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COVER ILLUSTRATION:

Iron Founder. From a series of engravings of craftsmen, 1825. Reproduced from JOHN CUNNINGHAM, NEWARK (1988). (For full reproduction, see p. 18.)
WORKERS in NEW JERSEY HISTORY

by JOSEPH GOWASKIE
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INTRODUCTION

New Jersey has a fascinating and complex history. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, the state’s past has not received the kind of systematic study that its rich tradition deserves and its importance in national history merits. As a result, there are huge gaps in our knowledge. And if historians and other scholars are in the dark concerning many aspects of New Jersey history, it is not surprising that many New Jerseyans possess scant knowledge about their state’s past. One area that has been woefully neglected is the history of working people. Until recently, very few studies concentrated on New Jersey workers. Consequently, the immense contribution that New Jersey laborers made to the growth and development of the state’s economy and the nation’s industry have gone largely unnoticed.

This book discusses some of the major themes emerging from the history of New Jersey’s workers. Obviously, this slender volume cannot do justice to the full range of worker occupations and activities, but I hope that it provides students with some insight and appreciation for the heroic sacrifices and contributions made by working men and women and encourages them to explore further.

I have divided New Jersey’s history into broad chronological periods and for each asked: “What were the major developments involving workers and their work during this time period?”

The book examines the changing nature of the work process from the colonial era to the present. Until the early nineteenth century, most New Jerseyans worked on farms, though a few worked at trades or crafts, ran small shops or worked in mines. Industrialization imposed radical change on people’s work lives. A worker no longer made an entire product, such as a shoe; he or she made a part of that product. Industrialized labor
became the most important form of labor in nineteenth-century New Jersey. In the mid-twentieth century, New Jersey’s industrial strength began to decline; the growth of the service sector is undeniably the most important development in the state’s recent history.

These economic changes had a profound impact on the labor force. The mass-production industries attracted millions of Eastern European immigrants prior to World War I. Blacks, women, and Hispanic Americans took jobs in the burgeoning service sector after the Second World War. New Jersey workers’ struggle to secure decent wages, shorter hours, and improved working conditions is a major theme in this story. Sometimes that struggle led to violent strikes or was met by government repression. Some strikes, such as the legendary Paterson Strike of 1913, attracted national media attention and were part of a larger working-class movement for social and economic justice. In addition, there were national and international crises such as World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II that had a profound effect on New Jersey’s economy and her workers. Finally, working men and women have been affected by the response of New Jersey’s government to economic good times and bad.

For the most part, this book is based on secondary sources. Specific notes are provided only for quotations or charts. I would like to express my thanks to Nancy Dallaire for her excellent design and Mary Murrin, Lee Parks, and Richard Waldron of the New Jersey Historical Commission, Barbara Petrick of Dickinson High School, Jersey City, and Stanley Worton of Jersey City State College for their helpful criticism and comments.
CHAPTER ONE

Colonial and Preindustrial Labor, 1600–1800

New Jersey's first settlers faced the difficult task of carving a society out of the wilderness. No one—man, woman, or child—was exempt from physical labor. Land had to be cleared, buildings erected, fields cultivated, and food, clothing, and other necessities produced. Throughout the colonial period, 90 percent of New Jersey's workers made their living from nature: farming, mining, hunting, trapping, fishing, whaling, and lumbering. Their daily work life was controlled by the rhythm of nature and not measured, as it is today, by the hands of a clock. Moreover, value was associated with the completion of the task, not the hours it took to do it. Crops were harvested, animals fed, lumber chopped, beaver trapped, and fish caught in a daily cycle that went from sunup to sunset and in a yearly cycle of the changing seasons. Although New Jersey's workers labored long and hard, they frequently experienced more control over their work life than their descendants would experience after mechanization and the introduction of the computer.

Two other general conditions of labor should be noted. First, labor-saving machinery, so much a part of our work life today, did not exist to any degree during the colonial period. Almost all work was done by hand. Hence, the need for many workers. Second, another feature of modern work, labor specialization, was relatively rare, though there were a few skilled craftsmen and artisans such as glassmakers and blacksmiths. Most workers
possessed several different skills; they were generalists who practiced no one particular trade, but could do many things reasonably well. Women and children, for example, not only cooked, spun cloth and sewed clothes, they also helped to plant and harvest crops. In a frontier society, workers had to be able to perform many tasks and fulfill many roles. Land was the chief form of wealth, and New Jersey’s economy during the colonial period was firmly rooted in agriculture. With few exceptions, most working New Jerseyans were farmers who raised livestock or produced grains, livestock, fruits, vegetables, and other products for local consumption or for shipment to New York and Philadelphia for sale. Most New Jersey farmers and their families owned about one hundred acres of land, but the picture varied considerably throughout the colony. Wealthy settlers in Hunterdon, Sussex, Bergen, and Somerset counties amassed estates of several hundred acres and more, and worked them with farm laborers, tenant farmers or black slaves.

**Work Life on the Farm**

The work life of the New Jersey farmer was difficult and his work day was long. He had to clear the land, plow the soil, harvest the crops, and perform many other chores incidental to farming. He was assisted by his wife and children, one or two servants or slaves, and a few farm animals like horses and oxen. Since most of the food, clothing, and other family necessities were produced by the household, women occupied a central economic role in colonial New Jersey. The household economy could not have functioned without their labor and, to a lesser extent, that of the children.

The farm wife, assisted by daughters and women servants, planted vegetable gardens, bred poultry and swine, and tended the cattle, whose milk she made into butter and cheese. In preparation for winter, she salted, pickled, and preserved the harvest of her garden and the fields and streams. She spun cloth, sewed her family’s clothes, and made such essentials as soap, candles, and medicine. When the home economy failed to produce all that was necessary, she traded surplus products for something locally. In addition to managing the household, overseeing and organizing the labor of her children and ser-
vants, she was responsible for educating, training, and disciplining those entrusted to her care.

In a society which frowned on idleness and in which there was so much work to be done, the labor of children was considered both valuable and essential for good order. In the household economy everyone had to work. It was not uncommon for boys under ten years old to work alongside their fathers in the fields and in the barns, or for very young girls to assist their mothers in housekeeping and caring for infant brothers and sisters. The modern view of adolescence as a time of physical, psychological, and intellectual development was a luxury few families could afford. In the colonial period, children were expected to mature rapidly into young adults.

**Types of Labor**

Like all the colonies, New Jersey experienced a shortage of workers. The frontier economy required a great many workers, and working for others was not an attractive prospect when good land was abundant and relatively cheap. There were several systems to supply workers to meet the shortage.

**Indentured Servants**

The first, indentured servitude, existed in all the colonies. Basically, an individual signed a contract or indenture to bind himself to serve a master for a specific period of time, usually two to seven years. Many immigrant families indentured every family member to pay for their passage from Europe. The servant earned no wages (there were some exceptions to this in the iron industry) during the period of the indenture, but the master provided him with food, shelter, clothing, medical care, and religious and moral training. At the end of the service period, the servant became a free man and received from his former master some land, corn, clothing, and tools. How a servant fared once he was free depended on whether or not he possessed a marketable skill, could take advantage of land ownership, or had the drive and brains to find a niche in a growing economy. Unfortunately, many servants did not achieve their goal of freedom and property. They became propertyless day laborers or died before they achieved their freedom.

Most indentured servants worked as agricultural laborers or
domestics (house servants), but some were artisans or skilled craftsmen whose skills were in great demand, such as blacksmiths and masons. Daniel Cox, a New Jersey businessman and governor, imported a large number of indentured servants to work in an enterprise that he built at Cape May that included whale and cod fisheries, a shipyard, and a pottery. Servants also labored on New Jersey's iron plantations. Peter Hasenclever, a financier and entrepreneur, invested a large sum of money on ironworks at Charlottenburg, Ringwood, and Long Pond. To man his industries he imported over 500 men and their families from Germany, as well as other workers from England. Among the workers were miners, foundry men, forge men, charcoal makers, carpenters, masons, and general laborers. Although they were indentured servants, many of these workers received some form of wage payment.

A small number of indentured servants were convicts, felons, vagabonds, and debtors from England and within New Jersey. In an age of few jails or prisons, their punishment was servitude.

The working conditions faced by indentured servants depended largely on the type of work they did and their masters' nature. Treatment of indentured servants varied widely throughout the colony. Some were treated fairly but court records include many cases in which masters were charged with the death of servants. In addition, a number of newspaper advertisements attested to the existence of runaways. Peter Hasenclever placed an advertisement in the New York Gazette or Weekly Post Boy to call attention to seven runaway miners.

They are all Germans, and talk very little English, had on when they went away soldiers jackets and carried with them, their miner's clothes black trim'd up with red, likewise guns and hammers. As these men are still engaged by contract for 3 years and 4 months, and have been brought into this country from Europe and at very great expense, all gentlemen, well-wishers to their country, are respectfully desired not to engage these people in their service, etc. etc.1

At the time of the American Revolution indentured servants composed perhaps one-tenth of New Jersey's population of 120,000.
Slave Labor

New Jersey’s colonists also turned to slave labor to solve the labor shortage. Unlike servants, slaves were bound to their masters for life and had few civil rights. And, their children were also slaves. Slavery thus provided a cheap, permanent, and potentially renewable source of labor. At first the colonists enslaved the Indians, but when that proved unsatisfactory, they began to import blacks. Before 1750 most slaves came from the West Indies because slave owners thought slaves brought directly from Africa would be hard to control. Although some men, like Lewis Morris of Tinton Falls, Monmouth County, and Charles Read of Burlington, used slaves in their ironworks and on large estates, most slave owners had one or two blacks working in their fields or in their homes.

Some slaves possessed or learned skills and worked as coopers, millers, carpenters, and skilled iron workers. The presence of slaves in New Jersey with marketable skills is illustrated by Charles Read, Jr.’s advertisement in the Pennsylvania Gazette.

TO BE SOLD, BY
CHARLES READ,
At Aetna, West New-Jersey
TWO FORGE NEGROES

One a good Firer, and the other a good Hammer-man. 2

While the working conditions of New Jersey’s slaves may have been better than those on Southern plantations, the penalties for running away, planning and participating in risings, and engaging in other acts of resistance were frequently brutal. Depending on the infraction, miscreants might be flogged, mutilated, hanged, or burned alive. This harsh treatment led to the passage in 1786 of a New Jersey statute which stated that slaves “ought to be protected by law from those exercises of wanton cruelty too often practiced upon them.” 3 Towards the end of the eighteenth century an antislavery movement led to the passage of several laws designed to reform some of the system’s worst features. Finally, in 1804, the legislature passed a law calling for the gradual abolition of slavery.

Apprenticeship

New Jersey’s settlers also used the apprenticeship system to
THE
African Miscellanist:
OR,
A COLLECTION
OF
ORIGINAL ESSAYS,
ON THE
SUBJECT OF
NEGRO SLAVERY.

BY PHILANTHROPOS.

"AM I NOT A MAN AND A BROTHER?"

TRENTON:
Printed by WILSON & BLACKWELL....1802.
train a variety of skilled workers. Although the colony was largely rural, there were a small number of artisans or skilled craftsmen in the towns and on the iron plantations. Wheelwrights, weavers, masons, cordwainers (shoemakers), carpenters, blacksmiths, and millers possessed skills which were in short supply. Generally, an apprentice served many years before he began practicing his trade. Frequently, apprenticeship was coupled with indentured servitude. An apprenticeship agreement bound a teenager to a master for a specific period of time, generally about seven years, and it required the approval of parents or guardians. The apprentice lived with the master’s family and assisted him and his wife in the business and the home. In return a male apprentice learned reading, writing, mathematics, and the master’s trade, and a female apprentice learned reading, weaving, and household skills.

A weaver named Pell Teed and his wife signed a typical agreement with the mother and stepfather of John Morris, aged seven. Morris was apprenticed to Teed for a period of thirteen years and five months or until he became twenty-one. The terms of the agreement provided for the strict regulation of Morris’s conduct. In return his master was directed to teach him the weaving trade as well as to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. In addition Morris was to be provided with adequate, food, and clothing. When his service ended, Morris was to receive his freedom and a new set of clothes. The text of the indenture provides excellent insight into society’s code of conduct for a young male.

This indenture witnesses that John Moris [sic] son to Stephen Moris deceast late of Newark in ye county of Essex and State of East Jersey hath of his own free will and accord and with ye full consent of his Father in Law Thomas Force and Mother Anne Force of Newark in said county put himself unto Pell Teed and Huma his wife of Newark in said county and with them after as a servant and apprentice to serve and dwell for and during the term and space of thirteen years and five months or untill he shall arrive at ye age of twenty one years. During all which time ye said John his said Master and Mistress faithfully shall serve, their secrets keep, their lawfull commands gladly obey. He shall not absent himself by night or by day from ye servis of his said Master and Mistress without ye consent of his said Master and Mistress; at cards or dice or any other unlawfull
games he shall not play whereby his said Master or Mistress shall have damage. With his own goods or ye goods of others he shall not trade or traffic to ye damage of his said Master or Mistress. He shall not commit fornification nor contract matrimony within ye said term of time nor frequent taverns or playhouses but in all things shall behave himself as a good and faithfull servant or apprentice ought during ye term aforesaid and ye said Master and Mistress shall procure and provide the said apprentice suitable and sufficient meat, drink, washing, lodging and apparel and learn him the weavers trade according to ye custom of ye country to do country work and learn him to read, write and cypher so as to keep book and at ye expiration of said term of time to sett him free with one new suit of holiday cloaths and for a true performance the parties have hereunto interchangeably set their hands and seals this twenty fourth day of January one thousand seven hundred and seventy eight. Signed sealed and delivered in the presence of WILL’M ELY, LUCY PERKINS Canoebrook
THOMAS X FORCE
BANNY X FORCE
PELL TEED
HUMA TEED

Ironworkers

As a rule, most of New Jersey’s workers made their living from agriculture. Workers in the iron industry were conspicuous exceptions. During the colonial era, the industry required large numbers of both skilled and unskilled workers. For example, miners had to dig the iron ore from mines in Morris, Bergen, and Sussex counties, or extract it from bog-ore deposits in the stream beds of Burlington and Gloucester counties. Woodcutters felled the trees which colliers turned into the charcoal used to smelt the ore. Much of the iron was produced on nearly self-contained iron manors or plantations where various skilled workers operated the furnace, tended the forge, ran the gristmills and sawmills, and performed the numerous tasks essential for the production of pig and wrought iron and manufactured iron articles.

