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"Is there something unique about Seattle's labor history that helps explain what is going on?" the reporter for a San Jose newspaper asks me on the phone during the World Trade Organization protests that filled Seattle streets with 50,000 unionists, environmentalists, students, and other activists in the closing days of the last millennium. "Well, yes and no," I answer before launching into a much too complicated explanation of how history might inform the present without explaining it and how the West does have some particular traditions and institutional configurations that have made it the site of bold departures in the long history of American class and industrial relations but caution that we probably should not push the exceptionalism argument too far. "Thanks," he said rather vaguely as we hung up 20 minutes later. His story the next day included a twelve word quotation.<sup>1</sup>

The conversation, I realize much later, revealed some interesting tensions. Not long ago the information flow might have been reversed, the historian might have been calling the journalist to learn about western labor history, a body of

research that until the 1960s had not much to do with professional historians, particularly those who wrote about the West. And his disappointment at my long-winded equivocations had something to do with those disciplinary vectors. He had been hoping to tap into an argument that journalists know well but that academics have struggled with. Call it western labor exceptionalism. It holds that work and class have meant something different in the West than in other regions and that labor relations have been as a consequence more turbulent and more radical than elsewhere.

It is an argument that circulates widely in the celebratory popular histories of the West. But it gains strength as well in many of the textbooks used to teach state and regional history. These typically include a chapter or two which narrate an exciting story of militant uprisings and violent strikes beginning in the mines and railroad camps of the gilded age, moving through early twentieth incidents like the Ludlow massacre and the Seattle General Strike, continuing with the maritime struggles that closed port cities in 1934 and the followup titanic battles between Harry Bridges and Dave Beck and their CIO and AFL brands of unionism, usually ending with the farmworker struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Articulated or not, the message is that the West's labor history is as special as its settlement history, filled with riveting episodes of high drama and danger. The Wobblies (Industrial Workers of the World) become in these accounts the

West's favorite labor movement, beloved for the same reason as cowboys: for their recklessness, their violence, and their failure.

That popular narrative stands in some tension to academic understandings of work, class, and labor in the West. In the last few decades historians have opened wide the field of labor history, pushing into issues and terrains that had previously been segregated or ignored. The result has been an impressive cross fertilization of subfields and an important crop of new arguments and insights. Today's labor history no longer fits neatly into a couple of distinct chapters and no longer focuses so tightly on strikes and radicals. Arguments about western labor exceptionalism have not disappeared, but they have become more complicated as labor historians have argued that issues of work, class development, and industrial relations lie near the heart of western historical change and regional identity.<sup>2</sup>

#### SEPARATE STRANDS

Western history and labor history had a curious and awkward relationship through most of the twentieth century. Professional historians paid little attention to workers, unions, or class until the 1960s. But outside of the history departments, a rich literature of labor history began to develop early in the 20th century, actually two literatures, one produced by left-wing novelists and journalists, the other

by economists.

Academic labor history was largely a project associated with labor economists. The study of industrial relations had emerged in the progressive era under the guidance of the University of Wisconsin economists John R. Commons and Selig Perlman. Moving, they claimed, away from the morality-based or revolutionary arguments about unions and class, the labor economists tried to understand what they thought to be the natural progress of an industrializing democracy towards a collective bargaining system of labor relations. History became important to their discipline because it enabled them to show the evolutionary trajectory and pick out the conditions that advanced or retarded the construction of what they regarded as a rational and efficient set of relations between workers, unions, and employers.

Their students took an early interest in the West, particularly in San Francisco which by the early twentieth century had established a reputation as the most tightly unionized major city in America. The labor economists set out to understand why, tracing in careful detail the history of unions, strikes, and labor radicalism from the gold rush on, focusing much attention on the way that labor shortages gave unions early advantages in the West. Some of those early studies remain impressive today, especially Ira Cross's A History of the Labor Movement in California (1935) which displays the labor economists' trade mark methodology: deep

historical empiricism. There is nothing shoddy about the research nor abstract about the conceptualization. The labor economists treated history with a reverence that even the most archive bound historian would admire.

Another subject also drew interest. The Industrial Workers of the World with their commitment to revolutionary industrial unionism and with their disdain for bargaining and negotiation over wages and working conditions, challenged the labor economist's model of industrial relations almost as much as they challenged the craft unions of the American Federation of Labor. Carlton Parker set out to explain this aberrant movement, producing a classic study, The Casual Laborer and Other Essays (1920), that relied on psychological concepts to argue that the movement was a response to social conditions, that dangerous social environments produced dangerous men.

