

## People's History of the Labor Movement:

Labor Notes Troublemaker's Workshop, Gainesville, Florida, 9/27/2014

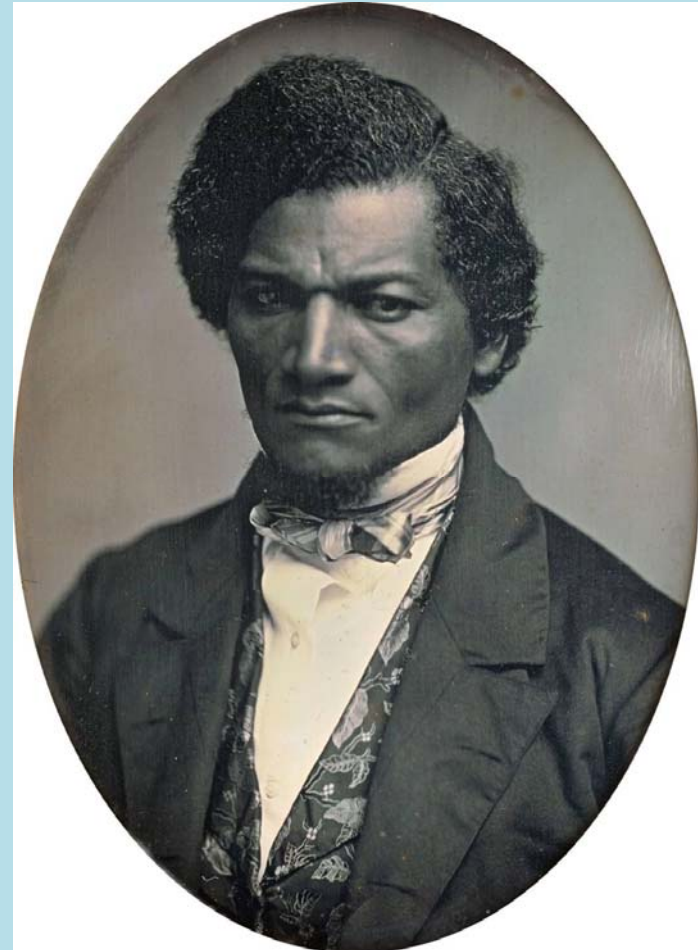
Lower right: Frederick Douglass, former slave & advocate of labor & immigrant rights

Key Concepts in a People's History of the  
Labor Movement:

### Centrality of Slavery

- A) Accumulation of capital, profits
- B) Rise of modern managerial techniques, surveillance, "pushing out" systems, measuring productivity,
- C) Invention of modern ideas of racism, divide-and-conquer, white workers' "psychological wage.

HANDOUT: Frederick Douglass in Defense of  
Chinese Immigrant Workers



## Myth: Unlike in Europe, there has been no class conflict in the United States

(Image lower right: Destruction of the Pittsburgh Railroad Depot by workers in 1877)

REALITY: Class struggle has been central to American history from the start. The US has one of the most violent labor histories in the world. Every “gain” came at great cost to working class people

Slavery: enslaved workers vs. masters

Labor Parties: first formed in the 1810s

Ten-Hour Day Movement, 1820s

8-Hour Day Movement, 1860s-1930s

General Strikes: 1860s, 1873, 1877, 1886, 1894, 1919, 1934, 1945-47, etc., etc.

American Civil War (Labor system & 1<sup>st</sup> General Strike)

Sit-Down Strikes, CIO, *Making of New Deal, 1930s*

*United Farm Workers' Grape Boycott, 1965-1970*

*Dr. King & the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, 1968*

Lordstown and “Blue Collar Blues” Wildcats 1970s

Ludlow Massacre, Matewan, Mother Jones, Dolores Huerta, *Norma Rae*, *Silkwood*, The Haymarket, Sacco & Vanzetti, Paul Robeson, Seattle General Strike.

