

How the Civil War Changed Labor

The year was 1863, the United States had been fighting the Civil War for two years, the economy was running wild with newly printed money and inflation, homes were filled with grief as loved ones died in the war, and the politicians debated the issue of state's rights. Amongst the upheaval of the war, a "social revolution" of sorts was going on among the Northern working class.¹ Though the Civil War focused mostly on state's rights and slavery, the Northern labor system also caused a significant amount of conflict in the North during the war, just as slavery did.

A columnist in *Fincher's Trade Review* asked this pertinent question of the North's laborer: "What, then are workingmen to do? Are they to settle down in tame submission, and see capital pluck them of every resource . . . Or are they . . . to assert their rights, and struggle to maintain their proper position in society?"² What was the workingman or woman to do while his or her country was fighting a war? How did the Civil War affect and change the Northern laboring class?

Before the war, workers were working in a variety of professions. The National Bureau of Economic Research stated that in 1860 laborers worked "in construction, manufacturing, and independent hand trades," and "in mining; and . . . transportation and other public utilities, trade, finance, and real estate."³ Workers in antebellum America were usually skilled laborers as the

¹ "Strikes," *Fincher's Trade Review*, June 7, 1863, microfilm.

² Ibid.

³ Solomon Fabricant, "The Changing Industrial Distribution of Gainful Workers," National Bureau of Economic Research, *Studies in Income and Wealth*, x1 (1949), 42 cited in Edward C. Kirkland. 1961. *Industry comes of age: business, labor, and public policy, 1860-1897*. The Economic history of the United States, v. 6. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

factory system was a new introduction to America, and they had to work anywhere between twelve and sixteen hours a day.⁴

Since only ten percent of the population lived in cities,⁵ labor was set up in a “craft-shop” setting where workers would perform all the steps in producing a product.⁶ In the 1820’s industrialization began in America which negatively affected skilled laborers because the new machines made their skills less needed. Workers now needed only to learn how to perform a small part of production instead of how to make an entire item.⁷

In response to industrialization, skilled workers banded together, and in the 1830’s they started to organize into labor unions.⁸ There was actually a lot of labor union activity in the 1830s though to the Civil War. The local as well as national unions that formed in the 1830s were a means for laborers to attempt to improve their lives through shorter working hours and higher wages.⁹

When the Civil War tore apart the country, it would seem logical to assume that the working class’ fight for rights would fall by the wayside in an attempt to support the war effort; however, this was not true. Because the war caused inflation and increased taxes, and thus aggravated the Northern working class, workers began organizing in greater numbers during the war than before the war. By 1864 union membership had begun to increase. A table published in *Fincher’s Trade Review* in 1864 demonstrated that the number of labor unions from December 1863 to December 1864 increased. According to the table, in December of 1863 there were a

⁴Thomas C. Cochran and William Miller. *The age of enterprise: a social history of industrial America* (New York: Harper, 1961), 65.

⁵Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: The Nineteenth Century*. American moment. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xiii-xiv.

⁶Ibid., 50.

⁷Licht, 50.

⁸Grob, 4-5.

⁹Ibid., 60.

total of 79 labor organizations, while by 1864 there were 270.¹⁰ In 1864 the number of moulders' local unions had increased from 24 to 65.¹¹

The reason labor organization thrived during the war was that the Civil War created conditions and agitations that cultivated organization. One way the war agitated the labor movement was through the government's strategies for funding the war. In a letter to Colonel D. H. Vinton, Quartermaster General M. C. Meigs said, "It has been impossible for the treasury to fill them all [requests for goods for the army], for the reason that it does not contain the money."¹² The January 1862 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* cited the 1861 government war debt as \$4,232,776.18.¹³

In order to raise the money to pay for the war, the government raised tariffs and taxes. The Tariff Act of 1862 created the highest tariff in thirty years.¹⁴ The government also turned to sales tax and income taxes on railroads.¹⁵ The new sales tax taxed items such as carriages, gold watches, construction, and property.¹⁶ Pennsylvania created an income tax that went into effect on April 1, 1862 and taxed people who earned over \$800 a year.¹⁷ However, there were few people who made over \$800 in small towns such as Franklin, Pennsylvania where only "one-

¹⁰ *Fincher's Trade Review*, December 1863 cited in John B. Andrews, *Nationalization*, vol. 2 of *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1918), 19.

¹¹ Andrews, 20.

¹² M. C. Meigs, Quartermaster General to Colonel D. H. Vinton, New York, November 16, 1861 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 174.

