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Chapter Author: Gerald Friedman

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# Dividing Labor

## Urban Politics and Big-City Construction in Late-Nineteenth- Century America

Gerald Friedman

### 16.1 Labor Divided

American workers have never formed class-wide institutions like those found in the labor movements of other western countries. Instead, America's working class is fragmented, leading to wide wage differentials in different industries and occupations. Since at least 1900, wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers have been significantly greater in the United States than in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Workers in construction crafts especially have enjoyed a wide premium over other workers. From their privileged position they formed the backbone of a conservative American trade union movement that fought hard to defend their privileges against the rest of the labor force as well as against their employers.

Some have attributed sharp divisions among American workers to exogenous conditions, including ethnic and racial distinctions.<sup>2</sup> Such an interpretation fails as a historical explanation, however, because it assumes unchanging characteristics and attitudes. It cannot, therefore, explain variations in working-class solidarity such as the rise and precipitous decline in organized labor solidarity in the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> I take a different approach. Instead of treating divisions as exogenously determined, I argue that divisions were fostered by

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1. Henry Phelps-Brown, *The Inequality of Pay* (Berkeley, 1977), p. 73.

2. See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, "Radicalism or Reformism: The Sources of Working Class Protest," *American Political Science Review*, 77 (Mar. 1983), pp. 1-18; Gwendolyn Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development* (Ithaca, 1986).

3. See, for example, Eric Foner, "Why Is There No Socialism in America?" *History Workshop*, 17 (Spring 1984), pp. 57-80; Richard J. Oestreicher, *Solidarity and Fragmentation: Working People and Class Consciousness in Detroit, 1875-1900* (Urbana, 1986).

politicians who sought to undermine working-class challenges to their power. Using the example of construction workers around 1900, I argue that the extraordinarily large wage differential they received in big cities was fueled by a strategy pursued by urban political machines to head off radical labor movements by promoting urban public works, thereby cultivating allies among construction craft unions.

## 16.2 Levels and Determinants of Wage Differentials

Big-city construction workers were paid wages far beyond those of workers in other industries or in smaller towns. To measure the effect of city size on wages, I have estimated regressions of the average wage paid to workers in different occupations in a locality using data from the 1904 Report of the Commissioner of Labor.<sup>4</sup> In addition to industry and regional dummy variables, I include variables designed to control for supply- and demand-side influences on wages: the proportion of immigrants and blacks in the population, the locality's rate of population growth, and a city cost of living index for 1890.<sup>5</sup>

In a labor market free of distortions, labor mobility should equalize real wages within an occupation across regions.<sup>6</sup> After controlling for industry, ethnicity, race, establishment size, and prices, city size should measure the residual impact of urban disamenities and political influences on wages. Assuming that a worker's industry and skill are not associated with preferences for city living, the interaction of city population with skill and industry variables tests whether the impact of urban politics on wages differed in the construction and manufacturing sectors, and for skilled and unskilled workers.

The regressions are all highly significant and demonstrate that even within an increasingly efficient national labor market, big-city construction had a special place in the American working class. As others have found, wages were higher in the West and lower in the South than in the Northeast or Midwest. Regional differentials, however, were largely due to the smaller size of

4. U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, 1904: Wages and Hours of Labor* (Washington, D.C., 1905).

5. City population characteristics are from the U.S. Census Office, *Eleventh Census, 1890: Population* (Washington, D.C., 1895), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 524–58; U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Census of Population* (Washington, D.C., 1901), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 609–94. Price data are from Michael Haines, "A State and Local Consumer Price Index for the United States in 1890," National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper Series on Historical Factors in Long Run Growth, no. 2 (May 1989). Because price data are available for only about half of the cities, real wage regressions have only been estimated for a subset of the observations.

While not reported directly, establishment size can be calculated from the data and are included in the regressions to test the impact of different production technologies on wages.

6. Real wage differentials will persist in efficient markets to compensate workers for living in relatively undesirable localities.

southern and western cities and to higher prices in the West. After controlling for city size, nominal wages were only 10 percent lower in the South than in the Northeast in 1890, and southern wages almost reached northern levels in 1903. Wages were higher in the western states even after controlling for city size, but nearly half of the 30 percent nominal wage differential between the West and the Northeast was due to differences in the cost of living. Comparing the results for 1890 with those for 1903, wage differentials narrowed sharply for both the South and West. This may suggest the emergence of a national labor market.<sup>7</sup>

Other evidence also suggests that labor markets functioned efficiently. Apparently, laborers responded to fluctuations in regional labor demand by moving to high-wage localities. The highest wages were paid in the fastest growing cities, and there is little evidence that cultural or historical factors led immigrants or blacks to crowd into low-wage cities.<sup>8</sup> Every ten-percentage-point increase in the proportion of foreign-born residents is associated with an increase in both nominal and real wages of over 3 percent in both 1890 and 1903.

All workers received higher wages in big cities. The effect of city size on wages was much greater in construction than it was in manufacturing.<sup>9</sup> For skilled manufacturing workers, nominal wages increased by around 3 percent with every doubling in city size. Wages increased faster for unskilled manufacturing workers, rising by 6 to 7 percent with every doubling in city size. Going from a town of 4,000 to a city of a million reduced the manufacturing skill premium by twenty percentage points.

Construction workers in large cities enjoyed wages higher than those earned by workers in other industries or by small-town construction workers. Despite widespread labor migration, the wage structure of small cities and towns was significantly different from that in large cities, and the differences persisted from 1890 to 1903. Skilled construction workers' wages increased much faster with city size than did those of skilled manufacturing workers, rising by about 10 percent for every doubling in city size. As a result, they

7. Joshua L. Rosenbloom, "One Market or Many? Labor Market Integration in the Late Nineteenth-Century United States," *Journal of Economic History*, 50 (Mar. 1990), pp. 85–108; Lonny Wilson, "Intercity Wage and Cost of Living Differentials in the United States, 1889–1939" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1973).