In the decades that followed labor economists would branch out to study all of the basic industries of the West and most of the cities where labor movements had flourished. These books were notable for their focus on institutional dynamics, on how unions were built and how they functioned. Some remain classics: Paul Taylor, The Sailor's Union of the Pacific (1923); Vernon Jensen's Lumber and Labor (1945); Grace Stimson's Rise of the Labor Movement in Los Angeles (1955).<sup>3</sup>

But the legacy of the labor economists is much bigger than any specific list of books. In hundreds of dissertations and masters theses that poured out of the economics

departments and industrial relations institutes they laid down a carpet of descriptive studies of industries, unions, strikes, bargaining, and politics of labor. The labor economists also built the archives that today preserve invaluable collections of union and business records. At a time when western history libraries like the Huntington and Bancroft were rejecting such materials, much of the region's industrial and labor history was being preserved as well as written by members of another discipline.

Besides the strong institutional focus some other features of this labor-economics literature are notable. One is that it paid little attention to concepts of regionalism or the frontier development issues that occupied western historians, relying more on the specificity of industry than a specificity of place. As a result much of this labor history was not explicitly western. It was set in the West but the regional effect was not much explored. Another characteristic that particularly catches the eye of today's historians was the economists' inattention to solidarities and fragmentations based race, ethnicity, gender, or even class. The tight institutional focus on unions left little room for social analysis. A third characteristic might also be mentioned: these works tended to underplay conflict and violence. It was partly a matter of tone--the clinical style of expression--and partly because the economists theorized violent industrial relations as a passing historical phase and often moved their

studies through such episodes to reach the stable systems of negotiation and controlled conflict that they saw as modern and inevitable.

#### LABOR NOIR

This last tendency stands in sharp contrast with the other labor history project that shadowed the work of the economists through the first two thirds of the 20th century. Its modes of expression were novels and journalistic histories and its tone was strident and sensationalist. Out of this stream of literature would come some of the most enduring understandings of western work and labor, especially the understanding that the West claimed a uniquely violent and uniquely radical heritage.

The founders of this tradition were socialist writers who at the turn of the century tried to publicize the struggles underway in the mining camps, wheat fields, and seaports of the West. Images of industrial violence had figured in the fiction of late 19<sup>th</sup> century regional colorists like Mary Hallock Foote whose 1894 novel Coeur d'Alene had told the story of the Idaho mining wars from the viewpoint of the owners and managers, making dynamite throwing strikers into one more of the dangers that heroic westerners must face on the road to civilization. The radical writers flipped the perspective while building up the image of the West as a zone of class violence. The early classics include Frank Norris's

The Octopus (1901), a haunting portrait of farmers taking up arms against the Southern Pacific Railroad; Jack London's Martin Eden (1908) and Valley of the Moon (1913), semi-autobiographical tales of young people wandering through a western workscape filled with brutality and terror; Upton Sinclair's King Coal (1917), the nightmarish story of the Colorado Ludlow massacre, and Oil! (1927) his saga of wealth and class conflict in southern California.

In these works the West was gaining a labor noir literary tradition that would blossom further in the 1930s both in fiction and journalism. The novels of John Steinbeck, especially The Grapes of Wrath (1939), Chester Himes, If He Hollers Let Him Go (1945), and Carlos Bulosan, America is in the Heart (1946) Alexander Saxton Bright Web of Darkness (1958) are examples of the rich vein of popular-front fiction that deepened the images of the West as a land of repression for those who sought merely to work and live. Violence by the privileged against the poor was key to this regional counternarrative. Using and turning the west's mythic associations with opportunity and violence, the labor noirists preached that the region's dreams had become nightmares.

