

THE ROOTS OF THE CIO MOVEMENT IN ALIQUIPPA AND AMBRIDGE, PENNSYLVANIA, 1933-1937

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how working-class men's anxieties about the experience of gender, class, and power gave rise to worker interest in unionization and the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in western Pennsylvania steel mill towns during the Great Depression. During the 1930s, working men in the Beaver County steel towns of Aliquippa and Ambridge viewed industrial unions and class struggle as ways to more firmly establish manliness and a sense of male authority since they often confronted experiences of powerlessness and subordination in company town politics, workplaces, and sometimes their own homes.

INTRODUCTION

In May 1937, steelworkers struck against the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation (J&L), in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, laying the foundations of industrial unionism in western Pennsylvania. The men and women who lived and worked in the borough described J&L as "a tyranny that had held it [the town of Aliquippa] for years" (Brooks, 1940, p. 124). In the months that led up to the strike, a series of changes emboldened the actions of the men and women on the picket lines. Between January and May, General Motors workers and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) won their sit-down strike in Flint, Michigan, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) won 110 contracts with US Steel, and the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.* in April, upholding the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA, or the Wagner Act) which mandated that workers had the legal right to organize unions. However, the independents such as Jones & Laughlin remained opposed to industrial unionism. When negotiations between the SWOC and J&L broke down in May, the union called for a strike. Originally concerned whether or not they could win, organizers reveled in the strike's success. "No one, not even the union," noted SWOC organizer Meyer Bernstein, "believed it possible." In Aliquippa, infamously known as "Little Siberia," the strike exposed the "pent-up" anger of marginalized steelworkers, who had long resented J&L's harsh treatment of workers and their communities. Bernstein asserted, "Men were aching for a fight" (Brooks, 1940, p. 121-127).

Meyer Bernstein's remarks echo the masternarrative of working-class politics in New Deal America: increasingly class-conscious and restive workers initiated grassroots "revolts" in cities, towns, and industries across the United States, throwing off the shackles of employer anti-unionism. Since the 1890s, organized labor had little success in Pittsburgh's Steel Valley. Even the 1919 strike in steel ultimately disintegrated due to ethnic divisions and virulent anti-radicalism (Brody, 1965, p. 129, 191). During the 1930s, however, unionization rebounded. In 1933-1934,

workers launched major strikes in Detroit, Toledo, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Akron, and in the Pittsburgh district. Later, in 1937, the new Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO) won its first major victories in automobile manufacturing and steel. What propelled the rejuvenation of the labor movement? To explain the widespread labor militancy and class-based politics of the thirties, historians have examined, for example, how forces such as the rise of a homogenizing mass culture, the general failure of 1920s welfare capitalism, the ways the Great Depression destroyed workers' faith in New Era prosperity, and the failure of ethnic institutions to mediate the effects of the economic crisis fostered widespread class consciousness and support for new industrial unions (Bernstein, 1966, p. 65-66; Bernstein, 1970; Cohen, 1990; Gerstle, 1989; Faue, 1991; Zieger, 1995, p. 9-13).

These explanations, however, fail to fully capture what drove the militancy of the workers Bernstein observed and what organized labor's success meant to them. Men, he recognized, wanted something else. In Beaver County steel towns, unionism offered males what they lacked previously, something historical as well as sociological: authority and power as working-class *men*. CIO unionism emerged from an environment where political repression undermined men's claims to civil liberties within their communities, especially the right to organize labor unions, the freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and the right to vote for political candidates of one's own choosing, and where transformations in women's status during the 1910s-1920s challenged male authority within the home -- all of which were made worse by unemployment and the weakening of male breadwinner identities during the Great Depression. As Joseph Periello, a veteran of the Aliquippa strike and long-time resident of the borough, remembered, working men believed they "lived on their knees." The Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) and the CIO, however, allowed them to stand up and "fight," to become men (J. Periello, interview, 2000).

This article examines the relationship between gender, class, and the labor movement during the Great Depression. In Beaver County mill towns, masculinity and gender were not primarily bureaucratic impositions that blunted an emancipatory politics of class (Faue, 1991, p. 66-99). Rather, the development of organized labor as a movement and an institution in the 1930s reflected working-class men and women's gendered views of identity, family, community, and labor. In steel, men and women built the gender politics of CIO unionism from the bottom-up. The protracted marginalization of working-class men during the 1910s, 1920s, and early 1930s fueled working-class militancy and the rise of industrial unionism, as well as its masculine overtones, in local mill towns. While persuasively indicating that gender mattered very deeply to working people in the 1930s, and the ways workers' ideas about gender shaped their political actions, historians' explanations for labor's success have underestimated how anxieties about pre-CIO gender politics informed worker actions and the appeal of new unions during the depression. The redemption of working-class manhood rested at the foundation of men's enthusiasm for the SWOC; men in Aliquippa and the neighboring borough of Ambridge brought a past history of wounded masculinities with them to the picket lines during the 1930s. As Periello said, "It made us feel like men" (J. Periello, interview, 2000).

