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Boston Eight Hour Men, New York Marxists and the Emergence of the International Labor Union: Prelude to the AFL

Kenneth Fones-Wolf

The International Labor Union, founded in 1878, represented a transitional phase in the transformation of American trade unionism from the Marxist International Workingmen's Association to the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Focusing on such immigrant leaders as J.P. McDonnell, Friedrich Sorge, and Samuel Gompers, historians have described the European origins of the Federation. Indeed, in the International Labor Union, these leaders first promoted the principles that came to dominate the American labor movement in the 1890s: concentration on immediate goals, avoidance of partisan politics, and reliance on the economic power of trade unions. Few historians, however, have studied the role of native Americans in the emergence of this transitional phase, despite Gompers' assertion that the organization attempted to subordinate potentially divisive European arguments for "an American movement under American control."¹

For this native leadership, Marxist trade unionists turned to Ira Steward and George McNeill, the leaders of the Boston Eight Hour League. As early as 1872, Steward and McNeill exerted influence on the Marxist immigrants centered in New York City. Over the next five years, these two leaders played a critical role in enticing trade unionists away from what they perceived as the dangers of premature political action and the problems of future rather than immediate goals. When the coalition Workingmen's Party of the United States turned to political action in the turmoil of 1877, it was the Boston eight-hour men who saved the trade union wing and the English-language newspaper of the Party from capture by political socialists. In the International Labor Union, they helped develop and legitimize what became the American trade union philosophy.² To understand the success of the early appeal of the AFL, one must grasp its ideological connections with native American workers.

In the 1860s, Steward emerged as one of the most eminent labor theorists in the country. Born in 1831, he was apprenticed as a machinist but lost his job when he agitated for shorter hours. From that time forward Steward was an advocate of the eight-hour workday. A man with strong religious and egalitarian beliefs, the young machinist became involved in antislavery politics, and the Radical Republican Civil War rhetoric left a lasting impact on his thought. In later years, Steward would continually refer to abolitionist speeches on equality in order to drive home ideas as he criticized “wage slavery.”

Following the Civil War, Steward developed a philosophy based on the eight-hour workday, an established principle in American working-class agitation. In his union, the Machinists and Blacksmiths, and through his own eight-hour leagues, Steward transformed this issue into a general critique of the capitalist wage-labor system. He argued that manufacturers robbed wage-earners by working them long hours and thus deprived them of the chance for a better standard of living. Steward reasoned that reducing the hours of labor to eight, would cultivate the wage-earner’s tastes and give him the incentive to demand more education and higher wages. The economy could still prosper, he argued, because technological advances allowed production to outstrip population growth. In fact, increased production made greater consumption by wage-earners an essential factor in keeping with output. But according to this line of reasoning, the capitalist only robbed wage-earners of the ability to consume and blocked innovative technology.

Certain that capitalists could offer no real solution, Steward urged workers to organize to shorten their workday and increase their wages, thereby reducing the margin of surplus labor. Steward hoped that such demands would eventually put the manufacturers out of business, which would provide the opportunity for a worker-controlled economy, fully utilizing technology for social production. The immediate action Steward proposed in the early 1860s centered around eight-hour laws. However, failures in labor politics in 1865-66, and the unwillingness of governors in New York and Illinois to enforce existing eight-hour laws began to convince Steward that something more was needed to achieve the eight-hour workday.³

At the same time, Steward’s firmest ally in the eight-hour agitation, George McNeill, linked the eight-hour ideal to the Boston trade union movement. Born in 1837, McNeill worked in a textile mill and as a shoemaker before becoming a printer in Boston. Like Steward, he learned about the labor movement at the same time he was developing oratorical skills in the temperance and antislavery campaigns. During the 1860s, McNeill became New England’s most renowned labor agitator, combining fiery rhetoric with a moral dedication reminiscent of the abolitionists. McNeill’s organizational abilities enabled Steward to gain a prominent position in the labor movement.⁴