New Jersey’s ironworkers were a mixed group which included original settlers, their descendants, European immigrants, Indians, and blacks, working in various combinations of free labor,
indentured servitude, apprenticeship, and black slavery. The ironworks of northern New Jersey made extensive use of black slaves.

The working conditions varied accordingly to the task, location, and the nature of the iron master. In general, though, the production of iron demanded the most effort. Making charcoal, for example, required the woodcutters and colliers to live in forest huts for months at a time. Miners dug for iron ore by hand with bars and pickaxes, and hauled it to the surface in a bucket or a basket attached to a rope. Once started, the furnace operated twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Two shifts worked twelve hours a day for periods of seven to nine months at a time.

Since much iron manufacture took place in isolated, remote areas of the colony, ironmasters provided the workers with simple houses and a company store a short distance from the iron works. Some iron estates also contained a school and a church. The ironmaster lived nearby in a fairly sizeable mansion or "big house" and personally supervised the operations, so a paternalistic atmosphere dominated the entire manor. Loyalty and hard work were expected from the workers, and, in return, the ironmaster was ready to assist his men with any troubles or problems that they might bring to him. Workers in need of a doctor, lawyer, or minister would go to the masters, some of whom ruled over the estates like medieval lords of the manor.

**Leisure Activities**

During the colonial period New Jersey’s workers—men, women and children—labored long and hard at a variety of jobs, most of which were closely related to the agricultural and frontier nature of the colony. However, a picture of all work and no play is inaccurate. When neighbors gathered to build a barn, butcher some hogs, or harvest the crops, the occasion always called for drinking, dancing, and conversation.

Like working people today, colonial laborers pursued leisure activities as relief from the rigors of work. Unlike today, however, workers frequently mixed leisure within their work routine. The separation between work and leisure was not sharply defined; work and play were often combined. Workers did not enjoy the variety of leisure activities that characterizes
modern life. Drinking was one way they relaxed and socialized while on the job. In fact, one of the biggest problems New Jersey’s ironmasters faced was their workers’ drinking habits. To deal with this situation, the legislature in 1769 passed a law giving ironworks’ supervisors the authority to sell rum or liquor to employees of the Hibernian Works in Morris County, while forbidding any tavern or inn within four miles of the works to sell any alcoholic beverages to the workers. Evidence suggests that the law was ineffective. Throughout the colony, hardworking iron laborers celebrated births, marriages, town meetings, or the end of the charcoal-making season with several days of drunkenness and revelry that often interrupted iron production.

Militia duty or “training days” provided another opportunity for workers to escape the rigors of the ironworks and other labors for merriment and socializing. Every male citizen of New Jersey over eighteen years was required to report for militia duty three or four times a year. However, training days were observed more often in the taverns than on the parade grounds, as indicated by a diary (author unknown) from the Martha Furnace Ironworks in Burlington County:

June 10, 1808—Training at Bodine’s was very fully attended from ye works. Most of the hands about the bank retd orderly.
May 8, 1809—Training at French’s Bass River.
June 9, 1809—Training at Bodine’s
May 25, 1810—Training at Bass River Most of the hands off
April 21, 1812—Thomas Anderson not returned from training
John Cramer returned about 11 o’clock in forenoon
April 19, 1913—Military exercises at Bodine’s. Hands chiefly there
July 15, 1813—Capt Joseph Townsend made a draft of the militia at Sooy’s

Bodines, French’s Bass River and Sooy’s were popular taverns frequented by the Martha Furnace ironworkers. Recreation, good times, and drinking were intimately associated with the work activities of New Jersey’s laborers.

At the end of the colonial period, New Jersey’s workers were an important element in a rapidly changing economy. A growing class of skilled artisans in the towns and villages earned wages anywhere from 50 to 100 percent higher than their counterparts in England. Generally, these workers remained gainfully
employed throughout most of the year, subject only to the usual slowdown during winter, an occasional economic recession, and self-imposed periods of idleness. Unskilled common laborers faced more difficulties, however, and oftentimes moved from the forests to the fields and the wharves in search of steady employment. In spite of these problems, however, most observers noted that New Jersey’s workers were better clothed and fed than England’s working class. In the nineteenth century, economic change would provide both opportunities and problems for New Jersey’s laborers.

CHAPTER TWO

Artisans and Industries, 1800–1880

Apprentices, Journeymen and Masters

During the colonial period and well into the nineteenth century, the vast majority of New Jersey workers made their living from the land. Nevertheless, there was a small but growing class of skilled artisans in towns and villages before the American Revolution. A self-employed craftsman like a shoemaker, hatter, or jewelry maker worked in a small shop or room and made an entire product (shoe, hat, or watch) from beginning to end with hand tools. For the most part such craftsmen sold their products to the local townspeople and the immediate farm population; a few might attempt to market their goods in larger cities like Newark, New York, and Philadelphia. Some craftsmen alternated working at their trade with farming when business was slow.
While many artisans were self-employed, others worked for wages in gristmills, breweries, distilleries, printing offices, factories, and foundries. Except for the iron plantations, these businesses were quite small by today's standards. Generally fewer than ten artisans worked in any one business.

Stages of the Artisanal Life

Before he could become a full-fledged, skilled craftsman or master, a worker first completed his apprenticeship and worked as a journeyman. During the early nineteenth century, boys of fourteen or fifteen were drawn to New Jersey's towns by the prospect of learning a trade as an apprentice. Many young boys entered apprenticeship as a way of moving up in a society which placed a premium on skilled labor. Apprenticeship was frequently coupled with indentured servitude, and a boy lived for a specified number of years in the home of the master artisan. Along with the craft skills, the apprentice was taught to take pride in his craft and was encouraged to further his education after working hours. In the larger towns, a master like Moses Combs of Newark, the founder of Newark's wholesale shoe industry, provided a night school for his apprentices. In the 1820s, Newark apprentices also had access to a library open in the evenings for their education. Despite the membership fee of twelve and one-half cents, a sizeable expense for a young man in those days, 306 apprentices applied for membership to use the library.

After serving several years or more as a satisfactory apprentice, an aspiring artisan became a journeyman (someone who worked for day wages). A journeyman worked under the direction of a master craftsman like the apprentice, but he possessed his own tools and was fully skilled in his trade. He lacked only the capital or credit to set up his own shop or business. That

Newark craftsmen, 1825. These engravings show four different kinds of skilled worker common in early nineteenth-century Newark—brewer, letterpress printer, iron founder, and saddler. Though the engravings were taken from The Book of English Trades and Library of the Useful Arts (1825), English and American craftsmen would have had similar skills. Reproduced from JOHN CUNNINGHAM, NEWARK (1988).
would come in due time. Every artisan expected that knowledge, experience and hard work would result in his becoming a self-employed master craftsman. Among hatters, when a young man finished his apprenticeship, his workmates gave him a party, symbolizing his entrance into the elite of union hatters. Such a party was called a “blowout.”

**Daily Life**

Hard work did characterize the daily life of the New Jersey artisan. There were few machines; the artisan produced everything by hand. Nonetheless, the very nature of preindustrial labor afforded welcome periods of leisure and relaxation. Unlike modern labor, the artisan was not controlled by a machine or timed by a clock; he worked at his own pace. Work schedules were irregular and production was unplanned. He might work several long days to fill existing orders and then knock off for a few days to take it easy. While moving about the town for supplies and materials, the craftsman frequently stopped by a groghouse to visit and have a drink. In addition, the seasonal nature of preindustrial work meant that an artisan experienced frequent bouts of involuntary leisure or unemployment. During winter, for example, most outdoor work ceased altogether. Business slowdowns or slack periods might send the artisan hunting, fishing or trapping until prosperity returned and he received orders for his goods.

Artisans controlled the production process, and employed their skills, experience, and tools to fashion the finished article from raw material. To a large extent, they determined the article’s selling price and consequently their wages and the quality and quantity of goods on the local market. Although wages varied from craft to craft, with jewelry makers and leather makers earning more than shoemakers or blacksmiths, all skilled artisans shared common values and beliefs. Master artisans in particular regarded themselves as intelligent and independent members of the community. They preached a doctrine of hard work, quality workmanship, and a fair price for their product. They took pride in their status and position in the community and believed firmly that their labor was more important to society than that of lawyers, bankers, merchants, and doctors because they, like farmers, produced goods. Industrialization revolutionized the nature of work and ended the skilled artisan’s
domination over the production process, along with the traditional values of the artisan class.

**The Industrial Revolution**

By the 1830s and 1840s, industrialization was beginning to affect workers in New Jersey’s larger communities such as Newark, Paterson, and Trenton. Basically, the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution altered significantly the ways that goods were produced. Prior to industrialization a skilled artisan, such as a shoemaker, made an entire pair of shoes with his hand tools and sold them directly to his customer. With the onset of industrialization, shoemaking was divided into several distinct steps: cutting the leather into uppers and soles, sewing the uppers together and bottoming or stitching the soles to the uppers. Some of these steps, such as sewing the uppers, could now performed by less skilled and lower-paid workers who needed little or no training. A master shoemaker who owned a central shop supplied women in the town or on surrounding farms with uppers to be sewn by hand with needle and thread, paid them piece rates for each item completed, and then collected and distributed the product to journeymen who stitched the uppers to the soles. A skilled journeyman was still needed to cut the leather and stitch the sole and upper, but he now made less money than he did when he produced the entire shoe. This practice, called the putting-out system, increased the volume of production to meet the expanding market resulting from population increase. It also cut the costs of labor and reduced the control of skilled workers over production, since the journeyman only performed a part of the process.

Eventually, machines were introduced to do certain tasks. In the beginning most of these machines were human powered, but soon machines powered by water or steam were commonplace. The installation of machines made many shops begin to look like factories. Again, using shoemaking as the model, during the 1870s women began using sewing machines to perform specialized stitching operations on the uppers. One might sew a side piece to a top. Another would sew two halves together and a third might do some fancy stitching. Fifteen to twenty women performed these tasks in a small factory room. Similarly, the process of bottoming the soles and uppers became
subdivided into distinct and specialized stages, several of which were accomplished by workers using machines in a factory. Mechanization decreased the skill level further and lowered wages as well. As machine operators, workers no longer owned the tools of production. Since machinery was costly, most artisans did not have the money to purchase machines and the opportunities for self-employment declined drastically.

**Effects of Industrialization**

In general, industrialization changed dramatically the production of goods and the nature of work. Instead of skilled craftsmen using their tools to fashion an article from beginning to end, unskilled and lower-paid laborers used some form of power-driven machinery to perform distinct steps of the work necessary to produce an item. Jobs were split into separate tasks, skills became obsolete, laborers did not own tools, and artisans no longer controlled the production process. Industrialization, therefore, had a serious impact on the artisan’s economic well-being. Perhaps more important, however, he experienced a profound psychological loss of self-esteem and a decline in social status. Recall that the preindustrial artisan, independent and self-employed, had been a pillar of the community. As a master craftsman or a journeyman on his way to achieving the highest rank of his trade, the artisan was respected as a creator of goods needed by the community. His knowledge and ability contributed to the functioning of society. By robbing his skills, industrialization greatly reduced the master’s independence and his role in the community. He was no longer the key factor in the production process. For the journeyman, the chances of ever becoming a master dwindled rapidly with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Increasingly, he was relegated permanently to the lesser status of a wage earner. He used someone else’s machines to make part of a product whose price he had no say in setting, and he sold his labor for a wage that was largely determined by outside market forces.

Similarly, the mechanization of the crafts destroyed the traditional apprentice system. Since a lengthy training period was no longer necessary to learn the new, unskilled jobs, adult males instead of teenage boys were recruited for these low-paying positions. It was no longer profitable for an employer to spend several years boarding and training a youth to learn several
unskilled tasks when these jobs could be easily learned by an adult off the street. Consequently, mechanization dealt a fatal blow to the apprentice system. Employment opportunities for young men generally declined. Even in industries like textiles, machinery made it profitable to hire large numbers of unskilled women and children.

Although this was the general model of industrialization, the process was not uniform throughout New Jersey. Different crafts in different communities experienced industrialization in diverse ways. Not all crafts industrialized at the same time. Even within a single community, a craft experienced industrialization unevenly. For example, Newark’s hat industry underwent rapid industrialization during the pre-Civil War period. Independent skilled hatters working in small shops were replaced by unskilled men and women using machines to perform discrete tasks in large factories. By 1850, over 1,300 employees labored in this industry; two-thirds worked in factories using steam-powered machinery and 72 percent in factories of more than 100 employees each. Yet, even here industrialization had not triumphed completely. A small number of skilled craftsmen still made hats by hand for a local retail market. Similar situations existed in other trades. It was not uncommon for a skilled artisan using the traditional craft methods to exist side-by-side in the same community with an unskilled factory worker tending power-driven machinery.

Finally, we should note two other features about industrialization. While traditional skills were rendered obsolete, new skills such as those of the machinist were created by the introduction of machinery. And many new industries contained sizeable numbers of skilled positions alongside of many unskilled jobs. Industrialization required skilled workers, but they possessed skills different from those of the preindustrial artisan.

**Artisans Respond**

How did New Jersey’s artisans respond to the economic changes of the Industrial Revolution? Some were able to adjust successfully by acquiring new skills such as building and repairing machinery or by moving into growing industries as skilled workers, foremen or supervisors. Several successful manufacturers in Paterson began their careers as workers, acquired skills as apprentices, and then started small shops or factories of their
own. William Watson, for example, worked in a textile mill, was apprenticed to a machinist, became a foreman, and then opened his own Paterson machine shop in 1845 employing ten workers. By 1873, his business employed 1,100 men and boys. Most artisans, however, tried to resist the negative effects of industrialization by combining in organizations known as trade unions.