HANDOUT: Steelworkers' Declaration of Independence



## Working Class Struggles in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

American Labor Law hampers organizing efforts

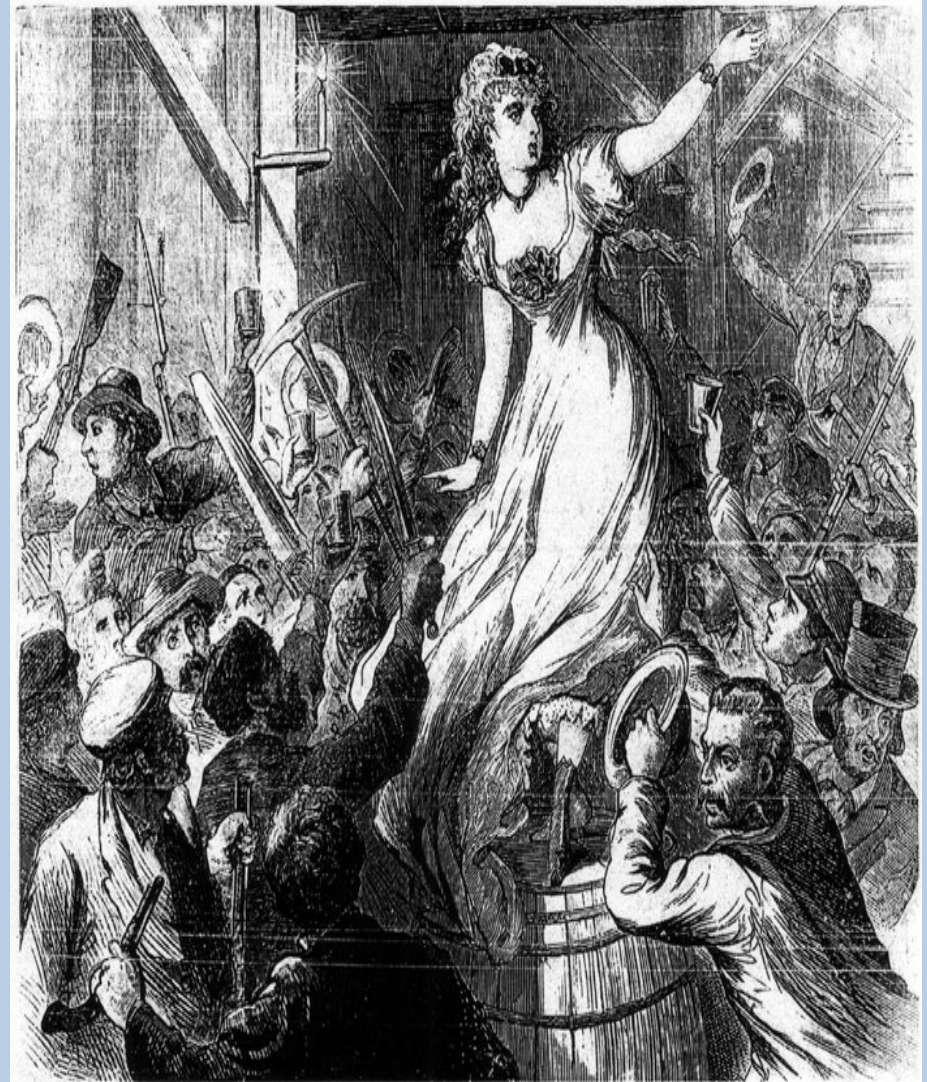
Lower right: workers rush to barricades during 1872 national railroad strike

A crisis facing America's workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the area of labor law.

In contrast to many other sectors of American life, the laws governing the workplace were grounded in earlier Common Law practices, such as the Law of Master & Servant. Hence, workplace law was also "Judge-Made Law" and relatively immune to legislative relief.

Employers could look to the state to pass laws to defend their interests; workers could not do the same.

Hence, efforts to regulate wages, working conditions, and child labor often failed. Unable to organize legally, the era between the 1870s and the coming of the New Deal is referred to as the "Age of Dynamite," an extremely violent



## The Rise of Workingmen's Parties, 1820s-1860s

### Socialism, Class, & Politics

(Below left: Police riot during Lynn, Massachusetts Shoemakers' Strike, 1860)



Working Men's Parties were organized in every major American city in the North beginning in the 1820s. At least 50 major newspapers were dedicated to building the movement.