Developments in trade unionism added to Steward's drift away from legislative solutions. In 1866 the successful eight-hour strike of the Boston and New York shipworkers encouraged him. Two years later, the New York building trades brought construction in the city to a halt before insufficient funds broke their own eight-hour strike.⁵ The solidarity other workers evinced in the cause of the shorter workday further led Steward away from his legislative panacea, as did the promotion of the greenback issue. In 1867 the prominent National Labor Union began supporting currency reform as the means of helping workers finance small cooperative shops. Scorning what he called a "hot-house" reform issue, Steward urged labor leaders to attack capitalism directly by adopting the tactics of calling "for one thing at a time; [something] simple and universal enough in its scope, to interest and comprehend all." Only the eight-hour day fit those criteria, reasoned Steward.⁶

In Boston in the late 1860s, Steward and McNeill battled against other greenbackers. Ezra Heywood and former abolitionist Wendell Phillips encouraged Massachusetts workers to elect a labor ticket on the platform of currency reform. The eight-hour men fought these reformers, claiming that currency, banks, tariffs and taxes "are not laborers' questions, because they have no appreciable relation to the wage system." Phillips and Heywood, however, emerged as temporary victors in the contest, and behind the electoral strength of the Knights of St. Crispin, they elected twenty-three candidates to the state legislature. Steward and McNeill organized an ineffectual eight-hour league, and only McNeill's appointment as deputy commissioner of the state bureau of labor statistics prevented their total isolation.⁷

From 1869 to 1872 the Boston eight-hour men remained a minor force in the labor movement, except in New York. There, a body of Marxists in the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) were impressed by Steward's understanding of labor problems. IWA Secretary Friedrich Sorge wrote of Steward and McNeill: "they give a refreshing example of the manly bearing of American (not immigrant) workers and show progress in the conception of real conditions."⁸ This was especially important because the IWA in America was struggling for control with an erratic reform group led by Victoria Woodhull and William West. The German Marxist section of the IWA was also under fire for being out of touch with native American workers. Consequently, it was essential to an American labor group which advocated principles consistent with Marxist trade unionism. When trade unions resumed their appeal for the eight-hour workday in 1871, IWA German sections drew heavily on Steward's American critique of capitalism. Steward likewise moved closer to the Marxists when IWA member Victor Drury attacked Ezra Heywood's greenback ideas in a New York debate. In September 1871 the New Yorkers invited Steward to speak to a massive eight-hour demonstration. The following year, Steward applauded the New York eight-hour strike, and claimed that these unionists represented "the manhood and conscience, the brains and hope of their class." New York trade unionist read and adopted the resolutions of the Boston Eight Hour League and sent representatives to the League's annual convention.⁹

McNeill's hope that Massachusetts workers would organize strikes on the eight hour issue died with the failure in New York. The Boston eight-hour men suffered a further setback when Wendell Phillips moved to depose McNeill from the labor bureau, arguing that he had devoted himself to eight-hour agitation and had ignored other reforms. A bitter feud with Steward made Phillips particularly anxious to remove McNeill. Steward and McNeill felt this to be another example of the treachery of political reformers and responded by vilifying their opponents in McNeill's parting issue of the bureau's report. Similarly, Steward's supporters in the IWA condemned the removal.¹⁰

As Steward drifted further from political reformers in practical measures, he moved closer to Marxist trade unionists in his economic theories. In the 1873 Massachusetts labor bureau report his article "Poverty" wove into labor thought the Republican traditions of free labor with the Marxian concept of surplus value. For Steward, the exchange of goods and money was not the cause of poverty, as the greenbackers argued; the exploitation of workers rested in the production process. He compared the wage system to slavery, noting that although wage-slavery exploited merely part of the product of a man's labor, "in point of fact, larger fortunes are made out of the products of wage-labor than out of the products of slavery."¹¹ Steward no longer viewed eight hours as the "millenium," but unlike Marx, he saw it as the major step toward giving every man the full product of his free labor. He also remained wedded to his republican conception of a small, negative role for the state, thus differing from many Marxists. But his emphasis on voluntaristic class organizations meshed well with Marxist trade unionism, and eight hours continued to serve as a flexible issue through which labor leaders could appeal to American workers.¹²