The labor noir historians worked with similar themes. Louis Adamic was first. In 1931 the Slovenian-born writer published what quickly became one of the best selling histories of American labor, Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America. Notable for its provocative primary

thesis that class violence caused by ruthless industrial conditions was endemic to American history, it also seemed to argue a secondary theme that the West was the location for the worst expressions of that violence. Moreover the book resurrected and romanticized the IWW, lavishing a good portion of its energy on stories of violence by and especially against Wobblies, many of whom in 1931 were still languishing in prison. Adamic had spent a number of years associating with Wobblies when he lived in Los Angeles. They become the forlorn heroes of his book and in a move that other journalists would follow, he regionalized them, turning them into westerners. He celebrates the basic principles of the organization, especially its plan for One Big Union as "a typically Western idea--big: the sky was the limit." <sup>4</sup>

Events in the 1930s added to the growing interest in labor's past and the market for such books. The explosion of strikes and organizing that attended the early New Deal found some of their most dramatic expression on the West Coast where the 1934 longshoreman's walkout led to a four-day-long general strike in San Francisco and sympathy strikes in ports up and down the coast. The passage of the National Industrial Relations Act in 1935 set off the greatest era of labor activism in American history as two union federations (the older American Federation of Labor and the new Congress of Industrial organizations) competed to organize millions of workers into unions. For the next twenty years labor would be

big news and labor history enjoyed its greatest era of public interest. Professional historians still paid little attention, but journalists and publishers now realized that there was a market for books on the subject.

Many of the popular histories of western places and other regional color journalism of the middle decades of the century emphasized labor issues and labor history, their authors typically following Adamic's lead and focusing on episodes of conflict and violence. Among the volumes still worth reading are Richard Neufelder's engaging portrait of the Pacific Northwest, Our Promised Land (1938); Anna Louis Strong's westcoast observations in I Change Worlds (1940); Murray Morgan, Skidrow: An Informal Portrait of Seattle (1951).

More important still are Carey McWilliams's books: Factories in the Field (1939) and Ill Fares the Land (1942) about farm workers; Brothers Under the Skin (1943), Prejudice: Japanese-Americans (1944), A Mask for Privilege (1948), and North From Mexico (1948) about immigration, racial prejudice, and the western industrial order; Southern California: An Island on the Land (1946) and California: The Great Exception (1949) McWilliam's efforts as regional interpretation and historical synthesis. In those eight books written over the course of ten years, the Los Angeles attorney/journalist/editor/historian brought the labor noir tradition to its pinnacle of sophistication and influence, creating ideas and agendas that would reshape much more than

labor historiography.

An implicit thesis of western labor exceptionalism had been running through the noirist literature all along, but apart from casually reasoned assertions about western traditions of individualism and violence, there was no theory to support it. McWilliams produced one. Spelled out in his 1949 book, California: The Great Exception, it formally argues the uniqueness of California's labor history but easily extends to most of the rest of the West.

Describing what he calls the "total engagement" of labor and capital in an unending no-holds barred cycle of industrial conflict, McWilliams' explanation starts with Ira Cross's insight that tight labor markets gave an early and fairly continual advantage to western workers. But the heart of his thesis is a blend of Frederick Jackson Turner's history and Robert Park's sociology. McWilliams argues that class tensions in the West were continually exacerbated by the pace of population growth and the "absence of well-established forms of social organization." The lightening quick development process caused labor movements to organize early and demand much. It made capitalists just as aggressive and ready to use "strong arm tactics." Absent what he took to be the usual institutions of order and tradition, labor relations in the West developed into a pattern of violence and militance on both sides.<sup>5</sup>

## THE NEW LABOR HISTORY

It was not until the historical profession started into its social historical turn in the mid 1960s that labor history became part of academic history. The journal Labor History was founded in 1960 and soon began to publish the work of a group of historians who had veered from the institutional focus established by the labor economists. E.P. Thompson's magisterial, The Making of the English Working Class (1963) became the touchstone for the "New Labor Historians" who followed its lead in using social history to probe beyond unions into work and social life, class formation, and the traditions of radical politics. The Northeast with its early industrialization and its well preserved sources was the favorite site for most of the new labor historians, but a few western studies appeared in the late sixties and early 1970s with many more to follow in the next decades. Two regional labor history organizations were founded in the late 1960s and early 1970s: The Southwest Labor Studies Association based in California and the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association which holds its annual meetings in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. Bringing together academic historians, trade unionists, and non professionals interested in the subject, the two organizations have provided the principle institutional support for western labor history over the past twenty-five years.<sup>6</sup>

The labor historians' biggest accomplishment has been to

explore in expanding detail the world of work, overturning singular images of "the worker" and replacing it with "working people" of great diversity and multiple contexts. From rural school teachers to hard-rock miners, from oilworkers in southern California to cannery workers in Alaska, from Native American hop pickers to African American ship stewards, up and down the social structure and across the broad geography of the West the labor historians of recent decades have mapped, counted, and richly described who worked, at what sort of jobs, under what sort of conditions.