New Jersey’s first unions emerged during the 1830s in those communities experiencing industrialization. They were local craft unions in which membership was limited to one trade. Shoemakers in Newark, Orange, Paterson, and New Brunswick formed craft unions as did Newark’s saddle and harness makers, carpenters, hatters, and teamsters. Artisans joined together to maintain job control and protect the craft from cheaper, less skilled workers. They sought to retain and strengthen the apprentice system, set work rules, and establish a uniform and minimum wage scale. They also pushed for the closed shop, pressuring masters and employers to hire only union members.

**Strikes and Unions**

To secure these goals, artisans threatened and conducted strikes, enlisting the assistance of other workers and support of the general public. Shoemakers struck in Orange in 1832 and 1835, in Newark in 1835 and 1836, and in Paterson in 1837. After a successful shoemaker’s strike in New Brunswick in 1836, employers promised to hire only union shoemakers, agreeing “not to give employment to any journeyman, except to a member of the Cordwainers Society of the City.” In 1853, Newark’s union carpenters refused to hinge doors or handle window frames made at nonunion sash and blind shops. Master builders were forced to concede to their demands.

In 1834, sixteen unions from Newark, Orange and Paterson formed a federation known as the Newark Trades Union. This organization of nearly 1,200 members promoted workers’ welfare through common action and assistance to those on strike. The Newark Trades Union joined with similar unions in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston to form a national trades union and contributed hundreds of dollars to striking workers in those cities. New Jersey’s shoemakers were also part of a successful organization of northeastern shoemakers during the 1850s. In 1865, 380 New Jersey carpenters formed the Carpenters and
Joiners National Union of America with representatives from eleven other states.

These early organizations experienced sporadic, limited success in preserving artisanal control over production and in maintaining relatively high wages. But frequently this was accomplished by excluding or ignoring the unskilled or less skilled workers in the trade or industry. Many artisans viewed unskilled workers as a threat, since they worked for lower wages and possessed very little of the craft skills and knowledge. This policy of craft unionism and skilled exclusiveness took no notice of the arrival of thousands of immigrants in New Jersey beginning in the 1840s.

**Industries and Immigrants**

While the Industrial Revolution adversely affected most of New Jersey's traditional craftsmen, it had a positive impact on the state's economy, transforming a largely rural state into an important industrial one containing several major manufacturing cities. Communities like Paterson, Trenton, Jersey City, Elizabeth, and Camden experienced rapid spurts of economic development and physical growth during the nineteenth century. By 1860, to cite one example, Newark was the country's major industrial city producing quantities of shoes, hats, trunks, saddles, jewelry, and leather goods for outside markets. With a population of 71,941, it was the nation's eleventh largest city. In Newark and other New Jersey communities, industrial expansion meant the creation of thousands of jobs and new opportunities in the mushrooming factories and mills. These jobs increasingly were filled by growing numbers of immigrants from abroad.

Before 1880, the vast majority of New Jersey's immigrants were British, Irish and German. Taken together these workers eliminated the labor shortage problem that had existed in New Jersey since the colonial era. They also provided the expertise required by industries where industrialization had created new skilled jobs and by those where technology had not yet wiped out the traditional skills. British immigrants frequently served as supervisors and skilled workers in Trenton's expanding iron and pottery industries and in Paterson's metal trades and textile industry. German workers filled skilled positions in southern New Jersey's glass industries and in Newark's leather crafts and
worked as carpenters, joiners, and cabinetmakers. Germans also monopolized the skilled jobs in the state’s breweries. In 1900, for example, out of 848 brewers and maltsters, 710 were of German nationality. Many immigrants, particularly the Irish, were recruited to work as common laborers building the state’s turnpikes, canals, and railroads. Irish workers were also employed as agricultural hands on farms. The majority, however, began as poorly paid factory operatives, dock workers and teamsters.*

Many of these newcomers (the “old” immigrants), and most of those from southern and eastern Europe who arrived after 1880 (the “new” immigrants), settled in New Jersey’s industrial cities where jobs were abundant. Oftentimes, these groups settled near the factories and mills, forming distinct ethnic communities. They did so to take advantage of the common language and cultural contact with their fellow countrymen, and to live where there was ample opportunity for work. Periods of economic depression and unemployment were quite common in nineteenth-century New Jersey and there was no unemployment compensation, so workers had to be prepared to look for jobs at a moment’s notice. The influx of these newcomers meant both a cheap source of labor for expanding industries and a substantial market for those industries’ products. As residents, employees, and consumers, New Jersey’s workers were important ingredients in the industrial and urban development of the Garden State. By 1880, New Jersey had changed from a state dominated by agriculture, little towns, and small shops to one characterized by manufacturing industries, expanding cities, and large factories.

*Skilled Irish hatters in Orange were an exception.
Workers filling a kiln, Trenton pottery, 1875. Pottery workers filling a kiln in a Trenton pottery in the 1870s. Most pottery workers in this period were skilled British artisans. As skilled workers they earned more than semi- or unskilled workers working in other industries. Reproduced from RUDOLPH J. VECOLI, THE PEOPLE OF NEW JERSEY (1965).
CHAPTER THREE

Protests, Struggles, and Strikes, 1880–1920

Ethnicity and Work

By 1880, New Jersey was the sixth largest industrial state. Ten years later, its five major manufacturing cities (Camden, Jersey City, Newark, Paterson, and Trenton) included one-third of the state’s population and more than half of its 150,000 factory workers. Over 90 percent of New Jersey’s immigrants in 1890 were from Ireland, Germany, and Great Britain, and areas of northern and western Europe. Most settled in the major manufacturing centers and the smaller industrial towns. Soon, however, the nature of this immigration changed dramatically as waves of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe moved into the state.

Explosive industrial growth attracted these and other peoples to New Jersey. Thousands of new jobs were created, and Italians, Poles, Magyars, Slovaks, Greeks, and Jews rushed to fill these places. Paterson silk mills, which had been worked by the English, Germans, and Irish in the 1870s, were manned by thirty different nationalities by 1910, with Italians, Poles, and Jews dominating the workforce. Similarly, while Passaic’s woolen and worsted workers still included some German and English mechanics and supervisors, the labor force increasingly was comprised of Poles, Hungarians, Italians, Russian Jews, and smaller Slavic groups.

Most of these new immigrants were rather poor. Some,
Italian-American tailors. Many Italian-Americans were self-employed as tailors, barbers, and shoemakers from their early days as immigrants. This picture of Lucian Tartaglia (left) in his tailor shop in Morristown, taken around 1925, shows that many maintained their positions as entrepreneurs. Courtesy COSTANZO COLLECTION, MORRIS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

However, had sufficient resources and skills to establish their own small businesses. Small concerns such as tailor shops, barber shops, and shoe repair shops added to the diversity of New Jersey’s economy.

Throughout New Jersey, new immigrants displaced older, established groups from already existing jobs or entered newly created positions. Most of this work was unskilled, heavy duty, and low paid. Italians, for example, replaced the Irish in sewer digging, excavation, and railroad labor. Poles and Hungarians moved into the brickyards and clay pits of Woodbridge, Sayreville, and South River. In Trenton’s potteries and iron and steel mills, eastern Europeans took over the unskilled jobs from the English and Welsh. Hungarians were highly regarded for heavy work because of their supposedly superior strength and stamina.
In some cases the displaced workers were without jobs, at least for some time. In many more instances the older workers took advantage of the expanding economy and changing employment patterns to move up to supervisory or technical positions. Many sons of Irish longshoremen left New Jersey’s docks to the Italians and found jobs as policemen, firemen, and office clerks. Rudolph Vecoli has argued that by 1900 New Jersey industry exhibited a rough caste system in which an individual’s ethnic origin frequently determined his position on the occupational ladder. The top white-collar and managerial jobs were held by descendants of the colonial era inhabitants or people who rose rapidly during the pre–Civil War period. British, Irish, and Germans occupied the middle ranks of foremen and supervisors. The new immigrants worked in the bottom ranks in jobs that were difficult, unskilled, and poorly paid. Afro-Americans later held the same kinds of jobs.

Resentment and open hostility frequently characterized the relations between the older and newer immigrants. Fighting sometimes erupted among the ranks of the new arrivals. Conflict and violence resulted from many causes: ethnic and religious prejudice, competition for jobs and living space, and fear of economic change and dislocation. The general prosperity of these years was offset by severe depressions in 1873 and 1893 and by recessions in 1904, 1907 and 1913. Workers experienced bouts of layoffs and unemployment, low wages and periodic wage cuts, and occupational accidents and deaths. Well-paid, skilled workers, many of whom belonged to unions, viewed unskilled workers as threats to their standard of living, and either ignored or mistreated them. Employers in search of cheap, exploitable workers frequently used new immigrants as strikebreakers, pitting worker against worker to divide and conquer the labor force.

Mills, Factories and A World of Work

Thus, the newcomers found that New Jersey’s industrial communities offered both opportunities and difficulties. Many jobs required exhausting effort, long hours, and meeting the demands of piecework and the speed-up system. Sweatshops were commonplace. Although wages invariably were higher than in the old country, the cost of living was higher too. Shortly after
1910, one estimate found that an average family required a yearly income of $800–900 for an "American standard" of living. Most recent arrivals made less than $500 yearly. Hod carriers and laborers earned an average weekly wage of seven to eight dollars; textile workers made eight to nine dollars; and longshoremen received nine to ten dollars.

To survive, many workers adhered to a tight budget which allowed spending only for the basic necessities of life: food, clothing and shelter. Single men and women denied themselves anything smacking of frills or luxury to support themselves or to send money to loved ones in the old country. Families decided that all but the very young must contribute. Married women and their children found work in New Jersey's textile mills, tobacco factories, and glassworks. One commentator noted that working-class families in Passaic had to endure many hardships to survive:

In order that families may exist at all, wives and children must go to work in the mills in order to supplement the earnings of the husband and father.... The usual custom in Passaic is for the husband to work in the daytime, while the wife works during the night. Because of the economic pressure upon the mother, she can secure no relief even during the period of pregnancy, because it is then that family expenses increase. There are many instances of babies being born in mills. Frequently the time taken from work by mothers amounts to no more than a few days before and after the birth of the child.¹

Twelve-year-old millhands in Paterson

rise ere dawn of day, consume their morning meal by candle light and trudge to the mill to commence their labor ere the rising of the sun; at noon a very short time was allowed them for dinner, and their labor terminates at what is called eight o'clock at night, but which is really (by the time they have their frames cleaned) much nearer nine o'clock. They then take supper and immediately retire to bed in order that they may arise early in the morning.²

While many middle-class reformers were shocked by the seeming callousness of immigrant parents, they failed to understand that the small sums paid young workers frequently meant family survival.
Workers Organize

Knights of Labor
How did New Jersey’s workers react to these far-reaching economic and social changes? Before the Civil War, workers formed local unions to address their grievances. During the 1860s and 1870s, workers struggled to organize unions on a nationwide basis, in keeping with the growth of national corporations. In 1874, for example, the Knights of Labor appeared in New Jersey. The Knights had been founded five years earlier in Philadelphia by Uriah Stephens, a Cape May native. Unlike earlier craft unions made up solely of skilled workers, the Knights took in both skilled and unskilled laborers and made a serious effort to attract women and black workers.

In New Jersey, the Knights experienced limited success until 1886, when thousands of workers inspired by successful strikes in other states flocked to its ranks. The next year, it achieved a peak membership of 40,000 workers. Thereafter, the Knights declined rapidly, suffering from a combination of internal disputes, unsuccessful strikes, and the public’s false perception that they were associated with the notorious Haymarket Square riot in Chicago.

State Labor Congress
One important offshoot of the Knights in New Jersey was the formation of the State Labor Congress, an organization of local unions of hatters, potters, glass bottle blowers, printers, and shoemakers. Established by John W. Hayes, an influential figure in the national Knights, the Labor Congress fought for elimination of wages paid in scrip (paper money) redeemable only at a company store, abolition of child labor, and the practice of using convict labor in competition with free labor. Charles H. Simmerman, a member of the glassworkers union and an important figure in the Knights, served as secretary of the State Labor Congress and later head of the State Bureau of Statistics of Labor and Industry.

Craft Unions and the American Federation of Labor
Other New Jersey unionists argued against the Knights’ attempt to organize all workers, claiming that craft skills were the only secure and powerful basis for the organization of
workers. They maintained that inclusion of the unskilled diluted overall working class solidarity, since the unskilled could be easily replaced by anti-union employers. Those who felt this way joined the national American Federation of Labor, a coalition of skilled unions formed in 1886. Advocates of these competing union philosophies remained at odds until 1890 when the craft union position emerged triumphant. One champion of craft unionism, Peter J. McGuire, helped found the United Brotherhood of Carpenters. McGuire is also known as the “Father of Labor Day” for publicly advocating that one holiday during the year be set aside in honor of working people.

McGuire and his successors in New Jersey slowly built strong craft organizations among skilled workers in the building trades (carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, painters, and plumbers), the metal trades (iron molders, metal polishers, brass finishers,
and machinists) and the printing trades. A state federation of labor, various county trades councils, and numerous city central unions pushed vigorously for higher wages, shorter hours, and improved working conditions. Unfortunately, the success experienced by the skilled craftsmen was not matched by the unskilled and semiskilled workers in the state's expanding mass production industries. A closer examination of conditions and events in one industry, textiles, and one community, Paterson, will illuminate some of the difficulties that industrial workers experienced during this era.