During the summer of 1875 a campaign to aid striking textile workers in Fall River, Massachusetts, thrust the eight-hour men into active alliance with the Marxists. The depression of 1873 which worsened already poor conditions had led textile workers to organize protective associations. After successive wage cuts "the embers of discontent, which had been smouldering. . . burst suddenly into blaze." On August 1, 1875, despite a warning from George Gunton, a young immigrant textile organizer, that the operatives were not financially prepared, the workers went out for eight weeks. New York Marxists, the Boston Eight Hour League and operatives throughout Massachusetts raised funds, but to no avail. Finally on September 17, hungry and out of money, the workers marched to the city hall to demand bread. The Massachusetts militia, called out to suppress the strike, prevented them from reaching the building, proving to Steward that the manufacturers "and their operative classes are living in war relations with each other." When no investigation followed the incident, he wrote "that the Captialist classes and the State authorities are a unit in all that concerns labor." Beaten and discouraged, the operatives went back to the mills, accepting a ten percent reduction. Gunton, called a "tall talker" for his opposition to the strike, left for Boston to work with McNeill and Steward.¹³

During the struggle Friedrich Sorge, a New York Marxist, opened a correspondence with the eight-hour men. With the 1873 depression, unions had declined and Greenbackism once again challenged wage and hour issues for predominance in the labor movement. Seeing the eight-hour men continually fighting for working-class gains, Marxists hoped they would participate in an effort to unify all genuine class-conscious movements. Indeed, Steward and McNeill represented, for the IWA, the only native American labor ideologists who offered anything of importance to a critique of capitalism. The IWA likewise had a particular attraction for Steward and McNeill because it had emphatically denounced all political parties of the ruling classes, including those supporting currency reform.¹⁴

Yet the IWA was unable even to purge itself of political activists. Lassallean socialists (disciples of German socialist Ferdinand Lassalle) stressed political agitation and control of the state through universal suffrage. Led by P.J. McGuire and Adolph Strasser, Lassalleans came to the fore shortly after the Panic of 1873. Both leaders were trade unionists but felt that political organizing could publicize the activities of trade unions and also capture control of the government. Furthermore, with the decline in union membership following the depression, Strasser and McGuire reasoned that government intervention was the only method of combating the power of the capitalists. When McGuire led an agitation for public work jobs for the unemployed in February 1874, the police of New York brutally suppressed the demonstrations. This proved to the Lassalleans the necessity of forming a workers' party and gaining control of the state. Later in 1874, they organized the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party, splitting with the IWA. The members of the IWA who continued to place unionism above politics formed the United Workers of America. These splits decimated the IWA and weakened the socialist and trade union movements in the United States.¹⁵

In 1876, however, the two groups began to seek out means of cooperating. Lassalleans of the Social Democratic Workingmen's Party sent out invitations to both Marxists and the Boston Eight Hour League, asking them to join in forming a united working-class movement. At an April labor convention in Pittsburgh, Social Democrats McGuire and Strasser helped trade unionists battle against greenbackism. Only a month later, the party held a convention in Chicago where it gave special attention to discussing the large role that trade unions must play in conquering the capitalist state. In June 1876, W.G.H. Smart, founder of the party's Boston branch, made an attempt to include Steward and McNeill in the class-conscious unity movement when he wrote that "we gladly clasp hands with the men who have done so much to enlighten the American people in the great truths that underlie the labor movement."¹⁶

The efforts of the Lassalleans led to a Union Congress in July 1876 which brought together the diverse strands of the class-conscious labor movement in America under the temporary leadership of the trade unionists. Despite a heavy socialist representation, trade union ideas dominated the Congress.

The first principle stated that "political liberty without economical independence is but an empty phrase," and the new united group would "in the first place direct our efforts to the economical question." In an effort to avoid reformers and "quacks," they formed the Workingmen's Party of the United States to confine politics to particular measures and to organize trade unions. The party pushed tenement investigations, labor bureaus, the abolition of child and convict labor, employer liability for accidents, the end of conspiracy laws against labor, and the public ownership of industry under the control of trade unions. But the eight-hour workday was the first plank. The party also changed the name of its newspaper from *Socialist* to *Labor Standard* and appointed the young Marxist trade unionist, J.P. McDonnell, as editor.¹⁷ Steward refrained from joining hands with the party because of its reputation as a communist organization, but his only complaint with its principles was "there are too many."¹⁸