EMBATTLED MANHOOD IN PRE-CIO BEAVER COUNTY

Discussions of gender and working-class consciousness during the Great Depression era often begin with the ways men experienced a “crisis of masculinity.” Due to extensive unemployment, men’s identities as breadwinners, workers, and patriarchs became increasingly precarious. This upheaval within society and the family, the argument continues, set the stage for working-class dissent (Faue, 1991, p. 191; Cohen, 1990, p. 246-249). Communist-led Unemployed Councils appeared in major industrial cities across the North and Midwest in 1930, for instance, appealing to men’s sense of disaffection. While discussions of a “crisis of masculinity” begin to uncover the gender anxieties of men, scholars have only given it limited significance and defined the concept narrowly. What historians and sociologists saw as a “crisis” in depression-era gender identities and relations may have been the tip of an iceberg; as the case of Beaver County men suggests, worries about gender predated the 1930s and these concerns went beyond the issue of male breadwinner status within the family. In addition to unemployment, other forces laid siege to working-class masculinity before, as well as during, the depression decade.

Three important social and political forces shaped the gender consciousness of working men in Beaver County. First, the authoritarian structure of the mill town marginalized working men in public life. Beginning in the 1910s, the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation closely circumscribed the freedoms of men in Aliquippa. Men had no legitimate status or voice in local politics, and company officials and local police sternly monitored steelworkers’ actions and behaviors in public space and on the shop floor. Second, social, political, and cultural changes in women’s status during the 1910s and 1920s empowered the American-born daughters of previous generations of immigrants. (Simultaneously, however, working-class men viewed their own status as slight). Men found themselves in conflict with women, who they believed had once been less forceful and independent. Finally, the Great Depression weakened the economic and social status of men. With work hard to come by, the ideal of the male breadwinner became difficult to fulfill. As the sociologist Mirra Komarovsky wrote in her 1940 study of manhood and depression-era unemployment: “He [the working man] experiences a sense of deep frustration because in his own estimation he fails to fulfill what is the central duty of his life, the very touchstone of his manhood -- the role of family provider” (p. 74). In the 1930s, men began to look to new institutions such as the Unemployed Councils, and later the CIO, as ways to affirm their sense of manhood.

In Beaver County, working-class men’s subordination began in 1910, when the Jones & Laughlin Corporation transformed the small town of Woodlawn into a tightly structured, harshly policed mill town -- reminiscent of the coal mining company towns of southern West Virginia, which were, as Samuel Gompers observed in 1913, decidedly “Russianized” (Norwood, 2002, p. 128-129). Renamed Aliquippa, J&L molded the town according to its own particular ends, cultivating what superintendent Tom Girdler proudly described as a “benevolent dictatorship” (Bernstein, 1970, p. 475). The corporation bought most of the land in the surrounding area, building new residential areas around a series of ethnic-, race-, and class-divided “plans.” These manufactured neighborhoods housed (as well as divided) workers and J&L officials. While the company envisioned a progressive, model community for workers and management, they enforced their policies through an omnipresent police force. At the same time, J&L employed spies that kept the company “sufficiently informed as to the likelihood of sedition breaking out” (Wollman and

Inman, 1999, p. 62-79; Fitch, 1989, p. 219). Workers who came to Aliquippa between the 1910s and the 1930s became all too familiar with Jones & Laughlin police chief Captain Harry Mauk's tyrannical, violent control. Company and local police stifled unionists and dissenters, scrutinized social spaces, and entered workers' homes (technically J&L property) at will. Working men argued they were not "free" in Aliquippa; rather, they lived as "serfs" in the J&L fiefdom (Davin, 1999, p. 14, 490).

While workers had it bad, union organizers and sympathizers had it far worse. A union activist of the 1920s and 1930s remembered how J&L officials once told him, "We make the rules. This is not the United States. This is Aliquippa" (Davin, 2000, p. 263). The company exacted a stern control over local working-class residents. During the 1930s, for instance, working men and unionists described a "reign of terror" in Aliquippa, driven by "systematic terror" at the hands of J&L and the police ("Union Lays Abuses," 1934). Violence was common, as the police targeted union organizers and sympathizers for harassment. "They beat you for exercise," Joseph Periello bitterly recalled (J. Periello, interview, 2000). Mike Kellar was one of the union men who experienced J&L violence first-hand. Mary Cozzicoli reported that Kellar "had been abused and beaten" on numerous occasions by company men (M. Cozzicoli, interview, n.d.) J&L policemen entered workers' homes without permission, assaulted or jailed union organizers, and in some cases "railroaded" men into asylums in order to enforce their silence, as they did with George Isosky, a unionist and disabled steelworker, during the early 1930s (Green, 1993, p. 10-11; J. Periello, interview, 2000).