Several challenging new understandings about the Gilded Age and Progressive Era western working class have emerged from all of this social history. One focuses on its industrial composition, the other on its ethnic configurations. Carlos Schwantes is responsible for the most ambitious argument about the complexity of the western workscape. He argues that the western economy was distinct from other regions because of the high proportion of wageworkers and wageworkers of a particular kind. The Northeast and Midwest had cities and large urban working classes. Much of the wage work in the West took place outside the cities, in the region's mining towns, lumber camps, cattle ranches, canneries, fishing villages, and in the mobile encampments of railroad workers who laid and repaired the tracks, farm workers who followed the crops, and on board the thousands of steam ships, lumber schooners, and fishing boats which plied the coastal and inland waters of the west

coast. Seasonal and economically unstable, these western industries depended upon a highly mobile work force comprised largely of young men who often moved from one kind of work to another and who also moved seasonally through the western cities, working on the docks, filling up the skidrows, getting through the winters. In several articles and an attractive pictorial volume, Hard Traveling: A Portrait of Work Life in the New Northwest (1994), Schwantes develops the concept of the "Wageworkers' Frontier" arguing not only the distinctive features of the western working class but also urging western historians to put aside covered wagons and recognize the centrality of wage work in the development of the region.<sup>7</sup>

Not everyone agrees with all aspects of this description. Richard White, whose synthesis of Western history, "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own" (1991) incorporates many of the key insights and contributions of the new labor history, stresses the continuing importance of family-scale farming and household labor through the early 20th century West. Obscured too in the wageworkers' frontier argument are the working lives of most women, whose labors were typically home centered. And it may be that wage work in other regions shared some of the circulatory and unstable characteristics that Schwantes assigns rather exclusively to the West. Still it is clear that the scholarship of the past generation has given us a new picture of not only the places and ways of work but of the West itself in the formative late 19th and early 20th

centuries.

Equally dramatic are the new understandings of who worked. The economists and noirists imagined the worker as male, white, and of no particular ethnic background. The new labor history has dug deeply into the complexities of race, ethnicity, and gender and discovered in these categories new reasons to contemplate the distinctive nature of western labor. This region had different patterns of ethnicity than any other: more Native Americans, Latin Americans, and Asian Americans, fewer African Americans than the South, and fewer southern and eastern Europeans than the Northeast. And those ethnicities overlaid the patterns of work and class in particular ways.

Scholars have mapped a kaleidoscope of ethnic occupational niches: Norwegians, Native Americans, Italians, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos in the fishing industries; lumber camps filled with other Scandinavians, Germans, and old stock Yankees; cattle ranches attracting Mexican Americans, African Americans, Native Americans and various whites; Chinese, Irish, Italian, eastern European, and Mexican men building the railroads; Portuguese, Italian, and Mexican women canning the fruits and vegetables; crews of almost every description harvesting the crops. The mining camps were especially complicated, changing ethnic compositions over time and place, with strong showings of Irish, Cornish, Welsh, Mexicans, Italians, Slavs, Hungarians,

Finns, and Chinese in some settings and very different mixes in the next mining region or the next generation. The cities were still more kaleidoscopic. Some occupations were ethnically controlled others not, with everything changing over time.

Deciphering the meanings behind these patterns has been a challenge. Most historians see a two-tiered, racialized labor market in which whites controlled jobs in any sector that offered reasonable wages while racial minorities were pressed into marginal occupations, principally service and unskilled laboring jobs. but others have been struggle to reconcile that binary logic with a social system of such diversity. The South had a two-tiered labor market. Does the same term apply to the West? Quintard Taylor has argued that African American opportunities in some parts of the West were situated in a three-sided competition that involved Asian Americans as well as whites. In The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture (1997) Neil Foley situates Latinos within another triangulation and within an evolving discourse of whiteness.<sup>8</sup>