After the Union Congress, the *Labor Standard* courted the eight-hour men and printed Steward's article "Poverty," along with his glowing approval of the paper's editorial policy. McDonnell, who was Marx's assistant before coming to America, emphatically directed the paper toward trade unionism. He wrote that the "workingman who understands his interests will keep away from the politician and the Ballot Box. His politics will be labor." The *Labor Standard* carried articles about McNeill's work in New England, and Gunton wrote weekly letters to the paper covering the activities of the Boston Eight Hour League.¹⁹

Dissension within the ranks of the Workingmen's Party of the United States during the autumn of 1876 kept Steward and McNeill from joining with the unity movement. Despite the trade union emphasis of the party, P.J. McGuire almost immediately began agitating for independent political action. Similarly, party machinery in New York and Chicago was still in the hands of Lassalleans. McDonnell, editing the *Labor Standard*, ran into trouble with the large political wing of the party when he so staunchly opposed electoral agitation. The party threatened to suspend the editor and his paper, and many contributors withheld their money.²⁰

Throughout the winter of 1876-1877, Steward and McNeill encouraged Marxist trade unionists to resist the temptation of politics. The continuing economic crisis armed Lassalleans with strong arguments for opposing mere economic agitation. McGuire, for example, claimed that workers could not afford to pay the dues required to build powerful unions. Indeed, labor papers noted that wages were extremely low, and they depicted unions as neglected and weak.²¹ Steward and the Marxists had difficulty disputing the Lassalleans, especially when many political activists also wanted to use trade unionism. But Steward and the trade-union wing countered with the enormous working-class appeal of the eight-hour workday. The *Labor Standard* commented that eight hours was "of present and future importance, it is easier to carry than any other demand" of the platform of the Workingmen's Party of the United States, "and it is of greater immediate benefit to the

workers as a class." McDonnell added that "any action but that for the immediate improvement of our condition was reactionary and false."²²

By March 1877, trade unionists were seriously at odds with the political activists. Lassallean Adolph Strasser confided to Steward that he and Sorge, a Marxist, were not on speaking terms. McGuire also showed disdain for the gradualist union approach, encouraging workers to agitate for the abolition of the wage system "and not waste too much effort upon measures which the capitalists will gladly grant, rather than surrender the system in which they are entrenched." Steward wrote to Sorge that Lassalleans resembled the political reformers who destroyed the Massachusetts labor bureau, and claimed that such men had "always been a vicious fact more to be dreaded than anything the capitalists can do." The eight-hour leader felt that political actions served only to diffuse the direct confrontation between labor and capital. Regardless of the political party, the leadership and issues inevitably came to be dominated by men outside of the working class, he contended. Steward was further angered at the attempt to undermine McDonnell and the *Labor Standard*.²³

The great railroad uprisings in the summer of 1877 temporarily eased tensions within the Workingmen's Party. Although there was little violence in New England, for a week "New York City was armed to the teeth, ready for an outbreak." Philadelphia Lassalleans joined with trade unionists for massive demonstrations and confrontations with the city police. In Pittsburgh, strikers destroyed property and over thirty died. Samuel Gompers later recalled that the workers' rebellion "was a declaration of protest in the name of American manhood against the conditions that nullified the rights of American citizens."²⁴ In New York Lassalleans shared the speaker's platform with trade unionists as both sides hoped to capitalize on the activity. The Boston Eight Hour League openly declared support for the party, bringing to fruition the unionists' long struggle to include the eight-hour men in their programs.²⁵

The cooperation between the political and trade union wings, however, did not survive the summer, and eight-hour men played a large role in dividing the movement. As McDonnell appealed to "join again under the old trades' union banner," Lassalleans in Chicago and Boston attempted to forge an alliance with the Greenback Party, which centered its agitation around currency reform. The political forces in Boston endorsed the Greenback nominee for governor of Massachusetts, Steward's old enemy, Wendell Phillips. McGuire in New Haven and Adolph Douai in Chicago likewise lent support to Greenbackers.²⁶ The eight-hour men pulled back from the Workingmen's Party in protest. Gunton sent a ringing attack to "those now crying for immediate political action." He claimed that the Eight Hour League had "raised more money" and had done "more political work for labor than any other organization" when others never "lifted a finger" to help. Steward also helped McDonnell move the *Labor Standard* to Boston in the fall of 1877 in an effort to escape the Lassalleans. The subsequent withdrawal of some of the English-speaking members helped finalize the party split.²⁷