8. In these reduced-form wage equations, there is no separate control for labor mobility. As a result, the regression coefficients confound the depressing effect of immigration and increased labor supply on wages and the positive effect of high wages on labor mobility. The coefficients are the net result of these two effects. On balance, they indicate that the effect of wages on migration was greater than any depressing effect of exogenous migration on wages because wages were higher in cities with a high proportion of foreign-born residents. Wages also increased with the proportion of nonwhite residents in a city.

9. In his dissertation, Lonny Wilson finds that nominal earnings increased by 5 percent with every doubling in city size in 1890 and by over 4 percent in 1900. He also presents evidence suggesting that these differences were much greater than the price differentials between small and large cities; see Wilson, "Intercity Wage Differentials," pp. 103, 125.

earned 50 percent more in cities of a million than in towns of 4,000, gaining 30 percent on skilled manufacturing workers.<sup>10</sup>

Labor market distortions are even more striking in markets for common labor. Despite an absence of specialized skills, laborers employed in big-city construction earned much more than those employed in small cities, and they earned more than laborers in big-city manufacturing. While going from a city of 4,000 to one of a million raised unskilled manufacturing wages by 35 percent, day laborers and hod carriers working on construction jobs in cities of a million earned 50 percent more than their counterparts in towns of 4,000.<sup>11</sup> Skilled and unskilled construction workers in big cities apparently worked in a labor market separated both from their small town counterparts and from other unskilled workers in big cities.

It is unlikely that high urban construction wages reflect compensation for urban disamenities. Only disamenities specific to urban construction jobs could explain the wide premium urban construction workers earned over other urban workers.<sup>12</sup> Urban construction workers also enjoyed at least one particularly favorable nonwage job condition beyond their high wages: they led others in winning shorter hours.<sup>13</sup> Every doubling in city size was associated with a reduction in the construction workweek of nearly two hours in 1890 and of over thirty minutes in 1903.<sup>14</sup>

Urban construction workers may have been paid more to compensate for a relatively long trip to work. Unlike manufacturing, whose workers could move closer to a fixed work site, construction work is carried out at different sites over the year. The geographic spread of many large cities may have in-

10. This is in nominal terms; after adjusting for cost of living differentials, real wages for skilled construction workers rise by 60 to 70 percent while those of skilled manufacturing workers rise by 10 to 15 percent.

11. Hod carriers are laborers employed in carrying bricks and other materials to bricklayers and other craftsmen working on construction jobs.

12. Disamenities common to all workers, such as urban crowding and mortality, would raise all wages without producing an extra premia for construction workers.

13. American unions struggled for decades to reduce the workweek. In 1886 the AFL inaugurated the tradition of striking on May Day by calling a general strike for the eight-hour day. The AFL continued this campaign in 1890 with the carpenters' union taking the lead.

14. This is from a regression for the length of the workweek similar to the wage regressions in Table 16.1. Note that hours declined with city size even faster for skilled than for unskilled construction workers.

Urban construction workers probably suffered less unemployment than did other construction workers. In New York, for example, unemployment rates for union members in 1898 and 1899 are nearly identical for construction workers in New York City as those in the rest of the state. At a seasonal unemployment peak, in December 1898, 35.7 percent of New York City's unionized construction workers were unemployed compared with 33.4 percent in the rest of the state; while in September 1899, 4.3 percent of the city's unionized construction workers were unemployed compared with 5.2 percent elsewhere. See New York Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Seventeenth Annual Report, 1899* (Albany, 1900), pp. 32–36. In addition, as Alexander Keyssar observes, urban workers may have been more successful in finding alternative employments during construction downturns than their counterparts in smaller locales because cities' diverse economies insulate workers from the effects of downturns in individual industries. See Keyssar, *Out of Work: The First Century of Unemployment in Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 119.

**Table 16.1** Explaining the (Log) Real Wage by Occupation and Locality, 1890 and 1903

Variable	1890		1903	
	Wage	Real Wage	Wage	Real Wage
Constant	4.902*	5.132*	5.175*	5.393*
Log of city population	0.032**	0.019	0.037*	0.025
Population growth rate, 1890–1900	0.149*	0.067	0.048	–0.012
% Nonwhite	0.170	0.451*	–0.039	0.241
% Foreign born	0.368*	0.313***	0.379*	0.361**
South	–0.069	–0.105	–0.025	–0.010
West	0.294*	0.171*	0.244*	0.161*
Midwest	–0.021	0.073*	0.014	0.122*
Unskilled	–0.958*	–1.073**	–1.039*	–1.221*
Log of population × unskilled in manufacturing	0.040	0.048	0.046***	0.060
Log of population × unskilled in construction	0.067*	0.063*	0.079*	0.086*
Log of population × skilled in construction	0.070*	0.089*	0.071*	0.108*
Construction	–0.172	0.003	–0.166	–0.035
Construction × skilled	–0.409	–0.847	–0.298	–0.918***
Wood and furniture	0.048	0.061	0.026	0.057
Printing	0.561*	0.569*	0.738*	0.761*
Log of establishment size	–0.029*	–0.029**	–0.054*	–0.072*
Number of observations	680	392	694	402
F-statistic	117.6	59.0	130.0	71.5
R <sup>2</sup>	0.74	0.72	0.76	0.76
Mean of dependent variable	5.421	5.446	5.613	5.632

*Notes:* The regressions are ordinary least squares, weighted by the number of employees in the occupation and locality. There are fewer observations in the real wage than in the nominal wage regressions because price data are available only for a subset of cities.