**Technology and Labor Unrest: Paterson, the Silk City**

After the Civil War, Paterson rapidly became known as the center of the silk industry in America. By 1900 the city contained 175 companies and over 20,000 employees, making yard goods for dresses, ribbons for decoration, drapery and upholstery silks, veiling, lining, and braids. In the 1860s and 1870s, skilled weavers from France, Germany, Switzerland and England came to Paterson. They brought with them their own hand-powered looms, purchased homes, and set up shop, seeking respect as independent artisans and pillars of the community.

To reduce the cost of labor and to increase production and profits, the silk-mill owners began to introduce high-speed power looms, especially in the ribbon-weaving branch of the industry. These new looms could be attended by semi- or unskilled women and children hired for lower wages. The skilled male ribbon weavers struck in 1877 and 1894, protesting the competition of low-wage workers, but also arguing that the owners did not share with them the benefits of technological improvements when they were forced to use the new machinery. One striking weaver stated:

We don't object to improved machinery. We welcome improved machinery, if we can get some benefit from it outside of making the work easier or making it possible to produce more goods; but as a rule we never receive any benefit from any improved machinery they put into the mills. On the contrary, we get a cut in wages, whenever there is a new method made on a loom. Instead of giving us a benefit from it the benefit is really taken away from us and the manufacturer gets the benefit instead of
Picking the cloth. This illustration shows women silk workers picking the cloth under the eye of a male supervisor. As the silk moved past, the worker marked flaws for later repair and removed knots and thread ends. Courtesy PATERNSON MUSEUM.

the worker. So that improved machinery does not help us. It only antagonizes the workers the more, because they can see themselves that they can produce more under the improved machinery; still they get less wages.3

The owners asserted that technological change was inevitable
and that the skilled workers had little voice in this matter. As one Paterson mill manager put it:

A good deal of trouble comes from the fact that the silk business is passing through a change, that is gradually becoming a business for females; that in the next 15 to 20 years the males employed in the silk industry will be nil. The change is coming very fast.4

However, the ribbon weavers' strikes of 1877 and 1894 successfully forced the owners to deal with some of the workers' grievances. The success was due largely to effective rallies, mass picketing, demonstrations, community support, and the neutrality of city officials. To secure greater production and profits, the factory owners also increased the number of looms that broad-silk workers tended from one to two looms. They supplemented the work force of skilled English broad-silk weavers with numerous semiskilled northern Italians and Polish Jews. Although at first hostile to each other, these groups achieved unity after 1910, as they struggled with the owners to share in the benefits of technological improvements.

In 1913, speaking in the still recognizable tones of the skilled weaver, the general strike committee made the same point: 'The manufacturers must realize that the improvement of machinery means something besides increasing the already swollen fortunes of a few unscrupulous and money-mad barons. That the toiler who feeds and clothes the world must have a fairer and more just share of the wealth he creates. This they demand as a right, not as a favor.'5

The silk industry also employed a huge force of unskilled workers in various jobs, the largest number in dyeing. Working

*Horizontal warping shop, Paterson, 1910. Women and young boy at work in a horizontal warping shop in the Paterson silk industry, ca. 1910. The silk mills employed many women and children, paying them as semiskilled workers. Courtesy PATERNON MUSEUM.*
in teams of seven or eight under the direction of a master dyer, these laborers added chemicals to the silk, frequently touching and even tasting the mixture to test its content. During the 1880s large numbers of northern Italians were hired as dye helpers and were assigned the worst jobs with the lowest pay. Grievances mounted until they conducted a violent strike in 1902. This strike failed, primarily because of the hostility of the public authorities and the lack of support from the English dye helpers and the skilled workers.

Paterson is significant, therefore, because its silk industry exhibited many of the distinguishing characteristics of this period of the history of New Jersey and other industrial states: explosive economic growth; large-scale immigration of Eastern Europeans; exploitation of and hostility to immigrants; replacement of skilled workers with semiskilled and unskilled women, children, and immigrants; labor unrest; initial community support of workers; and increasing business influence on the political and legal structure.

Several labor unions attempted unsuccessfully to organize Paterson’s silk workers. Although a small number belonged to an American Federation of Labor affiliate, the United Textile Workers, most remained unorganized. This did not prevent labor unrest; there were forty-eight strikes in various branches of the industry between 1905 and 1913. Matters came to a head in January 1913, when the broad-silk weavers walked off the job at a company that insisted the weavers work four looms instead of two. Thousands of silk workers joined the struggle, until the industry was completely shut down. The strike attracted the support of the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical organization. For nearly five months the 25,000 silk workers and their families displayed amazing solidarity, until they were starved back to work by a stubborn, united group of manufacturers.

Although major silk strikes recurred in 1919, 1924 and 1929, the 1913 general strike was crucial because it convinced many large mill owners to abandon the militant labor force of Paterson for the more docile workers of northeastern Pennsylvania and the South. Paterson’s silk industry began to revert to the status of small, family shops. Even so, strikes continued to plague the industry.
Labor Unrest in Bayonne

Worker unrest during this period was not limited to Paterson. All over the state, workers expressed their opposition to atrocious working conditions. Between 1881 and 1905, there were 1,562 strikes and the number continued to rise. Between 1914 and 1920 alone, there were 1,384 strikes. Bayonne’s oil refinery workers, the majority of whom were recent Polish immigrants, were involved in an important dispute that attracted national attention. Many of the jobs in this industry were exhausting and life-threatening. A journalist described how workers cleaned the oil stills:

A gang of two to five men... are set to clean each still. Wearing iron shoes, and wrapped in layers and layers of sacking, they enter the still in turns to break out the red-hot “cokes” left by the oil. In a temperature of over two hundred degrees they work furiously—a man can only stand it for three or four minutes at a time—from three to four hours a day. Almost every day someone collapses in the still and has to be rescued, sometimes with his clothing on fire. When they come out, after their spell, they strip and throw themselves down in the snow, if it be winter, or dash buckets of water over each other. One man said they looked like “boiled meat.”

Coming out of the stills it was common for workers to drink buckets of cold beer to replenish their lost fluids. One doctor revealed that

the average working-life of a still-cleaner is ten years. Take a twenty-year-old Polish or Lithuanian peasant who has worked out of doors all his life; a big, strong, healthy animal—the finest human material in the world. At thirty he will be a bent old man, with white hair. At thirty-two he will be dead.

The workers struck in 1915 and 1916, protesting these conditions and the verbal and physical abuse of their Irish foremen. In each instance, the corporations, led by the Standard Oil Company, hired private armies of thugs who terrorized and shot at the strikers, their families and supporters. The Bayonne Police vigorously aided strikebreaking efforts. Several strikers died from gunshot wounds; others received injuries, beatings, or jail sentences. Both strikes were brutally crushed.
Reform Legislation

Along with forming labor unions and striking, New Jersey’s workers used political pressure on the local and state level to secure legislation that would improve their lives. In this effort workers were sometimes assisted by middle-class reformers who were concerned about the social evils resulting from industrialization.

Joseph P. McDonnell was an early pioneer in this effort. A former Socialist and member of the Knights of Labor, McDonnell published a Paterson newspaper, the Labor Standard, for many years. During the 1880s he lobbied the state legislature for laws prohibiting child and convict labor and for legislation regulating factory conditions. In 1884 he was appointed as the state’s first deputy inspector of factories and workshops. His yearly reports at state labor conventions served as the basis for workers’ political activities.

Responding to pressure from McDonnell and other labor leaders between 1885 and 1893, the legislature passed a series of factory laws providing for fire escapes, adequate ventilation, protective covering on dangerous machinery and dressing rooms for women. Legislation also eliminated convict labor when it competed with free labor.

Southern New Jersey glass workers fought for the abolition of the odious store-order system. This practice had developed early in the nineteenth century in the thinly populated glassmaking region. Companies built crude huts for workers and their families, along with company stores to furnish the necessities of life, and forced their workers to live in the houses and buy at the stores. Prices in these stores were often 13 percent higher than in private shops in the area. Moreover, workers were

*Strike rally, Haledon, 1913. When Paterson silk workers, most of whom were Italian or Russian-Jewish, went on strike in 1913 to protest the doubling of their loom assignments, Paterson authorities denied them the right to assemble. Haledon’s socialist mayor gave the strikers permission to hold public rallies in Haledon at the home of Pietro Botto, a Paterson silk worker. Courtesy AMERICAN LABOR MUSEUM, BOTTO HOUSE NATIONAL LANDMARK, HALEDON.*
forced to accept store orders or scrip on payday instead of cash wages.

One newspaper reported in 1899:

Three-fifths of the 7,000 workers in Bridgeton never handled a cent of their earnings in cash. Isaac Nelson, general secretary of the National Glass Blowers Association, exhibited over 3,000 pay envelopes of the employees, every one of which showed that the employee had not received a cent in cash. The envelopes usually bore such legends as “store”, “rent” “drawback” . . . and these were made to balance the face value of the earnings marked on the envelope.\(^8\)

Workers frequently found themselves indebted to the company store month after month. If they tried to leave a factory without settling their account, they were blacklisted and denied employment at the other glass mills. Finally, after much pressure, in 1899 the legislature outlawed the scrip method of wage payment. One year later the owners met with the glassblowers union and agreed to abolish the system of forced residence in company houses and forced purchases at company stores.

Child labor was a more complex problem that took longer to resolve. The introduction of machinery allowed manufacturers to hire unskilled women and children. Child labor existed throughout New Jersey during the nineteenth century, but was most prevalent among the glass factories and commercial farms of southern New Jersey, the textile mills of Paterson, Passaic, and surrounding towns, and the state’s tobacco factories. The first pressure for reform came from craft unions fearful of the impact of cheap child labor on their economic livelihood. In 1883 the legislature passed a law forbidding the employment of boys under twelve and girls under fourteen. The maximum hours for minors above these ages were ten per day and sixty per week. Only one factory inspector was appointed to enforce the law, an impossible task given the thousands of factories throughout the state.

Nonetheless, the factory inspector’s first report revealed some shocking facts. When he interviewed the working children, he discovered that only a handful had ever heard of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and the Revolutionary and Civil wars.
Many could not name the city they lived in. He also found that thousands of children had only a brief period of education. They began school at six or seven, but were sent out to work at age nine.

The problem was made more difficult by the low wages paid many workers, which forced families to send their children to work at the earliest opportunity. The problem was particularly acute for immigrants. Furthermore, New Jersey's system of free public education was still in its infancy. Until free public schooling became widespread and compulsory and decent wages were paid to the older breadwinners, working-class parents had little choice but to send their children to work.

*Young boy at work in the Clark Thread Mills, Paterson.* Often, entire families worked in the mills. The wages children supplied were necessary portions of the family income, and sending them to school was not possible. *Courtesy AMERICAN LABOR MUSEUM, BOTTO HOUSE NATIONAL LANDMARK, HALEDON.*
The legislature passed additional child-labor laws in 1892 and 1904. The latter bill received the widespread support of Progressive Era middle-class reformers outraged by the thousands of children who continued to work under loosely enforced, poorly drawn statutes. By World War I, fourteen was the overall legal minimum age limit, although sixteen was the minimum for children employed in occupations considered dangerous or injurious to their health. Maximum hours were restricted to eight a day or forty-eight a week; work on Sunday or at night was prohibited. However, none of the child-labor laws pertained to children working in agriculture.

During the Progressive Era the legislature passed several other labor laws. The Employers Liability Act of 1911 made it easier for workers to sue employers whose violation of safety and health legislation resulted in an injury. A maximum workday of ten hours and a workweek of fifty-four hours was set for women. Legislation passed in 1917 and 1918 required employers to provide some insurance for workers injured on the job, and set up a compensation commission to enforce the requirement. In 1916, the Bureau of Statistics of Labor and Industry was consolidated with several other bureaus to form a Department of Labor and given the responsibility for the enforcement of labor legislation.

**World War I**

By World War I, New Jersey had outlawed some of the most blatant industrial abuses. Unfortunately, many laws were poorly or vaguely drafted, easily evaded, or interpreted by the courts in the employer’s favor. Then, too, vigorous enforcement of the laws depended on appointed officials who often ignored or minimized violations. Workers constantly petitioned their governmental representatives about the lax enforcement of many statutes. In addition, workers still faced the hostility of many local judges and officials who displayed an antilabor bias by restricting workers’ rights to strike, picket, demonstrate, carry placards, and distribute leaflets and literature. By those restrictions, workers were deprived of their constitutionally guaranteed rights of free speech, free press, and peaceable assembly. The
gains workers made during this period often were won against horrendous odds and after terrible struggle and sacrifice.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, the situation for New Jersey workers improved somewhat. For the United States, which did not enter the war until 1917, the war was a period of prosperity and full employment. Union workers in particular won wage increases and other benefits as employers eagerly stepped up production to take advantage of heightened business activity and the profits associated with the war effort. Unemployment evaporated as business expanded and thousands of workers joined the armed forces. Labor unrest, however, did not cease as workers struck to keep up with war-induced inflation. Prices outstripped wages, and workers in many industries fought to stay even. In spite of these difficulties, or perhaps because of them, union membership rose. Many workers hoped that government support for union recognition and collective bargaining during the war would lead to a new era in industrial relations once the fighting was concluded. This hope was dashed shortly after the troops returned from Europe.
CHAPTER FOUR

Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1920–1945

Prosperity and the Problems of a Changing Economy

During the 1920s, New Jersey’s economy suffered from a split personality. On the surface it seemed to many observers that the state was entering a sustained period of prosperity, full production, and optimism. In part, the prosperity was fueled by a huge number of construction projects in the urban areas of the state. Newark converted the Morris Canal into a roadway and subway line, built Newark Metropolitan Airport, and constructed numerous department stores, office buildings, and high-speed highways. Elizabeth and Camden spent millions of dollars improving their wharves and other harbor facilities; the latter city also pioneered the effort to build the first bridge over the Delaware to Philadelphia. Other communities joined in this building bonanza by constructing railroad terminals, hotels, skyscrapers, theaters, and banks and by repaving and upgrading many urban streets and roadways.