Greenback-Labor candidates failed miserably in the 1877 elections, reinforcing trade union opinions regarding politics. McNeill, speaking for the unionists, warned the workingmen "that they should not again be made the dupes of political tricksters" and that "they should not again be hurried into hasty nominations and certain defeat." Vindicated by political disasters, trade unionists formed the International Labor Union. Concomitantly, McGuire, Douai, and Philip Van Patten of Chicago organized the Lassalleans into the Socialistic Labor Party. This party's platform was not significantly new, but its program proclaimed that "the organization of National and International Trade and Labor Unions upon a Socialistic basis is an absolute necessity."²⁸

Steward and McNeill, however, steered a course away from the political agitators. Fifteen years of experience in the labor movement had taught them the dangers of independent political action. No matter where workingmen turned to vote, they ultimately ended by forming alliances with middle-class reformers and by supporting divisive middle-class issues. Steward and McNeill thus helped form the "little group that refused to subordinate the trade union to any 'ism' or political 'reform.'" These labor leaders taught "that the trade union was the fundamental agency through which [workers] could achieve economic power, which would in turn give [them] social and political power."²⁹

The International Labor Union (ILU), formed by the trade union wing in February 1878, embodied the ideological developments of both the Marxists and the eight-hour men. There was a degree of compromise, and certain sections of the ILU platform were written by the different groups, but the class-conscious unionism fit neatly into the thinking of both. The first section of the ILU's principles was a short Marxian analysis of capitalist society. The declarations, on the other hand, were taken directly from the Boston Eight Hour League. They claimed that political liberty could not survive the wage system, and that "civilization means the diffusion of knowledge and the distribution of wealth." Combining his republican ideals of a free, equalitarian society with his radical (almost Marxian) political economy made Steward an important link between the immigrant-influenced trade unionists and native American workers.³⁰

The first step in attacking the capitalist wage-system, according to the ILU, was the eight-hour workday. The methods listed for carrying out these objectives came from trade unionists and concerned the organization of workers. The voluntaristic nature of these worker organizations, however, was something learned from both elements, and later taken to the American Federation of Labor by ILU members McNeill, McDonnell, and Gompers.³¹ Thus the articulation of ILU principles: avoidance of partisan politics, concentration on immediate goals, and reliance on the economic power of trade unions, foreshadowed the principles that would dominate American labor a decade later.

Yet even before the agitators could begin their work, personalities clashed, posing problems for the ILU. McDonnell sought to leave Massachusetts as soon as possible because he chafed at receiving from Steward criticism on the content of his paper. In the ILU, feelings of distrust arose because of McDonnell's departure. The eight-hour contingent also began declining with the March 1878 death of Mary Steward, Ira's wife. She had been a source of strength for the movement since its inception and had coined the famous jingle:

Whether you work by the piece or by the day,
Decreasing the hours, increases the pay.

Steward's work steadily diminished after the death of his wife, and he came to feel increasingly bitter toward his opponents in the labor movement.³²

The path of the ILU led back to Fall River. Throughout 1876 and 1877, McNeill had made frequent trips to textile towns to hold the unions together following the failure of the 1875 strike. When he became president of the ILU in 1878, the operatives joined in anticipation of again facing the owners, and in May, 25,000 Fall River workers demonstrated for the nine-hour day. Instead, the summer brought layoffs, unemployment, and wage cuts. Gunton moved to Fall River to help the operatives prepare for a strike and he began publishing his own version of the *Labor Standard*.³³

In June 1878, McDonnell wrote that the ILU "is determined to direct its fire upon one point in the citadel of capital until a breach is made in the wall at that place." The Paterson, New Jersey, weavers' strike was that point. McDonnell left Boston for Paterson, where he spent the next three months organizing textile workers for the ILU and establishing the *Paterson Labor Standard*. In October, he went on trial for calling non-striking weavers "scabs," but McNeill went to Paterson and he ran the paper in his absence. After the strikers prevented Paterson manufacturers from recruiting strikebreakers, the holdout ended with a victory for the operatives. During the long struggle, McDonnell made Paterson the center of ILU action; his paper replaced Gunton's as the official organ of the ILU.³⁴ Steward, already distrustful of McDonnell, began questioning the loyalty of McNeill when the ILU president did not block the move.