*Sources:* The average wage in occupation in localities is reported in the U.S. Commissioner of Labor, *Nineteenth Annual Report: Wages and Hours of Labor* (Washington, D.C., 1905). City characteristics are from the U.S. Census Office, *Eleventh Census, 1890: Population* (Washington, D.C., 1895), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 524–58; U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census, 1900: Population* (Washington, D.C., 1901), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 609–94. Price data are from Michael Haines, “A State and Local Consumer Price Index for the United States in 1890,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper Series on Historical Factors in Long Run Growth, no. 2 (May 1989).

\*Significant at the 1% level.

\*\*Significant at the 5% level.

\*\*\*Significant at the 10% level.

creased construction workers' commuting time.<sup>15</sup> However, this effect is probably small. While workers may have changed job sites, most urban construction was carried out in relatively compact downtown business districts. In addition, intraurban transit improved substantially during the period. If the

15. Although the increase in commuting time would be balanced by urban construction workers' shorter workday.

wage premium urban construction workers received in 1890 reflected compensation for commuting, then transit improvements should have lowered the premium by 1903.

Differences in technology might have contributed to big-city construction workers' high wages. Entrepôts for continental and even world trade, big cities were relatively inhospitable to monopolies in manufacturing products. Competition pushed big-city manufacturers to use the most advanced technologies available, carrying out production in relatively large, modern establishments.<sup>16</sup> As David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich have argued, technological progress in urban manufacturers may have reduced the demand for skilled manufacturing workers, lowering their wage.<sup>17</sup> This is in contrast with construction where the slow pace of technological change protected traditional crafts from competition with the unskilled.

By itself, however, a demand-side, technology-driven account cannot explain the effect of city size on wages. Without barriers blocking the movement of labor into urban construction, a slow rate of technological progress does not explain the relative increase in wages for unskilled construction workers in large cities. Instead, with efficient labor markets, changing technologies should change economy-wide relative wages without having any lasting impact on local wage patterns. Certainly over the thirteen years considered here, the flow of labor out of low-demand and low-wage towns toward high-demand and high-wage big cities could be expected to equalize occupational wages between localities. To explain the persistence of regional wage differentials, a demand-side model of regional wage differentials must be complemented by an explanation for labor market rigidities.

Strong unions supported high urban construction wages, and their membership and apprenticeship restrictions provided one important barrier to entry into urban construction labor markets.<sup>18</sup> Big-city construction unions supported national union federations to spread organization to small towns to maintain high urban wages.<sup>19</sup> In addition to working to raise wages in small towns and cities, these unions discouraged workers from seeking urban jobs by publicizing news of strikes and any unfavorable labor market conditions in big cities.

Unions raised urban construction wages, but outside of the largest cities

16. Establishments in large cities were larger than their small-town counterparts. The number of workers per establishment increases by about 40 percent for every doubling in city size.

17. David Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 100–164.

18. Even unskilled urban construction workers would have benefited from unionization because they had among the few functioning unions of common laborers. Note that almost all of the unionized building laborers were in a few large cities. In New York, for example, 93 percent of the unionized building laborers in 1899 lived in New York City, compared with 70 percent of the nonlaborers (New York BLS, *Annual Report, 1899*, pp. 64–67).

19. See, for example, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, *The Carpenter* (Aug. 1881), p. 2.

their effect was probably small. Wages were only 3 to 5 percent higher in cities and trades with a union local. Including a dummy variable for the presence of a union does not significantly reduce the independent effect of city size.<sup>20</sup> Unions may have had a larger influence on wages in big-city construction, because there the unions were among the nation's strongest. Between 1881 and 1894, for example, strike success rates are significantly higher for construction workers in big cities than for workers in other industries or for construction workers in smaller towns and cities (see Table 16.2).<sup>21</sup> Perhaps reflecting their ability to conduct effective strikes, big-city construction unions enrolled a relatively large proportion of the potential workforce. The unionization rate of the entire labor force for the four largest construction trades in Chicago in 1902, for example, was 47 percent including 69 percent for carpenters and 68 percent for bricklayers.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, the unionization rate in the same four crafts in Illinois outside of Chicago was only 7 percent.<sup>23</sup>

Unions formed within the manufacturing sector were also stronger in big cities than in rural areas, but city size had less of an impact in manufacturing than in construction. In contrast with construction strikes, there is only a small, statistically insignificant positive relationship between strike success and city size in manufacturing. Perhaps as a result, there is only a weak relationship between city size and unionization rates. In Illinois in 1902, for example, unionization rates were higher in Chicago than in the rest of the state for all of eight large nonconstruction trades, but few workers belonged to unions even in Chicago, and the difference between Chicago and the rest of the state is often small.<sup>24</sup> Only 15 percent of Chicago machinists, for example, belonged to unions compared with 13 percent of those outside of Chicago. In

20. This is from regressions similar to those in Table 16.1 including only occupations for which I have local union information: bricklayers, carpenters, machinists, and molders. The estimate given is the coefficient on a dummy variable for the existence of a union local in the trade and locality.

21. Data are not available for individual strikes in other years. For a more detailed discussion of these data, see Gerald Friedman, "Strike Success and Union Ideology: The United States and France, 1880–1914," *Journal of Economic History*, 48 (Mar. 1988), pp. 1–25.

22. The unionization rate for the same crafts in New York City in 1900 is only 27 percent. Some of the difference in unionization rates between New York and Illinois reflects the rapid growth of unions in both states between 1900 and 1902. Note, however, that these rates are below the unionization rate of wage earners because the denominator, the entire labor force, includes employers. Also, the unions' reach exceeded their formal membership because many nonmembers would regularly support union strikes and wage demands without paying dues.

The labor force data are from the U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Census of Population* (Washington, D.C., 1901), v. 2, pt. 2, pp. 558–61, 578–81. New York union membership in September 1900 is from New York Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Eighteenth Annual Report, 1900* (Albany, 1901), pp. 505–44. Illinois membership in 1902 is from Illinois Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Twelfth Biennial Report, 1902* (Springfield, 1904), pp. 299–311.