The field has been slower to develop the issue of gender, despite early and eloquent pleas by Joan Jenson, Darlis Miller, and others. It was not until the late 1980s that books about female workers appeared in any number and the coverage is still thin. There are now books on waitresses, schools teachers, prostitutes, cannery and field workers, and a few

studies of unions and organizations like the Women's Wage Earner Suffrage League of San Francisco.<sup>9</sup> That some of the best studies focus on women of color can be counted as one of the triumphs of recent western history. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Issei, Nisei, War Bride (1986), Vicki Ruiz, Cannery Women, Cannery Lives (1987); Sarah Deutsch, No Separate Refuge (1987), and Judy Yung, Unbound Feet (1995) have been breakthrough books on several fronts.<sup>10</sup> But much more needs to be done. Something new has occurred in the last few years as scholars have figured out how to bring homeworking wives into labor history. In Dana Frank's Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labor Movement, 1919-1929 (1994) the labor movement is understood to consist of families and the family is understood to have consuming powers as well as producing powers, all of which makes gender issues and women's actions not peripheral but central to the fate of any labor movement.

#### WESTERN LABOR RADICALISM

While the labor history of the past generation has fractured our images of work and workers, it has also reorganized understandings of the West's labor movements and their relationship to the region's politics. Forgotten organizations like the Workingmen's Party of California have been rediscovered. Others like the Knights of Labor and the Union Labor Party that had been disparaged by labor economists

and noirists alike have gained new glory. And the old standards, the IWW and the AFL, have received full makeovers. As with the project of demographic recentering, the scholarship on labor movements has created an appreciation for the diversity of labor related institutions, politics, and ideologies while raising their collective profile. Thanks to these efforts, workers' movements figure more prominently than ever in the newer interpretations of Western political history.

Rethinking radicalism was one of the earliest and most consistent projects of the new labor history, which has in general sought to place radical movements within American political traditions and establish their continuing importance. Not surprisingly, it began with the *Industrial Workers of the World*. In the mid sixties a number of books heralded the resurrection of interest in an organization that seemed to speak to some of the concerns and styles of a new protest generation. Joyce Kornbluh, Robert Tyler, Joseph Conlin, and Melvyn Dubofsky turned the once feared Wobblies into forerunners of the CIO, the Civil Rights, and the Free Speech movements. They also more carefully than before distinguished between the peculiarities of its eastern operations and constituents and its western wing.<sup>11</sup>

The Wobblies became the jumping off point for a much wider investigation of western radicalism. Dubofsky set this up in a widely read 1966 article, "The Origins of Western

Working Class Radicalism" in which he drew attention to the Western Federation of Miners, the militant, socialist-linked union that helped launch the IWW. Dubofsky turned the WFM into the prototype for western radicalism. He argued that the mining region had seen industrialization in its most advanced, most rapid, and most brutal form. Taking on the noirist Turnerians who saw labor militance as an expression of western individualism and frontier conditions, he argued it was instead a response to the West's mature corporate structures. This was a West, he said, that Karl Marx understood better than Frederick Jackson Turner.<sup>12</sup>

These ideas helped inspire a long stream of followup studies focused on the region's resource extraction workers, especially miners. Easily a dozen important books and many more articles and dissertations have looked at hard-rock mining and coal mining in various western settings. Many endorse the descriptions of class struggle and miner radicalism, most recently in Elizabeth Jameson's fine-grained social history of Colorado's mining district All That Glitters: Class, Conflict, and Community in Cripple Creek (1998) and J.Anthony Lukas' Big Trouble (1997), a 750 page narrative centered on the trial of three WFM leaders charged in the 1905 bombing murder of Idaho's retired governor. But others complicate the image of mining as the motherlode of western radicalism. In The Butte Irish: Class and Ethnicity in an American Mining Town, 187-1925 (1989) David Emmons focused

on the largest and most powerful local in the Western Federation of Miners, finding not radicalism and class war but a relatively conservative, ethnically based union that went thirty years without a strike while dominating the city proudly called the "Gibraltar of Unionism."<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile another group of scholars has followed the trail of WFM and IWW radicalism into different industries and spaces: into the woods where a succession of radical unions of timberworkers and shingle weavers culminated in the formation of the CIO affiliated International Woodworkers of America in the 1930s;<sup>14</sup> into maritime transportation where, according to Bruce Nelson and Howard Kimeldorf, the radicalism of sailors and longshoremen in the 1930s owed much to the traditions of syndicalist organizing that wobblies and before them WFM activists had developed;<sup>15</sup> and into the fields where it meets up with Mexican traditions of radicalism in studies by Cletis Daniel, W. Dirk Raat, James Sandos, Devra Weber, and Camille Guerin-Gonzales.<sup>16</sup>