Events in Chicago helped deepen the distrust in the ILU. There, a movement to bring Lassalleans and trade unionists together led Chicago socialists to seek an alliance with Steward. The Chicago local of the Socialistic Labor Party began publishing a journal, the *Socialist*, which ran Steward's quotes alongside those of Karl Marx. In 1879 Chicago Lassalleans invited Steward to speak at their July 4 demonstration calling for an eight-hour workday. Steward's trip appeared to be a success for the ILU. He proclaimed that on "the preliminary issue of eight hours, therefore, . . . we join hands with all, regardless of politics, nationality, color, religion, or sex." This won praise from Douai, who kept Steward in Chicago for weeks delivering speeches on labor.³⁵

Steward's cooperation with the Lassalleans, however, furthered ILU dissension. He had been the most adamant opponent of the political activists, but now he claimed that the ILU and the Socialistic Labor Party could "stand as allies for effecting the passage of the Eight-hour law." Steward also did not defend McDonnell when the *Socialist* wrote that the Irishman's chief accomplishment in the labor movement had been in creating strife. This, while McDonnell assisted a strike effort begun in Fall River, Steward cooperated with his enemies in Chicago. On Steward's return, the eight-hour leader appealed to Sorge to assure McDonnell of his loyalty, but not even Sorge could ease the tensions developing between the two *Labor Standards*.³⁶

To add to ILU problems, in the summer of 1879 Fall River workers prepared to confront the textile owners. As the conditions improved in the trade in May 1879 the operative pushed for a raise. Efforts at arbitration broke down, and the operatives gave a strike notice for June 26 although they had only \$1500 in their treasury. When the spinners went out on June 26, they already had contacted the ILU in other cities in order to raise funds.³⁷ Spinners' leader Robert Howard recalled that the ILU rendered the strike "good service, perhaps bringing directly and indirectly about two thousand dollars into the spinners' funds." Such hard work, however, could not avert the impoverishment of the workers, and on October 16, almost four months after the walkout began, the operatives trudged back to the mills without a raise.³⁸

In February of 1880 without a reprieve the already struggling ILU sent its organizers — Gunton, McNeill, McDonnell and Gompers — to Cohoes, New York, for another strike. The Cohoes strike, which failed because "there was more spirit than organization or money," also brought to a head the personal animosities wracking the ILU. McDonnell was partially inactive in March 1880 because he began serving a jail sentence for libel. McNeill, however, sided with the Irishman and again moved to Paterson to edit his paper. Meanwhile, Steward and Gunton began to withdraw from trade union activity after three successive defeats, reverting to old methods of agitation, including political and legislative actions. They made plans to call a convention for a uniform ten-hour law independent of the ILU. McDonnell and McNeill, wanting to maintain the ILU's leadership in organizing, ignored Steward's call for the meeting; instead they planned a trade union conference on the shorter workday. Steward and Gunton, outraged at this "infamy," pulled out of the ILU, and Steward made plans to leave for Chicago. He was so incensed at the turn of events that he condemned McNeill, whom he once called the "prince of organizers."³⁹

It was actually because McNeill was a prince of organizers that Steward's eight-hour philosophy became so important to the formation of the American Federation of Labor. Indeed, McNeill did not withdraw from the path of voluntaristic trade unionism that he and Steward had mapped out in the 1860s and 1870s; rather he clung to the economically-oriented class organizations that would later culminate in the AFL. In 1877, Steward had noted that McNeill "was a good reader of men," and that he "gets along splendidly with ig-

norant men, and is equally at home with the highest."⁴⁰ By contrast, Steward had few of these graces in a career marked by bitter personal feuds and organizational splits caused by a nagging impatience. Although his philosophy had a great appeal to native workers, it was primarily McNeill's tireless agitation that linked the issue to the trade union. Although AFL leaders constantly referred to Steward's political economy as the most important American contribution to labor thought, it was left to McNeill to legitimize the issue in the trade union movement. In June 1880, Steward permanently left Boston, residing in Illinois only three years before dying. Gunton took over as the major eight-hour thinker, but disillusioned with trade unionism, he developed Steward's theories toward a labor-capital harmony. As the eight-hour movement entered its third decade, it relied on McNeill for its vitality.⁴¹