¹³ "Monthly Record of Current Events," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January, 1862, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu> (accessed October 27, 2009).

¹⁴ Cochran and Miller, 106

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁶ "High Taxes and Low Wages," *Valley Spirit*, April 21, 1861, Valley of the Shadow <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 29, 2009).

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

fourth of the citizens . . . have a nett [sic] income of over \$800.”¹⁸ The taxes failed to raise enough money, but they did succeed in angering workers.

When the taxes and tariffs failed to raise enough money, the government began to issue “greenbacks.” In February 25, 1862, the first of two legal tender acts was passed. This act allowed for \$300,000,000 greenbacks to be printed and circulated.¹⁹ This excessive greenback printing caused inflation,²⁰ which in turn led to price increases, and the cost of living rose during the Civil War. Workers were now unable to purchase the luxury items they used to buy such as magazines and books.²¹ The prices of meat, tea, sugar, rice, and muslin rose and from 1861 and 1863, and the price of beef rose from ten cents to eighteen cents.²² Sugar’s price also increased from five to twenty cents.²³

While the workers had to pay more for the necessities of life, their wages were not increased to compensate for the higher cost of living. Thus the government’s efforts to fund the war gave laborers a reason to continue organizing into labor unions and to continue protesting for higher wages as before the war. An article from the *Philadelphia Press* began by saying that workers all over the Northern states were “demanding higher wages” because “Taxation . . . the difference in values, the increase in the price of many necessary articles of life, consume that

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Andrews, 14.

²⁰ Note in Grob, 16.

²¹ “Labor Movement,” *Philadelphia Press*, November 16, 1863 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 219.

²² “The Past and Present, *Fincher’s Trade Review*, July 4, 1863 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 201; “Price of Beef,” *Valley Spirit*, June 15, 1864, Valley of the Shadow <http://valley.lib.edu> (accessed October 29, 2009).

²³ “The Past and Present, *Fincher’s Trade Review*, July 4, 1863 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 201.

portion of the laboring man's income that formerly went towards giving him some of the luxuries of life."²⁴

This discontent over wages caused increased organization among workers. A Newark shoe manufacturer, Mr. Hannan, reduced his employees' wages in June 1863. This caused the Newark shoemakers to call a meeting where they resolved "that no member of this society work at the reduced prices for any boss."²⁵ Other trades also demanded higher wages. The March 12, 1864 issue of *Fincher's Trade Review* said the "House Carpenters demanded \$2.50 per day" and the "Iron Moulders ask for 15 per cent advance."²⁶ In March 1864, the workers in Navy Yard also demanded higher wages. The watchmen were paid 13 shillings. They thought this was far too low and demanded that they be paid \$2 for their work. The blacksmiths were also discontented with their pay. The workers argued that the men in their respective trades who worked outside of the Navy Yard had recently received a raise in pay, and the Navy Yard workers wanted a raise too.²⁷

Another way the war propelled the post-war labor movement forward was by creating a demand for manufactured goods. Northern manufacturing suffered at the beginning of the war because of the South's secession and the resulting loss of cotton, but the North's industry did not suffer too long after secession because of the army's supply needs.²⁸ The war did not increase the North's industrial output, but it did, however, create a demand for items like

²⁴ "Labor Movement," *Philadelphia Press*, November 16, 1863 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 218.

²⁵ "The Trade Movement," *Fincher's Trade Review*, July 4, 1863, microfilm.

²⁶ *Fincher's Trade Review*, March 12, 1864 cited in John B. Andrews, *Nationalization*, vol. 2 of *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1918), 20.

²⁷ "Local Intelligence: Executive Labor Movement at Navy Yard," *New York Times*, June 29, 1864, Historical Newspapers Database. <http://proquest.umi.com>. (accessed October 27, 2009).

²⁸ Cochran, and Miller, 98; Nicholson, 89.

shoes, artillery, and uniforms.²⁹ For some states in the Union, like Massachusetts for example, the war increased industry. An author of an 1863 article in *The Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, stated that “the business of Massachusetts” was “more active or profitable” during the war because “the war has brought into activity many mechanical employments for which there is little occasion in time of peace.”³⁰ The war may not have created a nationwide industrial growth, but there certainly was a high demand for particular goods that needed to be filled.