These construction projects were frequently promoted by a booster spirit which emphasized civic consciousness and pride, cooperation between government and elite business groups, and unbridled confidence. Some workers, particularly those in the construction trades, benefited from this boom. However, many industrial workers discovered that the boom did not mean stable, decent paying jobs for them.

New Jersey’s economy was at a point of transition. This
transition had begun in the early twentieth century, but World War I’s full employment and bursting production schedules had masked the importance of what was taking place. Simply put, the old industries that had helped to bring about the state’s industrialization had begun to decline or were growing much less rapidly. Industries which produced ceramics, textiles, fur felt hats, shoes, leather goods, cigars and cigarettes, glass, and jewelry or extracted stone or clay yielded to concerns devoted to the manufacture of automobiles, chemicals, transportation equipment and paper, copper and petroleum refining, printing, slaughtering and meat packing, and canning. Consequently, the old industries needed many fewer workers than they had needed in the prewar period. Theoretically, workers who lost jobs or no longer found jobs in the old industries could move over to the new, expanding sectors. Inasmuch as the growth of new industry meant that the state’s economy possessed vitality in the face of deep-seated economic change, this transition from old to new industries was a positive development.

Unfortunately, the transition had a negative aspect as well.
The newer industries required fewer workers to manufacture their products. For example, in 1927 the chemical industry’s dollar output equaled that of the textile industry, but the chemical industry employed only one-third as many workers, 36,000 compared to 103,000 in textiles. The new industries were capital intensive; that is, they invested heavily in machines and equipment. The use of new technology meant that they needed fewer workers.

Declining Employment and the Open Shop

As a result, the 1920s witnessed an overall employment decline in the manufacturing and industrial sectors relative to the service and clerical sectors. The latter included employment in banks, department stores, hotels, merchandising firms, domestic service, and professional and other white-collar jobs. To cite two examples: In 1920, 50 percent of Newark’s workers made their living in manufacturing jobs; by 1940 this had declined to 34 percent. Trenton had 5,000 fewer workers in the iron, steel, and rubber industries in 1930 than ten years earlier. The 1920s were a difficult time for industrial workers. Many experienced bouts of unemployment throughout this period.

Unemployment was not the only problem confronting New Jersey’s workers. Many employers adopted anti-union attitudes and policies in the post–World War I period. Earlier we noted that union membership increased substantially during the Progressive Era. Due in large part to effective political pressure, unionized workers enjoyed organizational gains, protective legislation, and sympathetic treatment during those years. Once World War I began, New Jersey’s unions and employers cooperated to maintain uninterrupted production of materials for the war effort. This cooperation was frequently enforced by the state and federal governments.

Many employers, however, were not happy dealing with unions of their employees; once the war was over they began to push for the “open shop.” An open shop does not restrict its employees to union members. This movement was designed to eradicate or neutralize existing unions and prevent workers from forming unions where there were none. Open-shop proponents also intended to win back economic and political gains that workers had secured in the previous decades. To accomplish these goals, employers hired agencies specializing in
industrial spying, infiltration, and union busting. They imposed wage cuts and extracted concessions from their workers by threatening to relocate their plants if employees did not accept these take-backs peacefully.

A 10 percent wage cut in 1926 by one of the major woolen manufacturers in Passaic provided the spark that ignited one of the most famous labor strikes of the decade. Under the dynamic leadership of Alfred Weisbord, an avowed Communist, over 10,000 woolen workers from Passaic, Clifton, Garfield, and Lodi conducted a militant strike for several months. Efforts to settle the dispute peacefully were unsuccessful. The strike was marked by police violence against strikers, newspaper reporters, and photographers, as well as strikers using force against nonstrikers. Eventually, the employers’ refusal to bargain with any union forced the workers back into the mills. Although the woolen workers successfully fought the 10 percent pay cut, their other grievances remained unresolved. Furthermore, the union movement among the woolen workers experienced a serious setback.

The Red Scare, Prejudice and Anti-Union Sentiment

In the counterattack against workers and their unions, some employers took advantage of the public hysteria surrounding the Red Scare of 1919–1922, a time when many Americans believed that a Communist revolution in the United States was imminent. On January 3, 1920, United States Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer pronounced Paterson a dangerous “revolt center” and sent in Justice Department agents who arrested and dragged off scores of union members and reputed radicals, and sent them to Ellis Island in New York harbor. The government deported as many as it could; others were detained for several months. Referring to supposed Communists, one Camden official said: “I would have them shot first and send them out of the country as corpses.”

Many workers and union leaders were Jews, Catholics, or Eastern European immigrants. Hostility to any group perceived as radical was often expressed as virulent anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, or anti-immigrant sentiment. In addition, some employers capitalized on this super-patriotic atmosphere to rename the open-shop drive the American Plan. By such logic, if nonunionism was American, then unionism was un-American,
and true Americans should have nothing to do with organized labor.

Hostility to Jews, Catholics, and immigrants provided the right atmosphere for the reappearance of the Ku Klux Klan in New Jersey. The Klan, which added hatred of blacks to those sentiments, organized fifty chapters in the state between 1925 and 1930. At the end of the decade, 1,500 Klansmen marched boldly through the center of Camden, assembled at Convention Hall, and burned a twenty-foot cross in a nearby field. The presence of the Klan, the publicity surrounding the open shop drive or the American Plan, the demands for immigration restriction, and the emphasis on Americanism and ideological conservatism all made it exceedingly difficult for workers to protect and advance the gains they had made during the Progressive Era and World War I. The employers were on the offensive and held the balance of power.

Labor conditions in the hat industry in the town of Orange in 1924 illustrates how the employers held the upper hand. Five firms controlled the Orange hat industry. Faced with changing styles and subsequent lower demand for their hats, the five owners attempted to reduce costs by imposing a 20 percent wage cut. The hat workers believed that they were being treated unfairly by their bosses. In 1925, the threat of a general strike was averted by the national union’s intervention. Workers were forced to accept further wage cuts and additional concessions. To make matters worse, first one manufacturer and then two others moved their operations to the nonunion area of Norwalk, Connecticut. The remaining two owners ran virtual nonunion shops. Thus, once the smoke had cleared, nearly the entire hat industry was nonunion, most of it had left Orange, and more than 1,600 Orange hatters had lost their jobs. The employers were still in business making a profit and the workers had learned a painful lesson in economic power.

**The Black Worker**

As difficult as things were for workers in general, the situation for black workers in New Jersey was far worse. Black workers not only experienced many of the same problems (finding and keeping a job, supporting themselves and their families, working under exhausting and horrendous conditions) as white workers, but they also confronted problems of racism and discrimination
that made it extremely difficult to improve their economic and social status.

New Jersey's black population grew moderately in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During World War I, the interruption in the flow of European immigrants forced employers to recruit blacks from the South to work in New Jersey's industries. The black population of the state's largest cities grew sharply. Between 1915 and 1920, for example, the number of blacks in Newark increased from 9,400 to nearly 17,000. For the first time, many black males were able to move from domestic service to unskilled jobs in Newark's manufacturing industries, among them Flockhart Foundry, COE Steel, Carnegie Steel, Benjamin Atha Steel, and Worthington Pump.

The migration of blacks to Newark continued, and by 1940 over 45,000 blacks lived in the state's largest city. Some black workers made modest employment gains as skilled or semiskilled operatives. By 1930 black men could be found working in the construction industry as mechanics, painters, carpenters, and common laborers. Newark's blacks dominated the ranks of longshoremen and stevedores. Some black female workers experienced mobility of a sort, moving from domestic service to employment in the cigar and cigarette factories and into the clothing industry.

Between 1920 and 1930, the number of black professionals, both male and female, doubled. Black women were hired as teachers and nurses, some black males became physicians, dentists, and lawyers. Likewise, black trade and clerical workers increased, and by 1930 Newark had over 300 black insurance and real estate agents. Unfortunately, these examples of limited progress by a black middle class must be placed alongside the grim reality of massive discrimination against black workers by employers, unions, and white workers. The vast majority of blacks still worked in menial low-paying jobs when they were able to find any jobs at all. Further, whatever modest success that blacks experienced in the 1920s was negated by the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Great Depression

The stock market crash of October 29, 1929, marked the beginning of the worst depression in American history. It was
a disaster for New Jersey workers. The state did not feel the impact of the crash immediately, but by early 1930 employment levels, wages and take-home pay had begun to decline steadily. By 1932, an estimated 400,000 people, almost 25 percent of the state’s working population, were unemployed. Banks closed their doors, businesses went bankrupt, farmers lost their farms. Although the depression affected every area of the state, industrial cities were hardest hit. In Newark, more than 60,000 people, or 30 percent of the labor force, were unemployed in 1931. Thousands of workers wandered about the streets of Newark and other cities, begging for dimes, selling apples for pennies, sleeping in alleys and doorways and on park benches. Long lines of people waited for a bowl of watery soup and a slice of bread. People scavenged for food and clothing in the garbage containers and dumps about the cities. The Meadowlands contained thousands of small plots where people grew garden vegetables and constructed wooden and cardboard shanties to hold their tools and escape from the hot sun.

Unemployed workers faced the desperate task of finding jobs to feed themselves and their families. In November 1930, a local Paterson newspaper donated space for workers to advertise for jobs. Over 100 people responded pleading for any work; the same newspaper pages carried a mere handful of help-wanted ads. Full-time work disappeared and part-time labor became commonplace. Professionals were forced to accept work as clericals or attendants. Skilled workers reluctantly accepted unskilled jobs. Union membership declined dramatically as workers were laid off or had no money to pay dues. Some unions tried to cope by instituting various work-sharing schemes to divide up what little work was available. Overall, thousands of New Jersey workers faced layoffs, short work weeks and skimpy paychecks, sharply reduced living standards, and futile searches for employment.

While the depression affected all workers, blacks and young people faced especially difficult times. Black workers occupied the lowest rungs on the occupational ladder, and were among the first to be laid off or fired. Most had low seniority because they had been excluded by the labor unions. Although the black population of Newark continued to grow, black male employment fell from 13,308 to 7,990. On one occasion in 1931, the Urban League’s executive secretary revealed that he had 112
black men in his office who had not eaten for several days. Destitution and deprivation, according to one black novelist, haunted the black community:

Times were hard all over Newark then, but they were hardest in the Third Ward. There were some jobs, but the white man got first call on them, and there were not enough to go around. Colored men and women devised their own ways of making a living. Some of the men took the jobs that the white men did not want, while others scuffled and robbed and stole and pimped. Some colored women took domestic jobs or worked in the laundries. Others went up on Broome Street and sold their bodies. They all got along somehow.²

For young men and women completing school, there were virtually no jobs to be had. They were caught in a dilemma; they could not find jobs without experience and they could not gain experience because of the lack of jobs. Many young people suffered through a daily routine of leaving home early in the morning and traveling from employer to employer in the pitiful hope of finding any kind of work. At the end of the day they would dejectedly return home with the bad news.

Neither New Jersey nor any other state had a program to cope with the depression. Until 1931, there was no state agency organized to dispense aid to the needy. The unemployed relied first on private charity and then on municipal governments for assistance. Paterson officials, like their counterparts in other cities, underestimated the severity of conditions and were slow to respond. After two local newspapers revealed numerous instances of destitution and near starvation, city authorities allotted small sums for public work projects. When job notices for fifty streetcleaners for two weeks of work at four dollars and fifty cents a day were posted, more than 200 men applied.

Although Paterson and other communities tried to alleviate the suffering, they found themselves overwhelmed with requests and short of funds. With no income, homeowners could not pay property taxes. Municipalities ran out of money to pay workers, provide services, and take care of the needy. Finally, after hundreds of them declared bankruptcy, the state formed the Emergency Relief Administration in October 1931, and budgeted $10 million to last until June 1932. The money was distributed to those municipalities and counties which drafted
acceptable assistance plans. Paterson, for example, used the money to fund a flexible weekly grocery allowance for the unemployed of one dollar for a single person to seven dollars for the largest families. Allocations were also made for clothing, fuel, and other items.

**The New Deal**

By 1932, it was clear to many Americans that the states and cities did not have the resources to handle the millions of unemployed workers and thousands of bankrupt businesses. The election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency instilled a sense of hope and expectation that the federal government would take a more direct role. Beginning in 1933, the Roosevelt administration sponsored legislation establishing various programs designed to assist the needy, employ the jobless, and restore prosperity. This effort was known as the New Deal.

The National Youth Administration (NYA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) were two New Deal programs that significantly affected thousands of New Jersey’s young workers. The NYA provided part-time jobs to unemployed youths as well as to needy high school and college students. The CCC placed eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old males in work camps located in public forests and rural parks. For a minimum six-month enlistment, the young men were paid thirty dollars per month, with at least twenty-two dollars of this going to their families. Run in a quasi-military fashion, the camps were designed to inculcate sound work habits and take unemployed youths off the streets. One veteran of a Denville camp recalled that most of the participants were working-class boys who wore uniforms and lived in old army barracks. They worked in the northern New Jersey woods attempting to eradicate Dutch elm disease.

By far the most important federal program for New Jersey’s workers was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In 1937, over 70,000 workers labored for the WPA, building schools, hospitals, highways, water systems, and harbor and airport improvements. The WPA also provided employment for hundreds of New Jersey artists. These artists produced paintings, murals, sculptures, graphics, and various crafts objects which were placed in New Jersey’s libraries, hospitals, schools, museums, and other public buildings.
Growing Militancy

In spite of private charity and governmental programs, relief efforts were often insufficient. Protests were frequent, particularly in urban areas. Unemployed Councils (ad hoc groups of community activists and radicals) in various cities held marches, rallies and demonstrations demanding a halt to evictions of people from their apartments for failure to pay their rent. They also tried to help themselves by organizing miniature relief programs and distributing food and used clothing contributed by farmers and merchants. Local unions and their supporters also criticized local relief efforts and sent delegates to Trenton demanding more effective state aid. In 1936, unemployed workers organized a major protest march and occupied the State House for nine days, but failed to convince the legislature to pass new relief measures.