In New York alone, these were some of the cities that boasted labor parties:

- New York City, Brooklyn, Troy, Albany, Rochester, Buffalo, Genesee, Utica, Salina (Syracuse) Schenectady, Geneva, Ithaca, Auburn, Batavia, Brockport, Harford, Canandaigua, Kingsbury, Lansingburgh, Glens Falls, Palmyra, and Saratoga., Oneida, Rensselaer, Cayuga, Washington, Onandaga, Tioga, Tompkins, Montgomery, Kings, Cortland.

“The Great Struggle of the Age.” The Content of Workingmen’s Parties

(Lower right: Pennsylvania Militia fires on striking workers, Philadelphia, 1877 national railroad strike)

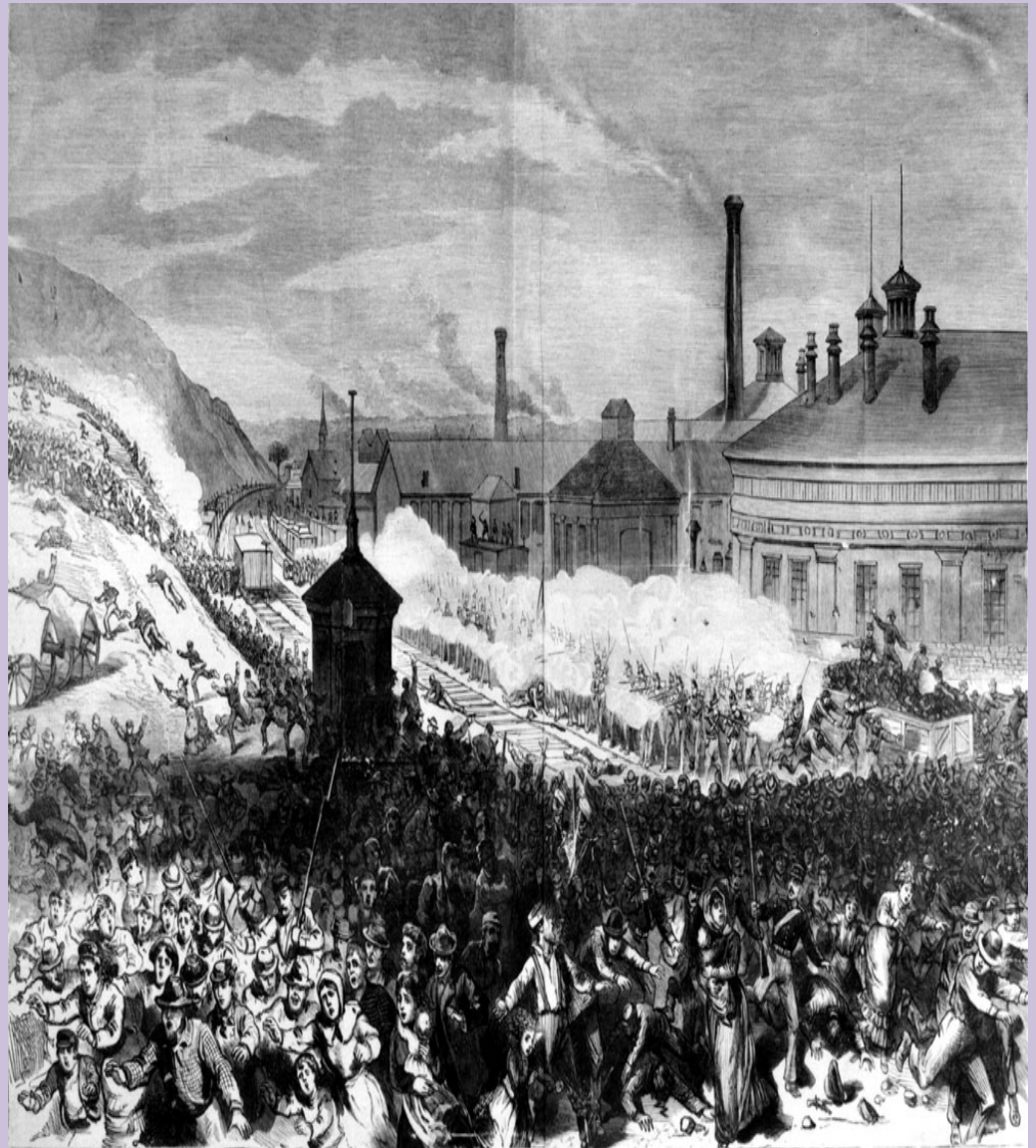
**Major political struggles included:**

“...championing public education [& higher pay for teachers!] abolition of imprisonment for debt, banking reform, reform of the militia system, factory laws, general incorporation laws, recognition of labor’s right to organize unions, shorter hours of work for labor.”