23. The gap between the metropolitan and nonmetropolitan unionization rates in New York is smaller, 27 percent for New York City compared with 17 percent for the rest of the state. The number of nonmetropolitan union members and the size of the labor force are from the same sources as in fn. 22.

24. These crafts include machinists, printers, boot and shoe makers, tailors and garment workers, bakers, butchers, brewers, and coopers.



**Table 16.2** Determinants of Strike Success in the United States: Strikes in 625 Cities, 1881–1894

Variable	Mean	Coefficient	t-statistic
Constant	1.00	-0.155	-0.25
Union strike, 1881–94	0.71	0.163	0.86
Union strike, 1887–94	0.41	0.490	1.83
Log of city population, 1880	12.21	0.056	1.36
Construction industry × log of city population	3.03	0.235	2.53
Construction industry × union strike	0.19	-1.050	-2.41
Construction industry × union strike, 1887–94	0.15	1.049	2.90
City percentage of foreign born, 1880	0.51	0.038	0.70
Strike participation rate	0.60	0.739	2.92
Log of strike size	3.54	0.001	0.18
Log of establishment size	3.99	-0.701	-1.02
Striker rate in industry and state	1.67	0.028	1.15
Number of issue dummy variables:	4		
Number of industry dummy variables:	3		
Number of year dummy variables:	13		
Chi-square statistic	161.06		
Mean of dependent variable	0.58		
Number of observations (individual strikes)	1,417		

*Notes:* The estimating procedure is a logit where the dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 for strikes where the workers gain at least some of their demands and equal to 0 otherwise. The industry dummy variables include construction, transportation, and mining. The dummy variables for strike issues include dummy variables for strikes over work rules, strikes against wage cuts, strikes over the hours of work, and strikes over personnel policies.

*Sources:* Samples of individual strike records in U.S. Commissioner of Labor, *Third Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, D.C., 1888); and *Tenth Annual Report: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington, D.C., 1895). Only strikes in the 625 largest American cities are included. City characteristics are from U.S. Census Office, *Statistics of the Population of the U.S. at the Tenth Census, 1880* (Washington, D.C., 1886), vol. 1, pp. 447–56.

New York, any positive effect of city size on unionization is even smaller. In five of these same eight crafts, unionization rates are higher outside New York City than within, including machinists, boot and shoe makers, butchers, brewers, and coopers.<sup>25</sup>

The impact of city size on unionization in construction and in manufacturing can be explored further using data on the distribution of union locals for several American unions. Data have been collected on the location of union locals in December 1903 for four of the most important American unions: in construction, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and the United Bricklayers and Masons, and in the metal trades, the International As-

25. There is a substantially higher unionization rate in New York City among printers (51 percent vs. 32 percent outside the city) and among garment workers (16 percent vs. 8 percent). The unionization rate among bakers is nearly the same in the city (15 percent) as outside (14 percent).

sociation of Machinists and the International Iron Molders Union.<sup>26</sup> In Table 16.3, I report the results of logit regressions for the effect of city size on the probability that a union local will exist for each trade in the 1,884 largest American cities. In each case, city size is associated with a significant increase in the probability that there will be a union local in a city. But the effect of city size on the probability of having a union is significantly larger for the construction trades than for the others.<sup>27</sup> Big cities were the centers of craft organization around 1900, especially for construction workers.

The relative strength of urban unions might surprise both economic theorists and labor historians. Theorists might expect workers in smaller towns to be more successful in forming unions because it should be easier to mobilize a smaller number of workers for collective action and because a smaller town's relative isolation should insulate local monopolies from outside competition.<sup>28</sup> Prominent labor historians, such as Herbert Gutman, also argue that labor militancy was more effective in smaller locales. Gutman, for example, finds evidence that collective action by workers in smaller communities often succeeded because the workers were supported by many in the middle classes sympathetic to their struggles against outside corporations.<sup>29</sup>

These arguments underestimate, however, the importance of the political leverage enjoyed by big-city workers. Construction workers in several of America's largest cities especially benefited from alliances formed with political machines after 1886. These alliances allowed urban construction workers to use municipal police powers, including licensing and other regulatory authority, to isolate themselves from national labor markets. While such alliances were of little value to manufacturing workers facing national markets in products as well as in labor, they helped construction workers to gain higher wages. These gains came, however, at the expense of separating urban construction workers from the rest of the working class.

### 16.3 Big-City Politics and the Building Trades

By the late nineteenth century, political machines were the strongest political force in most large American cities.<sup>30</sup> Unlike working-class socialists or middle-class good government reformers, machines formed cross-class coalitions

26. The distribution of union locals is available from the following union newspapers: United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, *The Carpenter* (Dec. 1903); the United Bricklayers and Masons, *The Bricklayer and Mason* (Dec. 1903); the International Iron Molders' Union, *The Iron Molders' Journal* (Dec. 1903); and the International Association of Machinists, *Machinists' Monthly Journal* (Dec. 1903).

27. The differences in the coefficients between the carpenters or masons and the machinists or molders are significant at 99 percent confidence with *t*-ratios of about 4.

28. See, for example, Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966).

29. See, for example, Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York, 1976).

30. M. Craig Brown and Charles N. Halaby, "Machine Politics in America, 1870-1945," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 17 (Winter 1987), pp. 587-612.