To fill a high demand for manufactured good, laborers with mechanical skills were needed to produce the goods, but the war also caused a labor *shortage* that made this difficult. When the war began, workers began to enlist. Some labor unions “adjourned” in order to allow their members to enlist.³¹ A report from the Secretary of War in 1862, reprinted in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, cited that the number of volunteers in the Union Army was 718,512.³² Many of these men probably left their jobs because when they volunteered for the army, 100,000 jobs were left vacant.³³ In 1864, seven factories in Oldham were “at a standstill for want of hands.”³⁴ At the end of the war the total number of volunteers was 2,653,000 and forty-two percent were mechanics and laborers.³⁵ Forty-two percent of over two million volunteers is a large number of laborers to be taken out of the workforce and thus created a demand for laborers to fill the resulting vacancies.

²⁹ Licht, 96-97.

³⁰ “Commercial Chronicle and Review,” *The Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, August 1863 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 129-30.

³¹ Dulles, 91.

³² “Monthly Record of Current Events,” *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1862, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu> (accessed October 29, 2009).

³³ Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 49.

³⁴ “Federal Recruiting,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1864. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed September 15, 2009).

³⁵ Montgomery, 93.

To help fill these vacancies and alleviate the labor shortage, the Contract Labor Law was passed on June 4, 1864. This law allowed for Americans to go overseas and hire workers to come to America and work in American factories, thus bringing more immigrants into the workforce. This law also said that “no laborer imported under the terms of this law would be drafted for military service.”³⁶ The American Emigrant Company formed in Connecticut and created agencies in Europe. This company brought laborers from Britain, Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden to work in fields like mechanics, mining, and textiles.³⁷ Because the immigrants who came to America during the war had little or no money when they reached America, they were willing to work for low wages, thus, putting them in competition with the native Northern working class for jobs.³⁸ Competing with immigrants for jobs was another issue that agitated the labor movement during the Civil War.

Because of the labor shortage, employers also began hiring young boys instead of experienced workers. When the workers of the Messrs. Abbot & Noble iron foundry went on strike, the foundry owners solved the problem by hiring boys to replace the strikers. Even though this practice was harmful to men seeking employment, it was helpful to women and boys who lost their husbands and fathers due to the war. *Fincher's* said that the Stuart & Peterson's and the Leibbrandt & McCowell's foundries tended to hire the sons of Union soldiers. This was a great help to women who had lost their source of income because of the war. The problem with hiring these boys was that employers did this to “reduce pay” because the inexperienced boys could be paid less than skilled men.³⁹ The shoemaking industry experienced similar problems with

³⁶ Cochran and Miller, 106-107.

³⁷ Andrews, 117; Dulles, 97.

³⁸ Dulles, 97.

³⁹ “An Interesting Tour—A Visit from Cincinnati Moulders,” *Fincher's Trade Review*, November 21, 1863. microfilm.

apprentices. Shoemakers felt that employers were “flooding the factories with boys” and this was harming those shoemakers who had gone through the apprenticeship system.⁴⁰

Besides introducing greater numbers of immigrants and boys into the wartime labor force, the labor shortage also gave women more opportunities for work. Because many male workers enlisted in the Union army, there were jobs left vacant. Women began working in a variety of jobs such as print shops, cigar shops, telegraph offices, department stores, manufacturing, and government clerks. Before the war, women were not usually hired as government clerks, but due to the shortage of men, they frequently held this position during the war. However, they made \$600 yearly which was half of the \$1,200 a male clerk would make yearly.⁴¹

Women were not only working, but organizing and demanding higher wages, just as male workers were. An article from the November 16, 1863 issue of the *Philadelphia Press* told of the women in New York’s clothing industry that went on strike. The women were paid sixty-eight cents for a “whole suit of boy’s clothing,” which was the equivalent of fourteen hours of work.⁴² A woman who was a ““baster” on cavalry pantaloons” was paid “thirty-two cents a day.” Pay for making a coat was twenty cents per coat; only two could be made a day, so a coat maker would make forty cents a day.⁴³ Because of their low wages, some New York working women called together a meeting in November 1863 “to consult upon the best method of advancing their wages.”⁴⁴ Of the four-hundred women present there were only four men present, one of which

⁴⁰ *Fincher’s*, November 21, 1863. microfilm.

⁴¹ Foner, *Women*, 49-50.

⁴² “The Labor Movement,” *Philadelphia Press*, November 16, 1863 in *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History*. Eds. George Winston Smith and Charles Judah, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 218-219.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ “Working Women of New York,” *Fincher’s*, November 21, 1863. microfilm.

was Mr. Beach, president of the Workingmen's Union. The cause of this meeting was that "Meyers & Co., of Broadway, had reduced their wages from 30 cents per hundred springs on hoop skirts, to 18 cents, which being totally inadequate to support them." The women invited Mr. Beach in order to help them achieve their goal of higher wages. Mr. Beach declared at the meeting that the men and women should "unite together . . . a combination of the working girls for general protection, and to bring the subject of the miserable pay received by them before the public."⁴⁵ Civil War working women joined the workingmen in organizing for higher wages.