Federal programs for relief and employment were only part of the New Deal. President Roosevelt also signed into law the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and two years later, the National Labor Relations Act. Among other things, both laws stated clearly that workers had a legal right to form unions and bargain collectively with their employers. Nationwide, workers responded to this legislation and the Roosevelt administration’s sympathy towards collective bargaining by participating in mass organizational campaigns and strikes for unionization and improved working conditions.

This mood of militancy stirred New Jersey’s workers. In September 1934, thousands of northern New Jersey silk workers struck as part of a nationwide walkout of textile workers protesting working conditions and demanding union recognition. Despite the initial enthusiasm and show of strength, the workers returned to their jobs after three weeks, responding to their union leaders who called off the strike after President Roosevelt intervened and promised to appoint a board to study conditions in the industry. The board issued a report recommending few concrete benefits, and the workers continued to suffer from low wages and the employers’ harsh and arbitrary treatment.

The Roosevelt Administration’s support for collective bargaining coincided with internal changes taking place within the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The vast majority of unions belonging to the AFL were craft unions consisting of organizations of similar workers. Thus, although employed
in the construction industry, carpenters, bricklayers, masons, and plumbers belonged to separate unions. The same was true for locomotive firemen, brakemen, engineers, and other skilled workers in the railroad industry. With the advent of mass production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more and more jobs appeared requiring few or no skills. The AFL's policy of organizing only skilled workers into craft unions was vigorously attacked by those who favored the organization of mass-production workers into industrial unions.

John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers of America, Sidney Hillman, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, and other union leaders wanted to organize workers in the textile, automobile, chemical, steel, rubber, and other mass-production industries. Since the vast majority of these workers were unskilled, they pushed for the formation of industrial unions where all workers, regardless of skill level, would belong to one union encompassing the entire industry. A struggle ensued between the advocates of craft and industrial unions, and eventually Lewis and his allies were expelled from the AFL. They formed a separate organization, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), in 1937.

New Jersey's textile workers were in a militant mood in the 1930s. Chafing under a weak AFL-affiliated union, the United Textile Workers, many local leaders sought the assistance of Lewis and Hillman. The result was the establishment of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC), a national umbrella-like organization intended to gather all textile workers into an industrial union. Carl Holderman was New Jersey's TWOC regional director. He later held several positions in the state and national CIO as well as the Textile Workers Union of America, a CIO union whose position was strengthened in the economic boom during World War II.

The TWOC managed to organize 12,000 textile workers by 1937, mostly in the silk mills. Unfortunately, internal rivalries between CIO and AFL partisans, personality clashes, and virulent employer opposition (particularly from the big woolen mills in the Passaic area) limited the extent of the organizational drive. The majority of the textile workers remained outside the union fold.

Conditions at the Camden plant of the Radio Corporation of America's (RCA) during the 1930s made it a prime target
for labor organization. Mass layoffs, wage cuts, involuntary overtime at straight time rates, no assurance of work when reporting to the plant, and abuse by foremen made the workers receptive to unionization. In the beginning, four unions vied for the workers’ support, but by 1936 the choice was between the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) Local 103, and a company-sponsored Employees’ Committee Union (ECU). Local 103 members demanded wage increases and a signed contract. When RCA refused, the local responded on June 18, 1936, by conducting one of the first sit-down strikes in New Jersey. This strike lasted for several hours and closed down 80 percent of the plant’s production.

When negotiations involving John L. Lewis, UE president James Carey, RCA president David Sarnoff, RCA labor relations expert Hugh Johnson, and local Camden representatives proved fruitless, thousands of RCA workers walked off the job several days later. The strike lasted over a month and was marked by riots, violence, mass arrests (over 500 people), and fights between union and nonunion supporters. A settlement was reached when both parties agreed to abide by an election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), to determine whether the workers wanted representation by the UE Local 103 or the ECU. Local 103 won over 95 percent of the votes cast and became one of the first unions to be certified by a federal agency in the electrical industry. The UE went on to organize workers employed by Westinghouse, Edison Industries, General Motors and General Electric. The UE negotiated contracts which assured some New Jersey factory workers their first paid vacations and holidays.

**Resistance to Unionism**

During the late 1930s, the CIO formed industrial unions in other mass production industries, such as petroleum, steel, and automobiles. Unlike the TWOC and UE, however, these unions experienced only scattered successes in New Jersey. Standard Oil of New Jersey, the leading petroleum producer in the state, refused to deal with the CIO union of oil workers, preferring instead to recognize company and local independent unions. The steel workers organized about twenty locals, mostly involving small mills and steel companies. The auto workers organized several small plants, the notable exception being the large
General Motors plant in Linden. Although CIO-affiliated unions had organized thousands of unskilled workers by World War II, many mass-production laborers were untouched by the upsurge of unionism.

One of the reasons for the failure of the organizational drive to recruit more workers was the staunch resistance of employers and some public officials. The RCA plant at Camden hired industrial spies and strikebreakers against UE Local 103. Those practices received considerable adverse publicity in 1937 during investigations by the United States Senate of violations of workers’ freedoms of speech and assembly. Publicity about the companies’ excesses increased public support for labor. That same year, the CIO began an organizational drive among Jersey City’s workers, passing out leaflets informing them of their rights under the laws. On November 29, under orders from Mayor Frank Hague, police descended on CIO headquarters, searched the union members and workers gathered there, confiscated their handbills, and made arrests. They forcibly removed the union leaders and organizers from Jersey City by placing them in cars or on ferry boats going to New York City. After city authorities refused permits to the CIO to hold open air meetings, the labor organization sued in federal courts. Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that the workers’ freedom of speech and assembly had been violated, and overturned the city statutes which had been used to prevent the CIO from organizing the workers. Another attempt to combat union militancy came from Governor Harold Hoffman who warned early in 1937 that he would tolerate no sit-down strikes in New Jersey involving the CIO. Thousands of workers, however, ignored the governor’s warning and conducted successful sit-down strikes as well as some conventional walkouts.

**New Jersey Enacts Social Legislation**

During the 1930s, the state legislature did not match the Congress’s output of national social and economic legislation. Nevertheless, it did pass some laws which benefited New Jersey’s workers. In 1933, the lawmakers adopted a minimum-wage law for workers whose employers operated solely within the state’s borders. However, this law was not enforced until 1937, and only covered selected businesses such as laundries,
cleaning and dyeing establishments, and light manufacturing concerns. The first minimum wage ranged from twenty to forty cents per hour with a basic work week of forty-four to fifty hours. Again, most workers were not covered by this law. The legislature also strengthened existing health and safety laws, forbade piece work at home in several industries, passed a bill establishing comprehensive regulation of child labor, and restricted the state courts’ power to issue injunctions or restraining orders against striking workers. This legislation did not constitute a New Jersey version of Roosevelt’s New Deal, but it did improve the daily lives of a number of employees.

By the eve of World War II, New Jersey’s workers had partially recovered from the depression’s terrible hardships. From 1933 onward, employment figures climbed upward, interrupted by the recession of 1937–1938. Thousands of workers in the textile and electrical industries had joined the newly formed CIO. Nevertheless, the vast majority of workers (84 percent) remained outside of the labor movement entirely, and of the 200,000 organized workers, some 123,000 were in AFL unions. The advent of World War II would dramatically change this picture.

**World War II**

World War II and not the New Deal finally ended the Great Depression. In New Jersey, the war created an economic boom for business and labor as its factories converted from producing civilian goods such as cars and radios to making military goods like planes, tanks and ships. A few examples illustrate the tremendous expansion of economic activity in the state. Federal Telephone and Radio, a Newark company making military field-telephone equipment, sprouted from a few employees in one plant to over 11,500 workers spread over forty-four different locations throughout Newark. Thousands of workers also found new jobs in the shipbuilding industry. The Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company of Kearny employed more than 52,000 workers in 1943—32,000 in around-the-clock operations at Kearny and 20,000 manning two shifts at Port Newark. Similarly, at Camden, the New York Shipbuilding Company’s 38,000 employees worked three shifts to construct $217 million worth of naval vessels from 1942 to 1943.
Passaic’s woolen mills produced enough material to make over 15 million army uniforms and blankets. Many skilled workers in the building trades were hired at good wages to perform construction work at military installations such as Camp Kilmer, Fort Dix, Fort Monmouth, Lakehurst Naval Air Station, and the Bayonne Naval Base. Full-time production, the end of unemployment, and the need for industrial peace placed New Jersey’s workers in a strong power position in dealing with their employers.

**Gains for Labor**

On the national level, both AFL and CIO leaders supported the government’s insistence on uninterrupted production and they promised not to strike for the duration of the war (the famous no-strike pledge). In return, the Roosevelt Administration made it easier for some labor unions to organize and retain their members and exerted pressure on firms with government contracts to resolve their differences with organized labor in the interest of steady production for the war effort. The War Labor Board, a government agency created by Congress, oversaw industrial relations in critical industries. It intervened in thousands of labor-management disputes, and it frequently issued rulings favorable to workers and their unions.

In New Jersey, AFL and CIO union affiliates supported the no-strike pledge. However, labor leaders capitalized on the wartime pressure on companies to produce goods to recruit some previously unorganized employees and strengthen their union. The Textile Workers Union of America, for example, organized 4,000 employees of New Jersey’s most important wool manufacturer, the Botany Worsted mills. This was followed by success at Forstmann Company and New Jersey Worsted. Similarly, several years of organizational effort at Johnson & Johnson achieved success in 1944, when the Textile Workers Union of America defeated an independent union in a government-supervised election.

Workers in the electrical and related industries flocked to the UE in huge numbers, swelling membership from 7,200 in 1939 to more than 40,000 in 1945. The United Auto Workers attracted thousands of new members working in the Ford and General Motors plants, converted from the production of automobiles to planes and tanks, and in the aircraft plants of Bendix
and Wright and Curtis. Laborers in the metal-fabricating industries enrolled in the United Steel Workers. The skilled building-trade unions added thousands of members, as the government-financed construction projects at military installations in the state, and the auto and shipbuilding companies expanded their plants and facilities. While the figures are far from precise, estimates are that more than 200,000 workers were added to union rolls during World War II. The war provided an opportunity for the labor movement to respond to workers' needs and advance their interests.

With full employment and with thousands of New Jersey males entering the armed forces, many women and blacks secured their first decent-paying industrial jobs. During the war thousands of Southern blacks moved to New Jersey's manufacturing cities looking for work. Many were successful. Busloads of black workers could be seen traveling west out of Newark bound for their jobs in several Morris County powder plants. In 1942, when the federal government leased a twenty-story Prudential office building in Newark to house 10,000 employees, more than one-fourth of that number were black. And many female workers, black and white, left their poorly paid jobs as domestics, waitresses, and clerks for employment as welders, machinists, and operatives in war-production industries. The term “Rosie the Riveter” came to symbolize the patriotic woman who labored in the nation's shops and mills, while her husband or boyfriend fought for freedom and democracy on a far-off battlefield.

While New Jersey's workers experienced the benefits of full employment during the war, they also endured substantial hardships as well. They were often forced to work overtime, subjected to rationing, pressured into buying war bonds, and ordered not to strike, even in the face of legitimate grievances. A number of them volunteered their spare hours to serve on local draft boards and civil defense squads and as air raid wardens and auxiliary firemen.

Although New Jersey's laborers supported World War II and most union members adhered to their leaders' pledge not to strike, many workers grew angry at the seeming indifference of the government and management towards their grievances. At the Federal Shipbuilding and Drydock Company of Kearny, workers during the summer and fall of 1943 engaged in a series
Two welders at work in 1943. During World War II, many women held jobs previously open only to men, and black women found work in industries which had historically employed only white males. Photograph by GORDON PARKS FOR THE OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION, Courtesy of THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.
of the shipbuilders. A series of conferences between local union leaders and federal officials yielded a tentative resolution, but when management delayed implementation, 13,000 shipyard workers walked out for two days. Union leaders convinced the workers to return, but the strike effectively moved the government to end the dispute. Nonetheless, workers at Federal Shipbuilding and elsewhere around the state conducted job actions and slowdowns to dramatize their deeply felt complaints. In 1944, New Jersey’s workers conducted more than 200 strikes involving 100,000 men and women. Patriotic support for the war did not, for most workers, mean that they had to give up protecting their rights and conditions. Wartime sacrifice, workers argued, must be distributed evenly among labor and management.

CHAPTER FIVE


The end of World War II abroad did not lead to industrial peace at home. New Jersey companies with government contracts began laying off workers even before the last shot was fired. General Electric released 850 of 1,000 employees at its Trenton plant. Thousands of workers were laid off from the shipbuilding industries in Kearny and Camden. Many of those who continued working experienced wage reductions, as happened at RCA’s Camden and Westinghouse’s Jersey City plants.
These difficulties were compounded by the ending of federal price controls on consumer goods. Workers felt their real incomes fall drastically as inflation rocketed into double-digit figures.

**Postwar Labor Unrest**

Undoubtedly, the most serious challenge that workers faced was the determination of many employers to regain the authority over their businesses which had been reduced by wartime conditions and by the federal government’s insistence on peaceful coexistence between labor and management. Many corporations believed that they had to assume the offensive against organized labor or continue to lose control of their employees. For their part, workers stubbornly defended the organizational gains made during the war and insisted that profitable companies could readily afford to sustain wages and standards of living. These conflicting interests produced the greatest strike wave in American history. In the year following the surrender of Japan, more than five million workers engaged in various strikes and work stoppages.