**Table 16.3** Determinants of the Presence of a Union Local among the 1,884 Largest American Cities, 1903

Variable	Carpenters	Bricklayers	Machinists	Molders
Constant	- 18.63*	- 19.56*	- 17.03*	- 16.89*
Log of city population	2.17*	2.19*	1.77*	
% Foreign born	- 2.95*	- 3.88*	- 2.10*	- 3.08*
% Black	0.03	- 0.61	- 2.00**	- 4.33*
South	- 0.08	- 0.35	1.22*	0.11
Midwest	0.35*	0.20	0.83*	0.13
West	1.16*	0.72*	0.79*	- 0.83**
Mean of the dependent variable	0.49	0.32	0.25	0.17
Log-likelihood ratio	- 952.43	- 795.31	- 741.39	- 583.45
Number of observations (cities)	1,884	1,884	1,884	1,884

*Note:* The estimating procedure is a logit where the dependent variable is a dummy equal to 1 for cities with a union local and equal to 0 otherwise.

*Sources:* Data on the location of union locals are from the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, *The Carpenter* (Dec. 1903); the United Bricklayers and Masons, *The Bricklayer and Mason* (Dec. 1903); the International Iron Molders' Union, *The Iron Molders' Journal* (Dec. 1903); the International Association of Machinists, *Machinists' Monthly Journal* (Dec. 1903). Census characteristics of cities are from U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census, 1900: Population* (Washington, D.C., 1901), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 609-46.

\*Significant at the 1% level.

\*\*Significant at the 5% level.

tions using government resources to broker a deal among the classes.<sup>31</sup> Such alliances were necessary to govern successfully America's large cities. Machines needed working-class votes to win elections. But to govern effectively, they depended on the support, or at least the tolerance, of property holders.<sup>32</sup> In exchange for their votes, workers received individual benefits, patronage jobs, and relief. At the same time, machines wooed upper-class voters by nominating prestigious candidates for major offices and by holding down taxes and municipal debt.<sup>33</sup> Here, of course, was the rub. The spending restraint needed to appeal to property holders came at the expense of the machines' working-class supporters.

31. This discussion draws on the work of Martin Shefter, *Political Crisis/Fiscal Crisis* (New York, 1985); and Steven Erie, *Rainbow's End: Irish Americans and the Dilemmas of Urban Machine Politics, 1840-1985* (Berkeley, 1988).

32. Facing the nearly unanimous opposition of the city's property holders, with their control over investment and the banking system, even San Francisco's Union Labor Party (ULP) government was forced "to continuously straddle the line between corporate wishes and a forthright defense of the needs of its core constituency. Straining not to cross that line led to inaction, and that won the ULP no friends on either side of the class divide" (Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* [Urbana, 1987], p. 192).

33. Jon Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore, 1984), pp. 15-82, 204-5, 208-10, 283-306.

Ethnic ties, especially among the Irish, helped political machines navigate these difficult shoals. But such ties could not substitute for a program attractive to voters in different economic circumstance.<sup>34</sup> Most late-nineteenth-century machines were led by Irish-Americans. But constituting less than 20 percent of the adult male population in most large cities, the Irish lacked the numbers to dominate municipal elections. Further, because they were predominantly working class, the Irish controlled little private capital.<sup>35</sup> And even among the Irish, political appeals based on ethnicity failed when they clashed with workers' economic interests. In New York in 1886, for example, Tammany Hall's working-class Irish supporters protested the machine's policy of fiscal restraint and opposition to labor militancy by abandoning Tammany to support Henry George's campaign for mayor as the candidate of the radical Union Labor Party.

Neither wage workers nor property holders were able to use machine-dominated city governments to advance their interests. Both workers and property holders accepted machine rule only from fear that the alternative would be open rule by their class enemy. Workers preferred machines to the alternative of elite domination, even though machines made significant concessions to property owners. Property owners tolerated machines because they impeded worker militancy and provided protection against socialism.

Machines like Tammany, therefore, were a big-city phenomenon because city property owners feared militant labor enough to tolerate machines. Their fear was realistic because in a democratic regime, working-class majorities could make cities dangerous places to hold property. In 1882, for example, the *New York Times* warned that "we are in this City over the crust of a volcano, with a powerful dangerous class who cares nothing for our property or civilization, . . . who burrow at the roots of society, and only come forth . . . in times of disturbance to plunder and prey."<sup>36</sup> Historian Francis Parkman agreed that in big cities, "the dangerous classes are most numerous and strong, and the effects of flinging the suffrage to the mob are most disastrous. . . . Democracy hands over great municipal corporations, the property of those who hold stock in them, to the keeping of greedy and irresponsible crowds . . . whose object is nothing but plunder."<sup>37</sup> Because of their high proportion of propertyless voters, a Harvard professor warned that big cities

34. Elmer J. Cornwell, Jr., "Bosses, Machines, and Ethnic Groups," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: City Bosses and Political Machines*, 353 (May 1964), pp. 27-39; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); W. B. Munro, *The Government of American Cities* (New York, 1916). Erie's *Rainbow's End* provides an alternative view.

35. Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (New York, 1984), discusses the origins of New York's political machines.

36. Quoted in David Scobey, "The Class Politics of City-Building in Gilded Age New York" (manuscript, Brandeis University, Nov. 1988), p. 9.

