He failed to carry the convention in this motion, and he could only reprimand Skeffington, who submitted under protest.⁸⁸ On February 19, 1889, Skeffington called for all assemblies in the shoemakers district to turn in their charters as KOL and to organize as locals of the Boot and Shoe Workers' International Union, which was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor.⁸⁹

Certainly the KOL was a dying force in industrial America, including Massachusetts. Phillip Foner finds a "pattern of betrayal" on the part of Powderly and the GEB towards KOL strikers, starting with the Gould and Meat-Packing Strikes, and continuing in the 1887 Massachusetts Shoe and Reading Strikes, as well as the 1888 Braddock Strike.⁹⁰ The post-strike period saw a slow and at times painful transformation in Worcester from industrial unionism (KOL) to trade unionism (CLU, AFL).

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 1821.

⁸⁵ Saltus, "1888-1938," *Labor News*, Oct. 21, 1938.

⁸⁶ *Proceedings*, 12th GA KOL, (Indianapolis, 1888), p. 19.

⁸⁷ See Table 1.

⁸⁸ Ware, *Labor Movement*, p. 208.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 209.

⁹⁰ Foner, *History of the Labor Movement*, pp. 158-159.

The Worcester Central Labor Union (CLU) was established in 1888 through the efforts of James H. Mellen, a former molder, editor and publisher of the *Worcester Daily Times*, a KOL leader and local and state political figure; and the Molders and Coremakers, then part of LA 7073.⁹¹ On December 13, 1889, P.J. McGuire of the Carpenters Union blamed the failure of the 1887 Shoe Strike on the Knights' mismanagement.⁹² A week later the CLU met again and heard Skeffington addressing the shoemakers-- denouncing the Knights and extolling the CLU.⁹³ Finally in June of 1895, the Boot and Shoe Worker's International Union 33 was formed by a merger of KOL and National Trade Assembly 216 locals as well as the local Lasters' Protective Union.⁹⁴

Trade unionism grew slowly in Worcester. The Building and Trades Council was organized in 1890 and reorganized in 1897, as was the MFL.⁹⁵ When Samuel Gompers visited Worcester in March, 1892, he urged the organization of the city's labor force.⁹⁶ Despite his words, a strike at Washburn & Moen that occurred because of a reduction in wages and men workers being "forced" to train women workers met with minimal success.⁹⁷ Other strikes involved going the nine-hour day for laborers, such as freight handlers, masons, blacksmiths, & granite cutters. The journeymen plumbers struck in 1896 because boys were being hired as helpers. There were union label campaigns as well as successful fights to gain the closed shop at Bowler Brewery and to ensure that local men were hired by the Worcester Consolidated Street Railway Co.⁹⁸ But

⁹¹ Saltus, "1888-1928," *Labor News*, Oct. 21, 1938.

⁹² *WEG*, December 13, 1889.

⁹³ *Ibid*, Dec. 20, 1889.

⁹⁴ Saltus, "1888-1938," *Labor News*, Oct. 21, 1938.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*; BLS, *28th Annual Report*, March, 1898, (Boston, 1898), p. 328.

⁹⁶ *WEG*, March 28, 30, and 31, 1892.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, March 3, 4, 5, 8, 10 & 11, 1892.

⁹⁸ Charles F. Johnson, "The Organized Labor Movement as a Social Force in Worcester, 1888-1913"(Unpublished Masters Thesis, Clark University 1935),

the labor movement of the 1890's at times seemed less optimistic than that of the mid-1880's, perhaps in part because of the depression that occurred between 1893-1897.

As the metal trade industries began to rival the boot and shoe industry in Worcester, new trade unions began to emerge, such as the Iron Molders Union. After the original IMU returned its charter in 1866, the iron molders and coremakers were part of LA 7073 (Iron Molders Assembly) until 1890. The molders then joined the IMU as local 5 and the core-makers became local 15 of the Core-makers International Union until 1903 when the two organizations merged.⁹⁹ Local # 5 was involved in several confrontations with manufacturers in 1899, according to the BLS's 30th Annual Report (March 1900). In January of 1899, the CLU called for stronger organization in view of a pending 1899 strike at the Pero Foundry as well as a prior one there in the fall of 1898. In April of 1899, the IMU called for union recognition, abolition of piecework, and a minimum wage of \$3 per day by May 1. These demands led to a strike at the Worcester Boiler Works and a lockout at Rice, Barton, & Fales. While the national leaders gained union recognition, organization of shop committees, and abolition of piece work, the minimum wage remained at \$2.75. While "some of the best workmen crossed the line at Rice, Barton, and Fales, the "Iron Molders Union paid striking molders their regular weekly wages out of the union's funds."¹⁰⁰