The vast majority of New Jersey’s 730,000 unionized workers (and many who belonged to no union) participated in these struggles. Over a period of eighteen months, the state’s steel and auto workers, meatpackers, electrical workers, longshoremen, and oil refinery, glass, and rubber workers joined their fellow workers throughout the nation in a series of highly publicized strikes and walkouts. Thousands of New Jersey employees of General Electric and Westinghouse walked off their jobs on January 16, 1946, demanding a sizeable wage increase to compensate for rapidly rising inflation. When the companies obtained injunctions limiting the number of pickets, workers in Newark, Kearny, Bloomfield, and other locations defied the injunction by setting up massive picket lines. Mounted police swinging clubs attacked the pickets. Similar clashes occurred between authorities and some of the 17,500 employees of Western Electric plants in northern New Jersey who also had struck for higher wages. In these instances workers returned to their jobs after winning wage increases, though not of the size that they felt they deserved. Other strikes took place in most of the Garden State’s industrial cities.
Once the smoke had cleared, major corporations such as General Electric, Westinghouse, General Motors, United States Steel, and Western Electric signed agreements with the unions representing their employees, beginning a period of relative tranquility between these giant corporations and organized labor. New Jersey workers who belonged to the United Auto Workers, United Electrical Workers and other national unions, received higher wages and greater benefits. Their unions won greater institutional security. Although conceding economic gains to their employees, corporate managers won the complete freedom and sole responsibility to run their businesses, limited only by those narrow issues which had to be jointly negotiated. This armistice between organized labor and the corporations continued with some interruptions until new conditions which emerged in the late 1970s renewed the conflict once again.

Setbacks for Labor

Taft-Hartley
Nevertheless, big labor did not remain insulated from several negative developments in the postwar era. The first setback involved the emergence of a national anti-union climate, in part caused by wartime wildcat strikes and the 1946 strike wave noted earlier. This hostility culminated in Congress’ passage of the Taft-Hartley Act over the veto of President Harry Truman. Taft-Hartley did not directly affect New Jersey’s union members. However, because the act made it difficult for workers in some states to organize unions, it was an important federal labor law. Among other things, it set specific safeguards for management rights, established unfair labor practices for unions, limited union political activity, and gave the president authority to order workers back to work in a national strike. Perhaps more importantly, it served to dramatize labor’s vulnerability to anti-union political forces.

Corruption and Racketeering
Two other issues, union corruption and Communist domination of unions, did directly affect Garden State workers. The question of union corruption attracted national headlines and was a convenient weapon in the hands of anti-union interests. Though most of the attention focused on the New York mob’s influence in the building and garment trades, in trucking and on the waterfront, New Jersey workers who belonged to the national unions representing workers in these trades also felt the sting of adverse publicity.

For example, officials of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), headquartered in New York, were convicted on charges of theft, racketeering and receiving bribes. Their notoriety prompted public scrutiny of New Jersey’s eleven locals of the ILA. The publicity surrounding ILA officials spurred the 1953 American Federation of Labor convention to expel the union and attempt to charter a new longshoremen’s union. After much controversy, elections supervised by the National Labor Relations Board confirmed the right of the ILA to represent the longshoremen. The leadership of the Teamsters Union in New Jersey was also singled out for alleged hoodlum and gangster influence. While few unions were actually proven to
be corrupt, the adverse publicity cast a pall over the entire labor movement.

**Communism**

The position of Communists in leadership roles in some CIO unions also received nationwide publicity. It became an issue because of the developing cold war hostility between the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1940s. During the previous decade, Communists and independent radicals had assumed important roles in the drives to organize the mass-production industries. Within the CIO, Communists were elected to leadership positions in several national unions. During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies, and Communist labor leaders enthusiastically supported the war effort. After the war, however, the two nations became embroiled in several international controversies, and anti-Communist sentiment spread rapidly throughout the United States.

The CIO leadership decided in 1949 to expel the Communist-led unions. One of those expelled was the United Electrical Workers (UE), a union containing thousands of New Jersey's electrical workers. The CIO chartered a new union, the International Union of Electrical Workers (IUE), and these two unions engaged in a veritable civil war to represent electrical workers. The New Jersey plants of General Electric, Westinghouse, RCA, and other corporations became battle grounds between the two rival unions and their supporters. The workers lost and the corporations gained from this conflict.

The intense publicity and emotionalism surrounding the issue of Communists in the labor movement during the late 1940s hurt workers both nationally and in the state. It gave management a convenient club to wield over the heads of workers and their unions, and it forced unions to spend enormous amounts of energy and resources proving their loyalty and fighting one another. The expulsion from the CIO of thirteen unions with a membership of almost a million seriously weakened the labor movement.

**New Jersey's Economy Changes**

Although strikes, corruption and Communism captured the public's attention during the decade or so after World War II,
these issues obscured a basic economic fact for New Jersey’s workers and their counterparts in surrounding industrial states like Pennsylvania and New York. Beginning in the 1930s, the manufacturing sector of the economy grew more slowly in these states than it did in the rest of the country. This meant that other areas of the United States, such as the South and West, were industrializing at a more rapid rate and were beginning to catch up in manufacturing with New Jersey and its neighbors.

Industry Leaves the Cities

During the 1950s, however, many New Jersey workers were too busy spending their wartime savings and their higher wages on homes, cars, and refrigerators to pay much heed to boring statistics on rates of manufacturing growth. Low cost, government-guaranteed mortgages by the Veteran’s Administration and the Federal Housing Authority, along with government-built expressways, allowed many second generation immigrant workers to move out of Newark, Paterson, Camden, Trenton, and other industrial cities into surrounding suburban communities.

As whites left the urban areas, blacks continued to move in. In Trenton, for instance, between 1940 and 1960, the white population decreased by 25,770 or 25 percent, while the black population increased by 17,000 or 300 percent. At the same time large numbers of people moved into the state from the cities of New York and Philadelphia. The suburbanization of New Jersey’s working class and the growing proportion of blacks in the state’s industrial cities were two major developments of the 1950s and 1960s.

The migration of workers and their families to the suburbs was often followed, or in some cases preceded, by that of business firms and government agencies. These institutions decentralized their operations and moved into newly created industrial parks and shopping centers outside of the core cities. Many old-line industrial families sold their businesses to large corporations which either closed down urban factories or else moved their production facilities to suburbia.

Nationalization

During this period, New Jersey’s industry also underwent a process of nationalization. Many national corporations moved
into the state for the first time or expanded existing operations, in both cases taking advantage of an experienced labor force and a growing mass consumer market. Invariably these corporations chose suburban locations for their operations. Chemical companies like Union Carbide and Allied Chemical constructed sprawling plants in the suburbs. Others such as DuPont and Celanese bought out small, local companies. In southern New Jersey, all but two of the locally owned glass firms were absorbed by major outside businesses such as Illinois Glass Company, Armstrong Cork Company, and Anchor Hocking Glass Corporation.

More and more, New Jersey’s economy was dominated by national corporations with headquarters outside the state. The purchase in 1953 of the historic 113-year-old Roebling Company of Trenton by a national concern, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation, was a case in point. The corporation, which was the ninth largest steel producer in the country, wanted to diversify its operations and purchased Roebling and a number of other small companies for that purpose. For a time, the factory remained busy, but the mills and the furnaces were badly outmoded. In the 1960s, the general oversupply of steel and Roebling’s high labor costs convinced CFI to begin to shut down the plants. Plant improvements were announced but never made and in 1969 the Crane Corporation purchased CFI. The plant was closed for good four years later.

As absentee management, many corporations made decisions about investment, expansion, and improvements based on national and international factors. If more profits could be made outside of the state, then corporate decision-makers felt justified in pursuing those opportunities. Beginning in 1947, New Jersey’s manufacturing industries reinvested at a lower rate than manufacturing concerns throughout the nation. This meant that they did not put their profits back into their plants at the same rate as manufacturing industries on a national level. Although the failure to reinvest attracted little notice at the time, it had serious consequences for industrial workers, which became clear by the 1970s.

**Blue Collar Slows/White Collar Grows**

Two other important developments in the 1950s affected New Jersey’s workers. Again, these changes were barely visible at
the time, but they would have a significant impact in the years to come. First, as we have seen, blue-collar jobs grew slowly in the 1950s; this was partially offset, however, by rapid growth in white-collar and service occupations. From 1940 to 1970, the proportion of white-collar jobs increased from 38 to 50 percent of New Jersey’s occupations; the proportion of blue-collar jobs declined from 45 to 33 percent. Two categories which showed the greatest growth were public school teachers and state, county, and municipal employees. Second, the growth of white-collar and service jobs was not an unmixed blessing. They included high-income professional, managerial and sales jobs that were relocating from city to suburb. But they also involved large numbers of low-income, low-status jobs such as service-station attendant, department-store clerk and fast-food store operative. Many of these service jobs were concentrated in cities and were filled by women, blacks, and other minorities. Most workers in this sector were unorganized.

The 1960s: A Period of Contradictions

The 1960s were full of contradictions for New Jersey’s workers. Overall, these years were prosperous, in part due to federal tax cuts for business and heavy government spending on the Vietnam War during the last half of the decade. Consequently, organized workers in the mass-production industries and the building trades experienced real wage advances, in some cases 50 to 100 percent. Auto, steel and electrical workers, machinists, painters, carpenters, and others secured a variety of fringe benefits, including life and health insurance, pensions, and paid holidays and vacations. Rising wages and improved benefits permitted many New Jersey workers to move to the suburbs and achieve middle-class consumption patterns. Some experts who study unions think that workers became smug about their hard-won benefits and more interested in their cars, houses, and personal luxuries than in their solidarity as workers. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that a good number of the state’s labor force improved their economic conditions during the 1960s.

Automation

It seems ironic, therefore, that in the very same industries
and occupations in which workers obtained more money and benefits, the problem of automation heightened workers’ fears about the loss of their jobs. One explanation is that rising labor costs encouraged management to automate so that production could be carried out with fewer costly employees. One union member in the electrical industry confirmed this: “Twelve girls who used to produce vapor lamps were replaced by a machine requiring only one maintenance man. The girls were paid $2.10 an hour; the maintenance man receives $2.88. Total annual savings in labor costs $46,426.”

New Jersey longshoremen and production workers in the automobile, steel, and printing industries witnessed a decline in their membership. While union contracts often protected current members or those with seniority, unions conceded to management the right to introduce new technology that eliminated jobs and potential union members. To cite the automobile industry as an example, a 60 percent increase in production since World War II was matched by only a 10 to 15 percent increase in employment. Machines were taking the place of workers. Workers who lost their jobs might find new employment in the expanding service sector of the state’s economy. As we have noted, however, the service sector included many dead-end jobs which were hardly the equivalent of good-paying work in the basic industries. Others had difficulty finding any work. Ten months after Mack Truck abandoned its fifty-year-old plant in Plainfield in 1961, 23 percent of 2,700 workers were still without jobs well after unemployment benefits were exhausted.

Minority Workers and Women

New Jersey’s black workers also experienced contradictory situations in the 1960s. On the positive side, a strong civil rights movement emerged to fight discrimination and prejudice in housing, schools, and employment. President Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty attempted to assist many Americans at the bottom of the economic ladder. Nevertheless, blacks and other nonwhite minorities found it extremely difficult to obtain decent paying jobs. Many lacked the skills and training essential for securing the better white-collar jobs. Some industries and unions practiced exclusionary policies which made it almost impossible for nonwhites to become skilled or trained. Furthermore, blacks
and Hispanics with good jobs tended to work in industries hit hardest by automation. Lacking seniority, they were among the first workers to be let go. Thus, despite all of the social programs of the 1960s, the unemployment rates for nonwhites consistently remained at twice the level of that for whites. Frustrated with the slow pace of change and with conditions of poverty in a time of prosperity, some black areas of New Jersey’s cities erupted in a series of riots during the late 1960s.

In a similar fashion, the women’s rights movement in the 1960s fought to eliminate sexual discrimination in employment. Partially in response to this, but more likely due to economic factors, women moved into New Jersey’s labor force in significant numbers, many for the first time. Unfortunately, the vast majority of women were not able to break into the higher-paying jobs of the unionized industries. Rather, many were forced to take low-paying, insecure service jobs in the so-called “pink-collar job ghetto.”

Other contradictions plagued the New Jersey labor movement during the 1960s. Membership in the leading industrial unions fell along with the decline in manufacturing employment. However, the legislature’s passage of the Public Employment Relations Act in 1968 marked the beginning of a new chapter in unionism in New Jersey’s public sector. Although this topic will be explored more fully later, it should be noted that the new law stated that workers in state, county, and municipal jobs possessed the right to join unions and engage in collective bargaining with their employers. But they did not, according to the law, have the right to strike.

As the 1960s drew to a close, New Jersey’s unemployment dropped to 4.4 percent, the lowest level since the Korean War. Yet, almost as an indication of things to come, this was about .9 percentage points higher than the national rate. This differential widened significantly during the early 1970s.

The Postindustrial Era

Thousands of New Jerseyans experienced some periods of unemployment during the 1970s; many lost their jobs altogether. Much of the difficulty stemmed from national economic problems. As a result of Vietnam-related expenditures, the federal economy had overheated and inflation had increased.
To deal with this and other problems, the federal government began to cut spending and tighten the money supply. In 1970–1971, the national economy slipped into a recession. New Jersey and the other heavily industrialized states of the Northeast experienced the effects of this recession more severely than other parts of the country. In October 1972, for example, New Jersey's unemployment rate of 7.2 percent compared quite unfavorably with the national unemployment rate of 5.5 percent. The pattern was established for much of the 1970s. New Jersey's workers, even during periods of recovery, faced extremely difficult times. Certain fundamental economic changes were occurring that help to explain these difficulties.

**New Jersey's Industrial Plant Declines**

First, New Jersey's manufacturing industries had failed to reinvest at the same rate as their counterparts in other sections of the country. Even during the prosperous years of the 1960s, New Jersey's industries reinvested at a lower rate than the rest of the nation. Their manufacturing plants and machines were not replaced or upgraded, and as a result they grew old, outmoded, and less efficient than facilities elsewhere. When recessions occurred during the 1970s, these older plants were shut down first and, during recovery periods, were restarted last. Oftentimes, factories were closed permanently, as national corporations relocated their operations elsewhere and decided that these facilities were unnecessary.