37. Francis Parkman, "The Failure of Universal Suffrage," *North American Review*, 126 (1878), p. 20.

promoted radicalism: "Urban concentration means . . . that the landless man rises to supremacy in the voting-lists, that the property-owning element dwindles in relative importance."<sup>38</sup>

Not only were there more workers in larger cities, but their concentration facilitated collective action. John Mitchell, head of the United Mine Workers of America, argued that unions in small towns were relatively weak because workers in these communities were integrated into the broader community. Small-town workers then were easily influenced by the hostility of their property-owning neighbors to labor organization. "The wage earners of the industrial centers," by contrast, formed "a society of their own." Their neighborhoods bolstered independent values, incubating and supporting working-class militancy.<sup>39</sup> As a result, collective action by workers was much more common in bigger cities. Not only was union membership more common in big cities, but so was strike activity. Strike rates rose with city size; in 1881–86, the share of the population striking was nearly four times as high in cities of over 100,000 than in cities of under 25,000.<sup>40</sup> Over the 1881–1900 period, the nation's four largest cities, with less than 10 percent of the population of the United States, accounted for over half the nation's strikers and struck establishments.<sup>41</sup>

Property holders in small towns had less to fear from labor. The smaller scale of production produced a relatively smaller working class. The social structure of many smaller American cities and towns was little changed by industrialization. With few large establishments, their industrial proletariat was relatively small, too small to pose a significant political threat. In Massachusetts towns of under 2,500 in 1885, for example, the average industrial establishment had eight workers and only 20 percent of the potential voters were wage earners. In cities of over 5,000 residents, in contrast, the average industrial establishment employed 31 wage workers and 64 percent of all voters were wage earners. Political patterns reflected these differences in social structure. Parties supported by the economic elite were strongest in smaller communities. In Massachusetts, for example, Republicans dominated small towns but their vote declined with city size. Independent labor candidates, in contrast, increased their vote with city size. In 1884, for example, the Green-

38. Munro, *Government*, p. 48.

39. John Mitchell, *The Wage Earner and His Problems* (Washington, D.C., 1913), p. 152. Also note Frank Parkin, "Working-Class Conservatives: A Theory of Political Deviance," *British Journal of Sociology*, 18 (Sept. 1967), pp. 278–90.

40. The number of strikers in each of 625 cities with a population over 4,000 is from the U.S. Commissioner of Labor, *Third Annual Report, 1887* (Washington, D.C., 1888). City population characteristics for these cities are from the U.S. Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880: Population* (Washington, D.C., 1883), vol. 1, part 1, pp. 447–56.

41. U.S. Commissioner of Labor, *Sixteenth Annual Report, 1901* (Washington, D.C., 1902), pp. 28–29. Also see the discussion in Sari J. Bennett and Carville V. Earle, "Labour Power and Locality in the Gilded Age: The Northeastern United States, 1881–1894," *Social History*, 15 (Nov. 1982), pp. 383–405.

back-Labor Party gained only 4 percent of the vote in the smallest cities compared with more than 9 percent in cities of over 5,000.

It was in the mid-1880s, the period entitled the "Great Upheaval" by labor historians, that the potential threat posed by urban labor came closest to realization. At the peak of the period's labor turmoil in 1886, as much as 5 percent of the nation's total labor force was on strike. Conflicts between strikers and municipal police combined with anger at fiscal retrenchment to turn these industrial actions into political challenges. In 1885 and 1886, independent working-class political movements contested elections in 18 percent of cities with populations of over 4,000, including most with more than 100,000.<sup>42</sup> In New York, for example, repressive court decisions against strikes and boycotts and working-class anger at Tammany leader "Honest John" Kelly's fiscal prudence made the city in 1886 "ripe for independent political action."<sup>43</sup> Swollen with new recruits, the city's unions organized the United Labor Party to run Henry George for mayor on a radical labor platform.

To defeat George, Tammany was forced to seek allies on its right and among the propertied classes. Nominating the manufacturer Abram Hewitt, the candidate of its long-time rivals organized as the County Democracy, Tammany defeated George with a fusion campaign, appealing to conservative voters "for the saving of society."<sup>44</sup> The George candidacy in New York attracted the most attention, but in the same year candidates supported by trade unions and the Knights of Labor also ran strong races in other large cities, including Milwaukee and Chicago. As in New York, these challenges were blocked by a united front of bourgeois defense, organized "to save the city government from capture by the 'Reds'."<sup>45</sup>

The Great Upheaval demonstrated anew to urban politicians the need for a strategy to accommodate property owners without alienating labor voters. Machines like Tammany developed tighter, more centralized organizations to restrain popular revolts.<sup>46</sup> Organization gave the machine's central leadership the tools to punish grass-root revolts. But even the best organization depended on policies that gave both workers and property holders a stake in the machine's success. Machines provided these with public works.

42. This is from a coding of the cities in Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, 1983), pp. 28–29, matched with population data for 625 cities with a population of over 4,000. The population data are from the U.S. Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880: Population*, vol. 1, part 1, pp. 447–56.

43. Gustavus Myers, *The History of Tammany Hall* (New York, 1917), p. 269. Also see Martin Shefter, "The Electoral Foundations of the Political Machine," in *History of American Electoral Behavior*, Joel Silbey, Allan Bogue, and William Flanigan, eds. (Princeton, 1978), p. 290.

44. Hewitt won only with the support of many Republican voters who deserted their own candidate, future president Theodore Roosevelt. Tammany did not depend on such support but also used frauds "so glaring and so tremendous in the aggregate" that most supporters of George believed their candidate won only to be "counted out" (Myers, *History of Tammany Hall*, p. 270).

45. Ralph Schama, "Thomas J. Morgan and the United Labor Party of Chicago," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 66 (Spring 1974), pp. 51–54.

46. This is emphasized by Martin Shefter in *Political Crisis/Fiscal Crisis*, p. 21.

The American tradition of using public works to reward supporters has a long history. As early as the 1830s, Democrats and Whigs solicited votes with jobs on canal and highway projects.<sup>47</sup> Public works spending can be the ideal cement for a cross-class political coalition. Such spending provides working-class jobs, which in turn enhances property values and rents of landowners, and it creates educational, recreational, transportation, and health facilities for middle-class use.<sup>48</sup> As a result, and in contrast with welfare measures benefiting exclusively workers and the unemployed, support for capital improvements spans the class divide. Even in San Francisco, where middle-class and working-class voters between 1899 and 1910 agreed on little else, both approved ten bond issues to build schools, hospitals, parks, sewers, and railroad and water systems by nearly identical three-to-one margins.<sup>49</sup>

Late-nineteenth-century political machines embarked on a jamboree of city building. Because of the economies of scale that come with a relatively dense population, per capita expenditures on road, waterworks, sewer, park, and public building construction should decline with city size. Instead, around 1890, cities of over 100,000 spent 55 percent more per capita on these facilities than did those of 10,000 to 15,000. Built by workers but used almost exclusively by the upper classes, park improvements demonstrate most clearly how political machines established cross-class coalitions. By 1890, cities of more than 100,000 had spent over eight times the amount on park improvements than had the smallest cities and over four times as much as cities of 50,000 to 100,000.<sup>50</sup> Through public works, political machines supplied the propertied classes with public goods and gave workers jobs and wages without class struggle.