Although workers were not always successful in gaining higher pay, one area in which the working class made progress was in shortening the working day. Shorter hours were a necessity because at this time in America people worked anywhere between twelve and sixteen hours a day.⁴⁶ Ira Stewart, a labor leader who formed a union for machinists and blacksmiths in 1859, realized this necessity and began the push for an eight-hour working day before the Civil War.⁴⁷ Stewart believed that an eight-hour work day was necessary for workers because they needed time to study politics and educate themselves so that they would not unknowingly vote against legislation that would help them.⁴⁸ Stewart said, "The most important change to us as workingmen . . . is a permanent reduction to Eight of the hours exacted for each day's work."⁴⁹ The eight-hour-day was an important and contentious issue both during and after the war.

The war actually provided motivation to continue and increase action for the eight-hour-day movement. Articles in *Fincher's* demonstrate workers' conviction that even though a war was being fought, workers still needed to demand an eight-hour-day; in fact it was because of the

⁴⁵ *Fincher's*, November 21, 1863. Microfilm.

⁴⁶ Cochran and Miller, 65.

⁴⁷ Andrews, 89.

⁴⁸ Nicholso, 98.

⁴⁹ Ira Stewart cited in John B. Andrews, *Nationalization*, vol. 2 of *History of Labour in the United States* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1918), 89.

war that they were to demand shorter working hours.⁵⁰ *Fincher's* believed that the war would create “superabundance of labor” because the high demand for goods would be gone and soldiers would be returning home to the jobs they left behind for the war.⁵¹ Labor leaders believed that the eight-hour-day would act “as a partial offset to this superabundance of labor [at the end of war].”⁵² This was because workers would not be able to work as many hours and production would take longer requiring more laborers.

During the war, the laboring class organized in an effort to gain the eight-hour-day. In November of 1863, the employees of the Charlestown Navy Yard in Massachusetts struck demanding a shorter workday. The employers agreed to meet with the strikers and offered them a work day starting a mere “sixteen minutes earlier” than the time they usually started work. However, this was not good enough for the strikers and they continued the strike.⁵³

After the war the eight-hour-day was at the forefront of the labor movement.⁵⁴ Getting the eight-hour work day on the agendas of state legislatures was the direct result of the labor movement during the war. Stewart was still actively involved in the movement and advocated for mobilization on a national and state level.⁵⁵ Stewart’s plan worked, for right after the war in 1865, Massachusetts began considering an eight-hour bill and “special committee in favor of the Eight Hour System” was formed.⁵⁶ The Grand Eight-Hour League was formed in Massachusetts and lobbied for the creation of a law requiring an eight-hour working day. The League’s lobbying worked, for in 1866 several states’ legislatures began to consider passing a law. Some

⁵⁰ *Fincher's*, October 23, 1862. Microfilm; *Fincher's*, June 27, 1863. Microfilm.

⁵¹ *Fincher's*, October 23, 1862. Microfilm.

⁵² *Fincher's*, June 27, 1863. Microfilm.

⁵³ The Charlestown Navy Yard Strike. The Masses and Uncle Sam,” *Fincher's Trade Review*, November 21, 1863. Microfilm.

⁵⁴ David Brian Robertson, *Capital, Labor, and State: The Battle for American Labor Markets from the Civil War to the New Deal*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 15.

⁵⁵ Grob, 18.

⁵⁶ Robertson, 42; *Fincher's*, May 27, 1865.

states like Pennsylvania, Ohio, and California did pass bills regarding the eight-hour day, but the bills never translated into laws.⁵⁷

Despite the difficulties and opposition the laboring class faced in lobbying for the eight-hour day, there was some success. In 1867, Illinois, Missouri, and New York and six cities passed laws for the eight-hour work day.⁵⁸ In 1868, government employees were prohibited from working longer than eight-hours.⁵⁹

Along with the success of the eight-hour-day, the Civil War was responsible for several changes in the Northern workforce. The first change was woman were a more involved in the workforce. After the war, women were encouraged to leave the jobs they had occupied during the war, so that the returning soldiers would not be unemployed.⁶⁰ An article printed in the *Franklin Repository* on June 15, 1865 encouraged people to “welcome home” the soldiers “by providing them prompt employment “ because “They have been absent for months and some for years, and others have filled many of their places in the various channels of industry.”⁶¹

Though women were encouraged to give up their jobs to the veterans, many were unwilling to do so. An article in the June 1865 issue of the *Franklin Repository* made the point that no soldier should “suffer want in the land he has rescued from the peril of treason by his sacrifices.”⁶² Women countered this argument with the fact that they too would suffer lack if they gave up their jobs. *The Boston Daily Evening Voice* put it this way: “Perhaps it would be more feminine to fold our hands and starve in graceful indolence; or pass through life an object

⁵⁷ Robertson, 42.