The explorations of the WFM-IWW tradition of western radicalism have paralleled and to some extent been in competition with another stream of scholarship that has focused on western cities and their labor movements. The cities saw the rise of craft unions of the American Federation of Labor in the late 1880s and before that the rise and fall of various Workingmen's parties and the Knights of Labor. These movements have taxed the interpretative powers of the

new labor history much more than the recognizable radicalism of the WFM and IWW. The unglamorous AFL had long been described as conservative, exclusive, and apolitical, and along with the Workingman's Parties and Knights Assemblies had been implicated in the West's worst episodes of xenophobia.

The scholarship has gone in two directions, one emphasizing the role and legacy of white supremacy, the other finding idealism and a legacy of labor power. Alexander Saxton pioneered the first in Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California (1971), a book that laid the groundwork for what was later called "whiteness studies". Its subject was the Workingman's Party of California which had come to power in San Francisco in 1879 and had played a large role in rewriting the state's constitution that same year. The WPC had been largely ignored by earlier labor scholars who found the party's combination of class-conscious and anti-Chinese politics embarrassing and also confusing. Confusing, because it was axiomatic that ethnic hatreds undermined labor movements. Saxton turned that axiom around, showing that racism helped the Irish, German, and native Protestant white workers of San Francisco overcome their differences and the resulting white-working-class solidarity laid the ground work for one of the most effective urban labor movements of the Gilded Age. Subsequent studies by Gwendolyn Mink, Sucheng Chan, Roger Daniels, Chris Friday, and Tomas Almaguer have followed the scheme of xenophobia through the anti-Chinese

campaigns led by Knights of Labor activists in various parts of the west in the late 1880s and the anti-Japanese and anti-Filipino politics of the AFL unions after the turn of the century.<sup>17</sup>

But other historians found more than xenophobia in these movements and, while acknowledging their racism, have been equally intrigued by their power to mobilize large numbers of white workers behind labor-centered and transformative political visions. Dan Cornford, Neil Shumsky, Jules Tygiel, and David Brundage are among those who have explored the gilded age radicalism that animated WPC and Knights activism.<sup>18</sup> The American Federation of Labor has also been historiographically refurbished, emerging in recent studies as more idealistic, class conscious, and politically involved than earlier scholars believed. Michael Kazin's Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era (1987) explores the sources of labor power in the decades when San Francisco was known as "Labor's City," contending that the AFL practiced a form of pragmatic syndicalism that while not revolutionary looked to "workers to transform society in their own image." Dana Frank joins Robert Friedheim and Jonathan Dembo in assigning a still more radical countenance to the Seattle AFL that waged the General Strike of 1919 and in the aftermath tried to build an infrastructure of labor owned banks, stores, a laundry, a daily newspaper, a union theater, even a film company in the early 1920s. Samuel

Gompers liked none of it and he warred often with these western city federations.<sup>19</sup>

These studies of urban labor movements expose the uneven geography of the most recent phase of labor history: the work has concentrated on a few spaces (rocky mountain mining districts, Northwest forests, California's valleys) and a few cities, especially San Francisco where the volume of labor related studies has had a noticeable effect on other aspects of the city's historiography. The political and social history of San Francisco has been extensively revised in the past two decades by urban historians sensitive to issues of class formation and labor politics (Roger Lotchin, Peter Decker, Phillip Ethington, William Issel, and Robert Cherney). Seattle's history has also been extensively rewritten. Richard Berner's three-volume city history may well be the most comprehensive labor-centered study of a city's institutional development found anywhere.<sup>20</sup>

But other cities await similar efforts, especially Los Angeles where much important scholarship is still in the publishing pipeline. The City of Angels was the West's fastest growing metropolis in the early 20th century and different in so many respects from the spaces that labor historians have come to know best. Because of its unique economy (oranges, oil, and entertainment) and demography (large numbers of Latinos and Jews instead of the Irish-Chinese axis) many of the equations labor historians have used to understand other

parts of the West do not apply. That may be why no one has yet figured out how to put labor into the LA story. Calling it the "Open Shop city" and treating it as the flip side of San Francisco makes for dramatic reading but bad history. The city was complicated. It was the site of an aggressive open shop campaign but also home to an impressive pattern of electoral radicalism (first by socialists, later by Upton Sinclair's EPIC movement). It had a promising AFL union movement early in the century which lost strength after World War I, but unionism remained alive and often highly innovative in the oil suburbs, the Mexican-American community, the Jewish eastside, among municipal water and power employees, and in the entertainment sector. As yet we know more about Mexican American working class life and activism through the studies by George Sanchez, Ricardo Romo, Gilbert Gonzalez, Francisco Balderama, and Douglas Monroy than we do about most other parts of this metropolitan working class. But there are a number of soon-to-be-published books that should change that.<sup>21</sup>