Big-city political machines did not rely exclusively on municipal Keynesianism to gain working-class support. They also consciously undermined working-class solidarity by favoring selected elements of organized labor. Craft unions were their preferred allies. Alliances with radical unions organized along working-class lines, such as the Knights of Labor or the International Workers of the World, would frighten all property holders because these unions challenged the system of private property, threatening all property holders regardless of industry. In contrast, an alliance with craft unions was

47. See, for example, Erie, *Rainbow's End*, p. 12.

48. While constituting only about 10 percent of the American labor force in 1900, Irish-born workers were 19 percent of the labor force in four construction trades in the ten largest cities; see U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Special Reports: Occupations at the Twelfth Census* (Washington, D.C., 1904), pp. 64, 488–715.

49. Erie, *Rainbow's End*, p. 82.

50. There is an interesting contrast between the relatively heavy per capita expenditures on public facilities in big cities with the relatively low expenditures on private business recreation. Theaters and other private recreational facilities were more available per capita in smaller cities. See the U.S. Department of the Interior, Census Office, *Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, at the Eleventh Census: 1890* (Washington, D.C., 1895), pp. 15–47.

less threatening because craft unions consciously rejected class alliances and restricted their concerns to a part of the working class without challenging the basic organization of society.

In Chicago, for example, municipal government favored construction craft unions while they used the police to repress broader working-class solidarity. Carter Harrison I, Chicago's mayor for most of the 1880s, was openly allied with the city's conservative craft unions. Through the early and mid-1880s, he hired Trades Assembly leaders for city positions and restrained the city's police force during strikes.<sup>51</sup> This alliance did not stop him from crushing the city's Knights of Labor and Central Labor Union after May Day 1886 and the Haymarket Affair. Drawing on contributions from Marshall Field and three hundred other prominent citizens, the city's police used the Haymarket Affair as an excuse to attack Chicago's radical labor movement. Union meetings were banned, halls closed, records confiscated, and leaders hauled off to police stations for questioning, or worse.

The post-Haymarket repression may have hurt all of Chicago's unions, but it was most damaging to the anarchist and radical industrial unions and the Knights of Labor, who were the focus of police repression. Once these unions were defeated, the city's Democratic politicians and conservative craft unions quickly renewed an alliance that both had found advantageous. On one side, the experience of police repression demonstrated forcefully to craft unions the importance of maintaining political support for their activities, and the surge of independent labor politics in 1886 and 1887 convinced Democratic politicians that they needed to cultivate alliances to hold onto elements of the working-class electorate. To preempt further independent labor politics, Chicago's Democratic machine consciously sought allies among construction craft unions. At the behest of these unions, the Democratically controlled City Council on 8 June 1889 adopted an eight-hour ordinance drafted by Clarence Darrow for city construction. The City Council's action was soon copied by the city's School Board and the Cook County Board of County Commissioners.<sup>52</sup> Construction unions responded to these overtures and the Carpenters Union quickly endorsed the Democratic candidate for reelection in 1889. The alliance gave the Democratic machine leverage to undermine independent political action by organized labor. To protect their alliance with the Democrats, the Carpenters sabotaged a campaign by other unions (including the city's machinists' union) to renew the city's Union Labor Party in 1890. Observers said the carpenters feared that independent political action by labor "would exasperate the Democratic city administration and bring on the active opposition of the City Hall officials and the police" right before the Carpenter's major

51. Bruce Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900* (New Brunswick, 1988), p. 43.

52. Richard Schneirov and Thomas J. Suhrbur, *Union Brotherhood, Union Town: The History of the Carpenters' Union of Chicago, 1863-1987* (Carbondale, 1988), p. 40.



eight-hour day campaign in 1890.<sup>53</sup> To maintain their alliance with the Democratic machine, Chicago's Carpenters abandoned working-class solidarity.

Chicago's construction unions profited from this alliance. By 1900, when Carter Harrison's son was mayor, there were twenty-two building trades union leaders on the city payroll, including the head of Chicago's Building Trades Council who also headed the city's Civil Service Board. Many union leaders served as city building inspectors and supervised the employers they dealt with over the bargaining table and during strikes. Chicago's city government openly favored unions during labor disputes. During a major construction lockout in 1900, for example, contractors and their strikebreakers were denied basic police protection and were forced to hire five hundred special detectives to guard their building sites.<sup>54</sup> One employer denounced the protection their plants received from police as a "farce" and blamed their troubles on city hall's twenty-two "laboring men."<sup>55</sup> His problem, however, was not the unionists in city hall, some of whom were there in 1886 as well, but the tight alliance that had been formed since the Great Upheaval between construction craft unions and the Democratic machine.