The local molders unions' inability to get full support from the workers perhaps contributed to the local not going out on strike in 1901 since they could reach agreement with a number of local foundrymen. They did go out in 1904 when the National Founders' Association abrogated the New York Agreement of 1899 (which provided for arbitration and annual wage agreements), and management attempted to cut their wages by 25 cents, and after a compromise offer of reduced wages for shorter hours had been rejected.¹⁰¹

pp. 10-19; BLS, *27th Annual Report*, March, 1897 (Boston, 1897), pp. 314-341; BLS, *29th Annual Report*, March 1899 (Boston, 1899), p. 494.

⁹⁹ Saltus, "1888-1938," *Labor News*, October 21, 1938.

¹⁰⁰ BLS, *30th Annual Report*, March 1900 (Boston, 1900), pp. 125, 131, 142-144, 208.

¹⁰¹ Bruce Cohen, "Worcester, Open Shop City: The National Metal Trades

In contrast to the molders, Worcester machinists had refused to join a national strike in 1901, and an attempt by the re-organized CLU to organize Norton in 1901 quickly failed. In addition to the Norton Company's focus on paternalism and ethnic loyalty, the workers who were involved in union organizing were quickly fired.¹⁰² Rosenzweig's thesis thus seems to carry more weight after the Great Worcester County Shoe Strike of 1887 than before as the ethnic and industrial base changed. The "Protestant Partnership" of Yankees and Swedes would dominate the economic and political scene by 1900.

Attempts to organize labor in Worcester brought mixed but encouraging results in the antebellum period, including the successful fight made by the city's metal trade workers to gain the ten-hour day through strikes. In the post-bellum period, James H. Mellen continued the fight to preserve and expand the Ten-Hour Act (1874), in his capacity as a KOL leader, state and local government representative, and newspaper editor. Indeed it was Mellen in his early 20th-century short-lived journal, *Mellen's Magazine*, who wrote about the gallant but ill-fated strike of 250 molders in Worcester in 1904-1905 to hold onto the ability to gain better wages through collective bargaining and arbitration.¹⁰³

It is important to recognize that Worcester was more than a "scab-hole" in the late 19th-century. In many ways, the city was in tune with the growing labor movement in the state and nation. The city and the county were very much part of the story of the Knights of St. Crispin, the Labor Reform League/Party, the Knights of Labor, the CLU, and the Massachusetts Federation of Labor.

The Knights of St. Crispin was an organization with a substantial Worcester area leader and member base. When the KOSC was organized in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in May of 1867, the leader was Newell Daniels, a native of Milford, Massachusetts. Not only were many of the Crispins from Massachusetts, especially from the Lynn and Worcester

Association and the Molders' Strike of 1919-1920," p. 173 in K. Fones-Wolf and M. Kaufman (editors), *Labor in Mass: Selected Essays* (Westfield, MA, 1900).

¹⁰² Bruce Cohen, "The Worcester Machinists' Strike of 1915," *Historical Journal Massachusetts*, 16 (Summer, 1988), 155-156.

¹⁰³ See Cohen, "Worcester Open Shop," p. 173.

areas, but 1200 of them went out on strike in Worcester in 1870. While this strike was partially successful, the “first” KOSC collapsed by 1874 and a “second” KOSC, totally Massachusetts based, operated between 1875 and 1878.

Not only was the state hospitable to labor reform leagues and parties in the post-Civil War period, but such activity was enhanced by the cyclical, even seasonal, economic and social distress that led to layoffs and wage reductions in industries as diverse as boot and shoe and the metal trades. In addition, technology was speeding up production and reducing the number of workers needed in these industries.

While in Worcester, little headway was made by the workers in substantial metal trades firms, such as Washburn & Moen, in stemming wage reductions, as well as in reducing the hours of labor through the ten and nine-hour movements. There was some success by workers in the building and trades areas as indicated earlier in this paper. Unionization of these workers can be seen in the composition of the Worcester Central Labor Union, which was established in 1888.