The 1820s-30s also witnessed a Ten-Hour Strike Movement.

---Edward Pessen

Most Uncommon Jacksonians (32)



By the End of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, class conflict was endemic in American society  
(Lower right: workers battle Pinkerton Detectives for control of Homestead Steel Works, 1892)

“The division of society into the producing and the non-producing classes, and the fact of the unequal distribution of value between the two, introduces us at once to another distinction—that of capital and labour. . . labour now becomes a commodity. . . . Antagonism and opposition of interest is introduced in the community; capital and labour stand opposed. “

*The Awl* (1844)

Shoemakers' Union Journal  
Lynn, Massachusetts



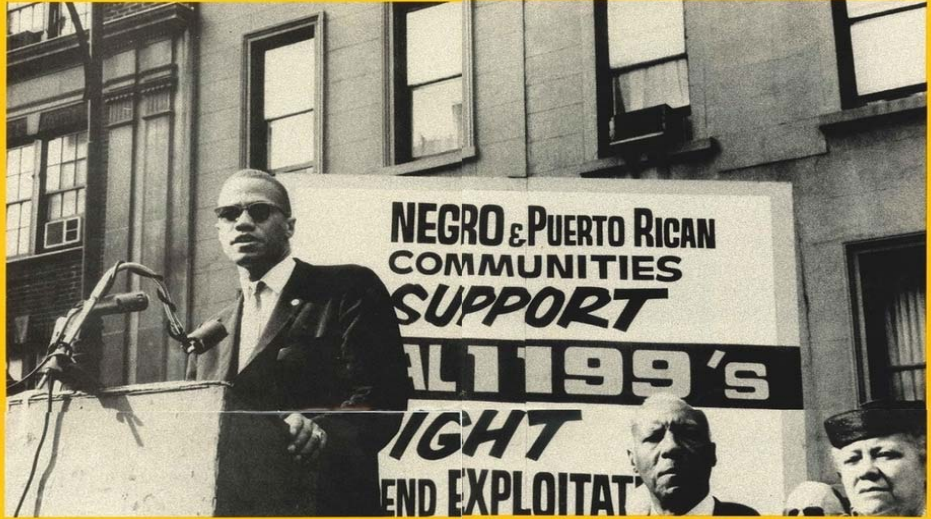
AN AWFUL BATTLE AT HOMESTEAD, PA.

Takeaway Lesson: “We Don’t Need No Leaders”  
(Lower right: Malcolm X at Hospital Workers victory rally, 1962)

The most significant uprisings of workers in US history were not led from above. They have always been fueled by local, rank-and-file insurgencies from below. Local “Leaders” develop the same way organizers do:

- A) Developing relationships of trust
- B) Mutuality, solidarity, “You’ve got my back; I’ve got yours.” (*Develop solidarity*)
- C) We are going to change this society; not replicate or sustain the current corrupt power relations.
- D) We cannot beg society’s leaders to “do the right thing” when it comes to our interests as working class people.

**Malcolm X** *and* **1199**  
New York's Health Care Workers Union



**“The hospital strikers have demonstrated that you don’t get a job done unless you show the man you’re not afraid... If you’re not willing to pay that price then you don’t deserve the rewards or benefits that go along with it.”**

Malcolm X at Rally in Support of Striking 1199 Hospital Workers, July 22, 1962

A Bread and Roses poster --5--

## History and Contemporary Struggles in the Workplace and Society

*(Lower right: Flint, Michigan Sit-Down Strike, 1936-37)*

If A People's History teaches us anything it is that we cannot change anything at work or in the broader society by waiting for the bosses or people in power to save us.

The best of our tradition is in emphasizing the right of each individual to develop their capacities to the fullest by promoting the values of solidarity and social justice.

**Be a Troublemaker!**