The western labor history of recent years shows other weaknesses in addition to its incomplete geography. The field's strength has been social history and community or industry based studies and it is only now beginning to appreciate cultural and political history. A handful of recent works explore the relationship between labor and the cultural institutions of the region. Mike Davis, Kevin Starr, Anne Loftis, and Stephen Schwartz have called attention to the

literary radicalism that flourished in Los Angeles and San Francisco and that helped remake images of the West and its workers.<sup>22</sup> Steven Ross's Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America (1998) opens another window on the laborist cultural crusades of the early twentieth century, as unions and radicals struggled to control not just print media but some of the dream machines of the young century. For years folklorist Archie Green has been urging a different strategy for exploring the cultural influences of workers and their movements. He introduced the concept of "laborlore" almost three decades ago in Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coalmining Songs (1972) and demonstrated it recently in Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes: Laborlore Explorations (1993). Maybe it is time for someone to follow his lead.

It is also time for labor historians to pay more attention to political institutions. Much of the new labor history has examined political ideas and actions without attending closely to the governmental and party systems in which they are embedded. What did it mean for labor that so many western cities lacked the entrenched two-party or single machine political systems common in the Northeast? How much did that contribute to the effectiveness of Workingmen's parties, Union Labor parties, and labor's interest in other political initiatives? Patterns of political development helped make the West a distinctive region in both the Gilded

Age when many state constitutions were written or rewritten, and in the Progressive era, when many western states reorganized governmental capacity and party systems. Labor historians have been paying attention to courts, parties, and governmental agencies in studies that focus on other parts of America. We need to bring that focus to bear on the West.<sup>23</sup>

Attention to politics may also encourage western labor historians to think more about the West itself. Some already do, Schwantes certainly, but others have been casually inattentive to the issue of regionalism, using western cities and other spaces without worrying about their westernness. This has its advantages: it has kept labor historians from falling into the parochial habits that plague some other western historical endeavors. But it robs both the western field and the labor field of potential insights. New efforts at synthesis are overdue; indeed it would be healthy if western labor historians would just argue about some of the field-defining theses that have been advanced. Schwantes "wageworkers' frontier" argument needs a full airing. More than a decade ago, Michael Kazin advanced a tentative but smart revision of Carey McWilliams' "great exception" thesis for California's urban labor movements. It was ignored. We need to change that. It is time to figure out how the rich social history that has been compiled over the last few decades adds up. What does it mean? It is fine to be cautious and empirical and tell the journalists when they call that the

West's labor history is "complicated." But that can be risky in a sense too. Nonacademicians have proved their ability in the past to take over the subject and make it respond to felt needs.<sup>24</sup>

1. Elliott Almond, "Economic and Social Divide Dates from Mill City's Birth," San Jose Mercury News December 2, 1999.
2. Two anthologies provide a good introduction to recent western labor historiography: Hugh T. Lovin, ed., Labor in the West (1989); Daniel Cornford, ed., Working People of California (1995).
3. Also important: Ruth Allen, Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas (1941); Vernon Jensen, Heritage of Conflict: Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry up to 1930 (1950); Philip Taft, Labor Politics American Style: The California State Federation of Labor (1968)
4. Louis Adamic, Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America (1931), 157.
5. McWilliams, California: The Great Exception, 133,172.
6. Both organizations hold annual spring conferences. Information about them and other labor history organizations can be found at the web site of the Labor and Working Class History Association (LAWCHA): [www.lawcha.org](http://www.lawcha.org)
7. Carlos A. Schwantes, "The Concept of the Wagerworkers Frontier: A Framework for Future Research" Western Historical Quarterly (January 1987),39-55.
8. Two-tierred arguments are made in Ronald Takaki's many books, including Strangers from a Different Shore: A History

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