In the 1880s, eight hours served as the crucial organizing issue for the AFL. Trade unionists, who had learned that "need and betterment could best be served by mobilizing and controlling economic power" during their years with the ILU, used eight hours as a major part of that mobilization. From the ILU failures, AFL leaders also discovered that unionism "had to be put on a business basis in order to develop power adequate to secure better working conditions."⁴² Many socialists also followed these ILU leaders into the trade union movement. P.J. McGuire and Adolph Strasser built two of the most successful unions in the 1880s. Knights of Labor leader Joseph R. Buchanan likewise recalled that in "after years my revolutionary views gave place to a belief in the doctrine of social evolution through the practical channel of opportunism."⁴³ The appeal of voluntaristic labor organizations that could offer immediate improvement in conditions for workers became attractive after economic depressions in the 1870s and 1880s.

Indeed many labor leaders came to the AFL combining Steward's ideas of the republican commonwealth, his radical political economy, and the practical lessons he helped teach in organizing voluntaristic class organizations. When asked what labor wanted in the 1890s, Gompers could quickly answer — eight hours. Because of Steward and McNeill, the AFL president recognized it to be a vital first step toward reaching an American working-class goal that would guarantee the worker the full product of his labor.⁴⁴ If trade unionists felt the eight-hour workday so crucial for achieving working-class unity, it was Steward and McNeill who made it so. And it was in the ILU that Steward and McNeill firmly entrenched this traditional American issue in the thought of the heirs of Marxist trade unionism.

NOTES

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4. Arthur Mann, *Yankee Reformers in an Urban Age* (Cambridge, 1954), pp. 179-81; George McNeill, "My First Experience in a Strike," *American Federationist* (Oct., 1901), p. 403; (Boston) *Knight*, Aug. 7, 1886.
5. *Daily Evening Voice*, June 7, July 3, 1866; Foner, *History*, I, 379-81.
6. *Daily Evening Voice*, Aug. 1, 1867.
7. "Resolutions Presented at the Convention of the Boston Eight Hour League, Wednesday, May 29, 1872," typescript in Steward Papers; Friedrich A. Sorge, *Labor Movement in the United States: A History of the American Working Class from Colonial Times to 1890*, ed. by Philip Foner and Brewster Chamberlin (Westport, 1977), pp. 130-33.
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9. Stuart Bruce Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896* (Westport, 1973), pp. 56-78; *American Workman*, June 17, 1871; *Sun* (New York), May 28, 1872, May 30, 1872; "Resolutions Presented... May 29, 1872," Steward Papers.
10. Samuel Bernstein, ed. *Papers of the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, 1872-1876* (Milano, 1961), p. 501.
11. Steward, "Poverty," in Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, *Fourth Annual Report* (Boston, 1873), p. 411.
12. Montgomery, *Beyond Equality*, pp. 256-60.
13. Robert Howard, "Progress in the Textile Trades," in George McNeill, ed. *The Labor Movement: The Problem of To-day* (New York, 1888), pp. 220-225; "Resolutions of the Boston Eight Hour League, May 31, 1876," typescript, p. 5, Steward Papers.
14. Kaufman, *Gompers*, pp. 35, 43-57, 81.
15. Foner, *History*, I, 445-50.
16. *National Labor Tribune*, April 29, 1876; *Socialist* (N.Y.), April-June, 1876.
17. *Proceedings of the Union Congress, 19-22 July 1876* (New York, 1876); *Socialist*, July 29, 1876.
18. Steward to Sorge, Dec. 1876, Steward Papers.
19. *Labor Standard*, Aug. 26, 1876, Sept. 30, 1876, Oct. 7, 1876.

20. Kaufman, *Gompers*, pp. 80-83.
21. *National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 6, 1877; *Irish World*, Sept. 30, 1876.
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