⁵⁸ Robertson, 5 and Nicholson, 98; Orth, 71.

⁵⁹ Nicholson, 98.

⁶⁰ Foner, *Women*, 51.

⁶¹ “Our Returned Soldiers,” *Franklin Repository*, June 14, 1865, <http://valley.lib.virginia.edu> (accessed October 29, 2009).

⁶² *Ibid.*

of charity.”⁶³ Women now needed to work more than ever because after the war it was less likely for a woman to leave work for marriage because the war had added to the shortage of marriageable men.⁶⁴ A census taken in 1860 found that “There are now eight States in the Union in which the females are in excess of the males to the number of 74,000.”⁶⁵ After the war, this inequality of numbers would be even more glaring. An article published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in September 1868, pointed out that now after the war women should not simply be told to “Get married,” but that “there are not husbands for all, and that the women must become . . . self-supporting.”⁶⁶

The second change the Civil War brought to the Northern labor system was the introduction of freed slaves into the labor force. Even before the war, there were more slaves than industrial workers in the United States.⁶⁷ Therefore, when the slaves were freed, there was a significant number of new laborers introduced to the free labor force. Some Northerners reacted negatively to these new workers. Sinclair Tousey wrote in *The Knickerbocker* that if the slaves were freed and “paid for their work [they] would consume more of the products of the white men employed in the mechanic arts” and this would cause prices to rise and a ““leveling up” the price of labor.”⁶⁸ Samuel S. Cox, an Ohio democrat, believed that free slaves would take jobs away from whites. Cox said, “Our soldiers, when they return, one hundred thousand strong, to

⁶³ *Boston Daily Evening Voice*, January 12, 1865 cited in Philip S. Foner, *Women and the American Labor Movement: From the First Trade Unions to the Present*, (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 51.

⁶⁴ Foner, *Women*, 51.

⁶⁵ “Women’s Work and Wages,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, September 1868, 547, <http://digital.library.cornell.edu> (accessed October 27, 2009).

⁶⁶ “Women’s Work and Wages,” 547.

⁶⁷ Gutman. *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

⁶⁸ Sinclair Tousey, “Emancipation: Its Influence on the Rebellion and Effect on the Whites,” *The Knickerbocker*, October 1861, 349-50 cited in George Winston Smith and Charles Judah. *Life in the North During the Civil War: A Source History* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1966), 149-151.

their Ohio homes, will find these negroes . . . filling their places, felling timber, lowing ground, gathering crops.”

However, the Northern workforce actually needed the ex-slaves to fill the labor shortage caused by the war. After the war, many freed slaves began working in Northern mines and railroads.⁶⁹ A leader in the Philadelphia African-American community said, “a great scarcity of laborers exists in the country; making black workers welcome.”⁷⁰ The Republican Party agreed that ex-slaves were needed in the Northern economy.⁷¹

When *Fincher's* asked in 1863, “What, then are workingmen to do? Are they to settle down in tame submission . . . Or are they . . . to assert their rights, and struggle to maintain their proper position in society?”⁷² The laborers responded that they should “assert their rights.” The Civil War was an important period of labor history because of the labor organization that occurred both during and after the war that brought changes to the Northern workforce. Because the war created taxes and tariffs, laborers had a reason to demand higher wages that reflected the actual work they put into a task. In order to gain higher wages, laborers began to organize in greater numbers than before the war. This wartime period brought changes to the workforce in the form of the eight-hour-day and in the demographics of the working class. After the war, both women and African Americans were more prevalent in the workforce. Because northern laborers fought for their rights during this traumatic time in history, the labor movement gained momentum during the war that allowed it flourish after the war ended.

⁶⁹ “The Coming War,” *Valley Spirit*, November 1, 1865. Valley of the Shadow.

⁷⁰ Cox Richardson

⁷¹ Richardson, 14.

⁷² “Strikes,” *Fincher's Trade Review*, June 7, 1863, microfilm.

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