Second, during the 1970s New Jersey experienced the same fate as the other industrialized states of the Northeast and Midwest—a shift of manufacturing activities to less industrially developed states of the South and West, the so-called Sunbelt. Whether prompted by reasons of low wages or taxes, less government regulation, or fewer and weaker unions, industries moved to places like Georgia, Texas, and southern California. In New Jersey the impact of this can be clearly seen as manufacturing employment fell from a high of 862,000 workers in 1967 to a low of 708,000 in 1982.

Third, throughout the 1970s, the state's population and average personal income increased at a slower rate than those of the nation as a whole. A slower-growing population that earned smaller increases in income than those in other regions meant that the consumption capacity of New Jerseyans did not keep
pace with the national pattern. Fewer people had fewer dollars to spend on goods and services, and this adversely affected the growth of business activity in the state. Several industries experienced an actual decline.

**Impact On Workers and Their Communities**

These economic changes profoundly affected New Jersey workers. In the mid seventies, over 10 percent of the labor force, more than 300,000 workers, were unemployed. The impact of job loss on workers and their communities is clear from this example. A cutlery manufacturer, J. Wiss and Son, had been in business in Newark since 1848. In 1978, this company was purchased by a Texas corporation and moved to North Carolina. This meant a direct loss of 760 manufacturing jobs. The loss of income to these workers also cost Newark an additional 468 jobs in stores, banks, taverns, gas stations, and other local businesses as over $14 million in purchasing power was removed from the local economy. Much of this money had been deposited in local banks which used it to make loans for mortgages, home improvements, and the purchases of autos, televisions, refrigerators, and other appliances. Wiss employees had also contributed $22,000 annually to charity, while the company donated $11,000. Not only the workers and their families, but the entire community suffered when this business closed. This example could be multiplied many times in New Jersey during the 1970s.

The 1970s recessions also created problems for New Jersey’s public employees. They had to confront employers plagued by declining tax revenues and determined to hold the line against further increases in wages and fringe benefits. Public employees responded by joining unions in unprecedented numbers. Throughout the state, unions appeared among police, fire, health care, and sanitation workers as well as public school and college teachers.

New Jersey's teachers were among the first to take advantage of the law permitting public employees to organize and engage in collective bargaining. In fact, teacher militancy and activism predated the 1968 law, as teachers throughout the decade participated in demonstrations, walkouts, and work stoppages. Although economic concerns such as salaries and benefits were important factors precipitating these actions, other issues such
as the absence of teacher involvement in school policies and professional decisions frequently were of greater significance. The 1968 law accelerated the pace of unionization among teachers; over 100,000 educators joined the New Jersey Education Association during the next decade. Thousands of teachers joined a rival organization, the New Jersey State Federation of Teachers.

Although public employee strikes were illegal, many teachers believed that striking was the only effective recourse to accomplish their goals. In 1970, striking teachers in Passaic, Jersey City, East Brunswick, and Sayreville were fined and jailed. From 1968 to 1981, 141 teacher strikes took place. The militancy of public school teachers was not lost on faculties at New Jersey’s colleges and universities, who soon formed bargaining units of their own.

During the 1970s, other public employees of state, county, and municipal governments rapidly unionized. Like the teachers, these workers were not permitted to strike. Nevertheless, it was not unusual to see police, fire fighters, nurses, and clerical employees conducting job actions or walking the picket line. By the end of the decade, organized public employees had become a potent economic and political force. The growth of public sector unions partially helped to offset the decline of their counterparts in the industrial sector.

The 1980s: Boom Times and Hidden Problems

The Economy Takes Off

During the late 1970s, New Jersey’s economy recovered from high unemployment and recession. An economic boom took place during the next decade. Over 19,000 new businesses and 500,000 nonmanufacturing jobs were added to the economy. In January 1987, the unemployment rate dropped to 3.6 percent, the lowest rate in seventeen years and well below the national average. Several parts of the state became rapid-growth areas, experiencing significant increases in jobs and employment opportunities. These growth areas tended to be located along the state’s major transportation arteries (such as the Route 1 corridor between Trenton and New Brunswick, interstate highways 78, 80 and 287, and state highway 73 between Cherry Hill and Philadelphia) and within special development sectors (such as
the Meadowlands, the Hudson River waterfront, and Atlantic City). Many of the expanding industries were in the service sector, providing well-paid positions for architects, engineers, computer scientists and programmers, accountants, financial managers, labor-relations specialists, and personnel executives. These jobs were designed for college graduates with specialized skills and expertise; high school graduates and unemployed factory workers were unable to qualify for these positions.

**Low Pay and Lost Jobs**

Underneath the appearance of overall prosperity, however, New Jersey's economic portrait had some serious blemishes. Many of the new jobs in the service sector were relatively low paying, and workers holding these jobs found it difficult to provide a family with basic necessities. Consequently, although the unemployment rate was good news, it masked the problem that thousands of workers were employed at substandard wages. Further concern during the 1980s focused on the continuing decline in well-paid manufacturing and construction jobs. From 1979 to 1986, the state lost a net total of 964 manufacturing plants providing 100,000 factory jobs.

Many of the lost jobs were held by unionized workers in the auto, steel, and chemical industries and paid decent wages and fringe benefits. Some who did find work in the service sector made less money and enjoyed fewer benefits. These workers, their families and their communities suffered economic hardships as a result. Employed unionized workers also faced wage freezes and givebacks as employers, for various reasons, attempted to hold the line or reduce labor costs. The 1980s was not a boom era for New Jersey's industrial sector.

The decline in manufacturing jobs and the continuing shift of employment to the "high technology" service sector had an important impact on the state's urban residents, many of whom belonged to minority groups. In its *18th Annual Report*, published in 1986, the Governor's Economic Policy Council listed eighteen declining cities, including Camden, Newark, Paterson, Jersey City, Elizabeth, and Trenton. They were characterized by a declining economic base, fiscal deficits, unemployment, and a disproportionate concentration of low-income families requiring state public assistance. Many urban workers were blacks or Hispanics whose low skill levels, poor
education, and city residence shut them out technologically and geographically from the growth areas of the state. Despite some improvement during the 1980s, the black unemployment rate remained twice as high as the white rate.

**Women in the Workforce**

Working women in New Jersey and throughout the nation continued to experience economic difficulties during the mid-1980s recovery. More than 600,000 additional females had joined New Jersey’s labor force since 1970; by 1986 some 1,710,000 women were working or actively seeking work. The reasons for this significant influx are varied: later marriages, fewer children per family, changes in patterns of spacing children, the necessity for two breadwinners, an increase in the number of women who are sole supporters, and changing attitudes towards careers for women. Whatever the factors, projections indicate that this trend will continue to persist.

Despite the growth of female employment, the majority of women still toil in the lowest paying industries and remain concentrated in traditionally female occupations. A few years ago national figures revealed that 99 percent of secretaries, 96 percent of nurses and 82 percent of elementary school teachers were females. Because of this historic job clustering and outright sex discrimination women averaged 64 cents earned for every $1.00 earned by men. The primary goal of working women remains the achievement of wage and salary parity with working men. Thus, the economic boom of the 1980s did not benefit all New Jerseyans. This point was dramatically underscored in 1986 when the Governor’s Task Force on Hunger reported that 600,000 people or 7.7 percent of the state’s population suffered from hunger. The report noted that in spite of a robust economy and high standard of living for most residents, “food pantries, homeless shelters and soup kitchens are evident throughout the state.” The report concluded by noting the difficulties faced by many workers in seeking employment: “In fact, there are two New Jerseys. One is economically vital and dynamic. It is service oriented, highly skilled and involved in the technology of the twenty-first century. The other is a sluggish remnant of New Jersey’s past. It is the New Jersey which struggles to make ends meet.”
The Shrinking Economy

Unfortunately, the fragile nature of the economic prosperity of the 1980s was readily apparent by 1989 when the recovery ran out of steam and New Jersey entered the worst recession since the early 1970s. Consumer and corporate debt skyrocketed, real estate prices plummeted, banks and savings and loans lost huge amounts of money, and several major corporations (e.g., Campbell's Soup in Camden and Maxwell House Coffee in Hoboken) along with many smaller businesses closed their doors. Once again workers and their families bore the brunt of the bad times. By 1991, unemployment neared 7 percent, more than 78,000 jobs had disappeared and even white-collar workers in both the private and public service sectors experienced the effects of a shrinking economy. Faced with a substantial budget deficit, the state's political leaders laid off more than a thousand state workers. Stripped of their paychecks, thousands of New Jersey workers faced severe financial crisis and a loss of self-esteem. Job prospects for the unemployed and first-time job seekers remained exceedingly bleak well into 1992.

For the past three years, New Jersey has experienced an economic recovery from the devastation of the 1989–1992 recession. During this period the state's economy has generated over 160,000 new jobs, more than the neighboring states of New York and Pennsylvania. In spite of this good news, however, workers in the Garden State are threatened by several serious problems.

First, the job gain represents only 61 per cent of the 262,000 jobs lost during the last recession and analysts predict that the complete replacement of lost jobs might take until the end of the 1990s.

Second, manufacturing jobs continue to decline from a peak of 900,000 jobs in 1961 to fewer than 500,000 jobs today. Two examples of this decline occurred recently in Trenton when Hill Phoenix Refrigeration moved its 750 production jobs to Virginia and General Motors cut the size of its work force at its Inland Fisher Guide plant from 2,300 to 860. In both cases, the lost jobs had paid decent wages with good fringe benefits. The newly unemployed workers now must find work in the service sector where entry-level jobs are low wage and offer few or no benefits.
Third, many of the jobs created during the current recovery are in personnel supply (businesses that supply other businesses with temporary or contractual workers). Another term for this process is outsourcing. While hiring temporary or part-time workers saves companies money, these employees are paid lower wages than permanent employees and usually work without health care or pension benefits. Many workers are forced to accept these jobs because they cannot find permanent, full-time work. Experts estimate that in the future three out of seven workers hired will be on a short-term basis.

Finally, New Jersey is witnessing the national economic phenomenon known as corporate downsizing or restructuring. Across the nation companies are cutting labor costs by merging or consolidating operations, moving facilities elsewhere or simply eliminating positions. In some New Jersey industries such as pharmaceuticals, banking, health care, and retail, this means the trimming of white-collar, high-tech jobs held by middle-income workers. Many of these positions pay relatively high wages. These experienced and well-trained workers are now hard-pressed to maintain their standard of living. Significantly, much of this job loss has occurred in the expanding service sector among companies located in New Jersey’s suburbs. Recently, Mobil Corporation and Lockheed Martin Corporation announced that they plan to leave Mercer County and take their combined total of 4,100 jobs with them. Some of the scientists and engineers will be transferred to other sites, but many must find employment elsewhere. In both cases the job loss will have a negative ripple effect on the county’s economy. State actions to downsize New Jersey’s public sector have been less severe but no less painful to the workers whose jobs are lost.

Corporations hope that eliminating jobs will cut their operating costs and lead to more efficient and profitable companies. In the long run, New Jersey’s workers will benefit from an economic system that is stronger and more competitive with other states as well as the international market. In the short term, however, it is clear that thousands of workers and their families in the Garden State are struggling to make ends meet. Some experts who have analyzed these economic trends have discovered the emergence of a fairly rigid, two-tiered economy. Some workers do quite well while many others increasingly find it hard to pay their basic bills. As evidence, they note that
personal incomes have not returned to their pre-recession levels. In fact, relative to inflation, middle- and lower-class incomes have actually declined. Maintaining a healthy economy is no longer simply a question of creating new jobs, it has become a question of assuring all workers a sufficient wage to support themselves and their families in decency.
CONCLUSION

New Jersey’s workers have experienced and participated in dramatic changes during the course of the state’s history. From a predominantly agricultural and preindustrial colony, where laborers completed entire tasks by hand, New Jersey moved rapidly during the nineteenth century into the Industrial Revolution, with its legions of unskilled factory workers tending automated machines. During this period, the state developed an impressive industrialized base centered largely in several expanding cities in its northern and central portions.

Workers, long-time residents, and newly arrived immigrants adjusted to industrialization in a variety of ways. Sometimes they resisted through protests, strikes and unionization; more often they accommodated themselves in innumerable little ways on the job; frequently, they upgraded their skills and those of their children through several forms of education and training. Invariably these adjustments demanded dislocation, struggle or simply hard work. Almost everyone in the family—husband, wife and children—went to work to make ends meet. The family budget came first above all else.

During the first half of this century, New Jersey workers lived through two world wars and the worst depression in American history. The country’s war efforts stimulated employment and wages. The depression, of course, was disastrous; hundreds of thousands of workers walked the bread and soup lines. At the same time, increasing numbers of blacks from the American South, along with the recently settled groups from Eastern Europe, joined the state’s work force. Working-class solidarity was more often than not a casualty of increased competition for jobs, housing and education. Still, blacks and whites did cooperate in New Jersey’s industrial unions during the 1930s and 1940s.
NOTES

Full citations are found in “Sources,” p. 85.

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2. Ibid., 166.
3. Vecoli, People of New Jersey, 46.
5. Boyer, Early Forges and Furnaces, 117.

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1. Bensman, Practice of Solidarity, 44.

Chapter Three

2. Ibid., 161.
4. Ibid., 68.
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FOR FURTHER READING

Full bibliographic citations are given in this section only for titles not listed elsewhere. All other titles are fully cited in Sources, p. 85.

New Jersey labor history is still in its apprentice stage. During the past two decades, however, several studies have been published that begin to address the important part played by New Jersey’s working population in the development of the state. A number of problems remain. There is a real need for a comprehensive resource guide to materials on New Jersey’s workers in state and national archives and libraries. Such a guide would encourage and assist scholars and others interested in this area. Also, some of the better recent studies are doctoral dissertations which are relatively inaccessible to secondary school students and teachers. Hopefully, these works will be published in the near future. Finally, while we know more now about New Jersey workers than we did twenty-five years ago, we need further exploration of specific cities, industries, trades, minorities and ethnic groups, and time periods. The books and articles listed should be available in most college libraries.


Gutman has two perceptive essays on Paterson in Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America (1976). Two ex-