Men and women in Aliquippa found life there demeaning. The company and the police not only victimized men; they also victimized women. Company officials, according to Joseph Periello, sometimes demanded sexual favors from steelworkers' spouses. Moreover, the small number of women, who worked at the Jones mills, was vulnerable to the sexual advances of supervisors. Bosses sometimes visited workers' homes and coerced women into extramarital affairs, forcing some women to meet them at area hotels (J. Periello, interview, 2000). Due to the company's unyielding control, men and women had little recourse. J&L coercion did not stop at matters pertaining to union organizing; it could reach into workers' homes, families, and private lives.

Aliquippa was a company town. Through the local Republican Party, the company controlled borough politics. To maintain the city government as an arm of J&L control, the company dictated how its employees voted during elections. If a man wanted to keep his job, he voted the Republican ticket. Reflecting on local elections during the early 1930s, Joseph Periello remembered how supervisors recruited would-be voters from the shop floor and escorted them to the polls.

My boss came over, He said, "Joe, at 2 o'clock a car will be outside, and you will go vote." I told him I wasn't 21. I was only 19. I am not registered to vote. He said, "You vote." . . . I voted Republican like they wanted me to (J. Periello, interview, n.d.)

As men, who lived in the United States, a country where working people hoped to find democracy, J&L workers resented the ways the company arbitrarily restricted their civil rights. Periello continued,

When I came back out [of the polling place] . . . I figured a god damn man has a right to do what he wants in this country . . . I said, . . . That's the last time I'll vote for those bastards" (J. Periello, interview, n.d.)

For men and women in Aliquippa, personal freedom and dignity could be meager as they suffered numerous injustices. The company fostered a debasing environment: their practices marginalized men by denying them control over their own votes, made them wholly vulnerable to police violence and intimidation, and J&L officials sometimes forced wives and women workers into unwanted sexual relationships.

Gender not only shaped class relations between working-class women and men and the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation, however. Beaver County also witnessed intra-class conflict over the meanings of gender and power. During the 1920s and early 1930s, numerous instances of violent domestic strife appeared in local newspapers and court records. These incidents highlighted an assertive, vocal generation of women and an uneasy generation of men. The women who came of age during the New Era were American women, raised on the pleasures of mass consumerism, urban leisure, and expectations of freedom and empowerment. Since the Progressive Era, women's expanding independence and assertiveness became increasingly visible in urban centers and popular culture (Dumenil, 1995, p. 98-144; Ewen, 1985; Peiss, 1986; Benson, 1986). Reformers in Chicago and New York City, for example, targeted women who did not depend on men for support, demonstrating a negative or fearful reaction to changes in gender relations and women's status during the 1910s and 1920s (Meyerowitz, 1988; Peiss, 1986).

The achievement of the vote was another marker of change for women. As a result of Progressive Era activism and suffrage militancy, women became important players in national politics. While women's political activism waned during the remainder of the 1920s (due to the lack of a central cause that would allow women to unite on the basis of gender), the Nineteenth Amendment symbolically recognized women and men as equals in politics (Chafe, 1972, p. 36-37). Between 1900 and 1930, the high profile of independent women in urban centers and the achievement of the vote signaled change in the status of women across the country. Despite the fact that working-class votes meant little in "Little Siberia," it was the era of the "New Woman."

Between World War I and the Great Depression, the prominence of married women in public life also increased. Due to the rise of mass consumerism, new ideals and aspirations towards a middle-class lifestyle heightened the need for financial contributions from supplementary wage earners. Working men, families discovered, "were not paid enough to support their families according to the American standard of living" (Wandersee, 1981, p. 1-2). Women thus remained important to the family economy. While women's access to jobs varied according to city or region, these changes signal a broader shift in American culture. Women needed, and wanted, to work just as men did. In their study of social and cultural change during the 1920s, the sociologists Robert S.

Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd concluded that “working for money is becoming larger” among women. “[T]o a greater extent than thirty-five years ago,” they wrote, “women share this activity with men” (Lynd and Lynd, 1929, p. 30). Men were perhaps not comfortable with these changes. During the Great Depression, voices in opposition to women’s employment not only resonated with the exigencies of the economic crisis -- they also suggested a negative reaction to the previous decades’ changes (Faue, 1991; Scharf, 1980). In Beaver County, a region dominated by the steel industry’s sexual division of labor, women’s assertiveness during the twenties and thirties reflected the impact of these broader revisions in women’s range of acceptable activities. While women had severely limited job opportunities in the region, men’s actions suggested they were weary of women’s new attitudes.