However, the most dynamic labor activity in the 1880’s occurred in the boot and shoe industry, and was carried out by the Knights of Labor and the Lasters’ Protective Union, sometimes jointly as in Brockton and Lynn in the mid-1880s. The unions were able to force the manufacturers in 1885-1886 to accept the “Philadelphia Rules,” “which included: employer’s right to hire and fire, but not to fire on the basis of union membership, the ten-hour day, the joint committee of arbitration, the outlawing of strikes and lockouts, the standard scale for piece workers, and the settlement of day and week work wages by individual agreement.”¹⁰⁴

The gains made by the KOL and the LPU were eroded quickly in 1887 when a lockout/strike was forced upon them in Worcester County by nineteen manufacturers’ commitment to individual contracts and the “free shop.” While DA 30 of the KOL supported strike actions by the local assemblies of the KOL, the KOL’s national board was committed to arbitration. This arbitration in the “Great Worcester County Shoe Strike” of 1887 meant conceding to the employers’ demands and ending the KOL’s role in the boot and shoe industry in the county and also the state.

¹⁰⁴ Ware, *Labor Movement*, p. 205.

Many of the workers who left the KOL helped form the CLU, and through membership in the LPU joined the MFL (AFL). Worcester's industrial unionism was replaced by trade unionism in the building trades and transportation. In the metal trades, there were attempts to reorganize the molders through the CLU as the IMU #5. Strikes in 1899 and 1904 brought limited success, as did attempts to organize the machinists. The Machinists' Strike of 1915 and the Molders' Strike of 1919-1920 ultimately failed because of ethnic differences, employers' hard-ball tactics, and paternalism.¹⁰⁵ Worcester's metal trades would not be successfully organized until the passage of a National Labor Relations Act and the emergence of a new industrial union, the CIO, in 1935.¹⁰⁶

In some ways the labor struggles of the 1930's and 1940's of the CIO to organize the metal trades of Worcester would mirror the similar struggles of the KOSC and KOL in the 1870's and 1880's. In conclusion, Worcester's labor organization followed a pattern of increasing success after the Civil War, then of bitter defeat in 1887, followed by a long period of open shop and anti-union domination (1887-1935) and finally the breakthroughs of the 1930's and 1940's. Rosenzweig's depiction of the "middle-period" is valid, but he seems to have underestimated labor's strength in the 1870's and the 1880's. Finally, by ending the labor part of his history in 1920, he does not see or consider the industrial unionism that was reborn in the city and county from 1935 on. Despite P.J. McGuire's words of 1889, Worcester would not remain a "scab-hole" as non-union firms such as U.S. Steel (formerly Washburn & Moen) and Wyman-Gordon would be organized for the first time.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, "Open Shop," pp. 197-198.

¹⁰⁶ See Bruce Cohen, "Labor and the State in Worcester: Organization of the Metal Trades, 1937-1971," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 20 (Summer 1992), pp. 160-177.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 171-172.

Table 1

Massachusetts Knights of Labor

1879	DA.	30	405
1880	DA	30	521
1881	DA	30	401
1882	DA	30	210
1883		30	1295, 1579, 1414 (# of assemblies reporting varied)
1884	DA	30	6112
1885	DA	30	7536
	DA	77	2517
1886	DA	30	81,191
	DA	77	10,838
1887	DA	30	20,628 (Oct. 1887)
	DA	77	1,122
1888	DA	30	16,4421 (as of Jan. 1, 1888, later that month DA 30 is reconstituted as MA State Assembly 9,179
	MA State Assembly		
	DA	216	6,069*

*In February, 1889 the Shoemaker's National Trade Assembly (DA 216) left the KOL and formed the Boot and Shoe Workers International Union affiliated with AF/NTA 198.

Table 1 Sources: *Knights of Labor Proceedings of General Assembly 1879-1888*, DA 30 *Quarterly, Annual Reports 1879-1886*, and J. Garlock, compiler *Guide to the Local Assemblies of the KOL* (Westport, CT, 1982), pp. 184-207, 596-597, 602-603, 634-645, 648-651, 656-659, 668-669, 676-677.