Political machines, like Chicago's, helped their construction union allies outside of strikes. Workers employed on public construction, including utilities and workers at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, were shielded from labor market competition by municipal regulations setting wages and working conditions at union levels. State support made these "good jobs," preferred to other private employments and obtained only through personal influence. Control over such employment gave unions and political machines leverage over workers and voters. Personalized administration gave municipal officials, including building inspectors, opportunities to grant favor or "petty penalties and annoyances" to employers, discretion they used to harass anti-union businesses and building contractors with unfavorable tax assessments, building and safety inspections, or by withholding authorization to use public ways. In San Francisco, under Boss Reuf's rule, for example, open-shop contractors and employers battled repeated attempts by municipal departments to hamper their operations with petty citations and bureaucratic delays. Many agreed to operate union shops out of fear that a city inspector would close them down otherwise.<sup>56</sup>

With open city support, construction unions boomed in Chicago even while manufacturing-sector unions made little headway. Machines rarely formed alliances with unions outside of the building trades, partly because alliances the machines made with construction unions reduced their need for alliances with other unions. The machines also had more to offer unions in the construction

53. *Chicago Tribune* (1 June 1890), p. 6.

54. Royal Montgomery, *Industrial Relations in the Chicago Building Trades* (Chicago, 1927), p. 29. Schneirov and Suhrbur, *Union Brotherhood*, pp. 80–82.

55. David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), p. 272.

56. Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor*, p. 188.

sector than in manufacturing. While manufacturing employers could shift location to avoid unfriendly local governments, construction was fixed to particular locations. Tied to particular locations and schedules, construction contractors were particularly vulnerable to local action by city governments and workers. As the Illinois governor and social reformer J. P. Altgeld observed, building trades unions could achieve gains that eluded others because construction “is always a local question.”<sup>57</sup>

Regardless of location, technical conditions helped make construction workers throughout the United States, and the world, among the most unionized of workers.<sup>58</sup> But it was political support that made large cities American construction unionism’s stronghold. The New York correspondent of the business-oriented *Boston Evening Transcript* reported in 1892 that “it is only in the building trades that the labor unions in New York have of late retained much power for evil. There they are a constant bane.”<sup>59</sup> While probably exaggerating the weakness of other unions, this was an accurate assessment of the strength of unionism in the construction trades, both in New York and in other large American cities.

#### 16.4 Conclusion: Wages and Politics in Large American Cities

Construction workers played a central role in American radical politics from the 1770s through the 1830s, the 1850s, and the 1880s.<sup>60</sup> Among the leaders of Philadelphia’s Order of United American Mechanics, for example, were George F. Turner, carpenter, John Bottsford, bricklayer, and Matthew W. Robinson, carpenter.<sup>61</sup> Later building tradesmen joined workers from outside the building trades to support radical political action in the Great Upheaval of the 1880s.<sup>62</sup> Peter McGuire, carpenter, founder of the American Federation of Labor and of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, for example, was a Lassallian socialist and organizer for the Socialist Labor Party. Under his leadership, the Carpenters at their first national convention endorsed independent working-class political action and industrial unionism.<sup>63</sup> Radical building tradesmen joined alliances structured according to their relationship

57. John P. Altgeld, “The Eight Hour Movement: An Address Delivered before the Brotherhood of United Labor, at the Armory in Chicago, Feb. 22, 1890” (Chicago, 1890), p. 13. A similar point was made by the *New York Tribune* (2 May 1886), p. 12.

58. Montgomery, *Fall of the House of Labor*, pp. 298–99; Montgomery, *Industrial Relations*, pp. 4–6.

59. *Boston Evening Transcript* (16 July 1892), p. 6.

60. Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976), pp. 57–63; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984), pp. 410, 414; Jonathan Garlock, “A Structural Analysis of the Knights of Labor” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1974), pp. 42, 62.

61. Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–50* (Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 174, 182–83.

62. See, for example, the involvement of building tradesmen in Chicago’s anarchist movement in the 1880s in Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs*, p. 89.

63. United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, *The Carpenter* (Aug. 1881), p. 2.

to property rights, uniting all those whose only productive property was their labor.

As long as construction workers had the same relationship to the state and the legal system as did other workers, there were grounds for a broad, working-class alliance. The active role of local officials in construction and their support for construction unions and workers, however, made construction workers a privileged part of the working class. Treated differently by the state, construction workers had reason to distance themselves from the rest of the working class.

Focusing on national politics, scholars comparing American and European unions have stressed differences between politicized European central union federations and their relatively apolitical American counterparts. By neglecting local action, however, these studies overlook much of American craft unions' political action. Craft unions were generally uninterested in national legislation, but this did not preclude an active involvement in local politics.<sup>64</sup> American craft unions understood well the importance of government policy, but living in a decentralized regime they sought to influence local politics. Far from not being conscious of their position as wage earners, construction workers were extraordinarily active in defense of their interests against their employers. And far from being apolitical, they were intimately involved in politics.<sup>65</sup> But their militancy and their political action did not lead to alliances with other workers because they found they could advance their interests—at least their short-run interests—better through alliances with local political machines resting on cross-class coalitions.

In cross-class alliances with urban political machines, construction unions used America's political system to their advantage. But their cross-class alliances weakened any working-class challenge to capitalist domination. Allied with local Republican or Democratic machines, construction unions supported the AFL's voluntarist ideology because it required no commitment on political issues that might upset their local alliances.<sup>66</sup> Construction workers became the crucial missing component to any socialist political coalition. Without them America's big cities and its working class were lost to socialism.

Through alliances with political machines, construction unions carved a niche for themselves within the existing political and social order. Secure in their urban fortresses, construction workers were labor's aristocrats, able to stand on their own and for themselves.

64. Michael Rogin, "Voluntarism: The Political Functions of an Antipolitical Doctrine," *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 15 (July 1962), p. 534.

65. This separation of worker militancy and political action is at the core of Ira Katznelson's discussions of American exceptionalism. See his "Working-Class Formation and the State: Nineteenth-Century England in American Perspective," in *Bringing the State Back In*, Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds. (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 257–84.

66. Rogin, "Voluntarism," p. 535.