Due to their privileged status as breadwinners, men demanded authority over women and their homes. During the 1920s and early 1930s, as the era of the New Woman unfolded, homes became a site of conflict between men and women in Beaver County. While men dominated work opportunities in the labor market, women nonetheless forged a vocal and forceful role within the family and the home (Kleinberg, 1989). Clinging to notions of patriarchal authority over spouses and homes, men found themselves on new and uncertain terrain. Their fathers’ wives were characteristically submissive and “conservative,” according to Joseph Periello. However, new “American” ideas gave immigrants’ daughters of the 1920s-1930s a set of higher expectations from marriage (J. Periello, interview, 2000).

In Beaver County, instances of violent conflict within heterosocial and homosocial relationships underscored how volatile gender relationships could be during the New Era and the early 1930s. Cases of domestic violence (among men and women, as well as among men themselves) and litigation initiated by wives against delinquent husbands provide a small window into the volatility of gender relations between 1925 and 1933. Daily news reports on crimes committed among men and by men against women appeared often in the *Daily Citizen*, the daily Ambridge newspaper, between 1925 and 1935, calling readers’ attention to troubled gender relationships. Within the homosocial culture of working men in Beaver County, men sometimes clashed over the affections of women. Men also violently quarreled over insults, perceived or otherwise, to one’s honor. Moreover, these articles highlight patterns of conditional and contested marital arrangements between husbands and wives -- specifically, what men and women believed they were entitled to within the context of their relationships. Husbands could not always count on an evening meal, for example, if they engaged in violent or abusive behavior with their spouses. Reports on these issues appeared frequently in the *Daily Citizen* as well as the Beaver County court dockets, and they portray social spaces and homes as sites where men and women struggled with issues of gender right and power.

In private spaces, family life could be confrontational. During the first years of the Great Depression, newspaper articles highlighted incidents of domestic conflict where relations between husbands and wives had been strained to the breaking point. In 1931, for example, Emery O. Crawford and Clara Crawford’s marriage smoldered with tension. When Emery arrived home one night, Clara told him she would make his supper “if he would eat it.” Apparently, Emery had refused to eat Clara’s meals for some time and Clara was fed up with him. She chastised her husband for his behavior, and their argument quickly escalated. Emery threatened his wife: “I’ll

slap your mouth for you,” he warned. Clara, however, refused to back down. “I have never yet seen,” she declared, “the man big enough to slap my mouth.” The pair began fighting in the kitchen. Then Clara’s father, John Merriman, who probably lived with the couple, appeared with a gun. He fired, killing Emery. Initially, the Beaver County Court charged that Merriman “willfully . . . did kill and murder.” Later, however, the judge sympathized with the older Merriman, lowered his charge to involuntary manslaughter, and gave him ten years of probation (“Merriman Paroled,” 1931).

The Crawford case suggests how men and women struggled to negotiate gender and power within marriage, and how these negotiations could violently break down. Clara expressed the limits to what she would and would not do as Emery’s wife and caregiver. She did not work away from the home, and as his wife, she readily offered to fulfill her position as homemaker by preparing her husband’s supper. Most importantly, Clara expected Emery to allow her to fulfill that task. When Emery belittled her labors by refusing to eat, Clara forcefully challenged his behavior. During the violent confrontation before Emery’s death, she attacked the ways men tried to violently subdue her in the past (“I’ve never seen the man big enough to slap my mouth.”). The Crawford incident suggests how women and men could violently disagree over gender right and privilege.

In addition to heterosocial contexts, men often confronted dangerous tensions within homosocial settings. Homosociability did not necessarily provide men with an escape from the tensions of mill town life. In 1925 a group of men who worked at Ambridge’s Central Tube Company plant boarded together in a home owned by a man named Tony Raimondi. One evening, three of the roommates (Bruno Fisano, Dominick Page, and Ned Scrivo) engaged in a heated argument over the affections of a young woman in the neighborhood. The disagreement rapidly escalated, and Scrivo drew a thirty-eight caliber handgun and fired twice. Dominick Page died immediately, and Bruno Fisano ended up in the Sewickley Valley Hospital with a bullet lodged in his chest. Scrivo ran from the scene, while Frank Valenti, who also lived in the house, rushed to the police station for assistance (“Shooting Affray,” 1925). The incident points to a potentially volatile social world where competition and disagreements among men over issues such as relationships with women could end in death.

The Scrivo shooting reflects themes that repeatedly appeared in the newspapers during the late 1920s and early 1930s. An important component of manliness, as demonstrated by various incidents, revolved around the protection of one’s honor. In the social lives of Beaver County men, sociability, alcohol, and insults often led to violent showdowns in public and private spaces (“Failure to Buy Drinks,” 1932). In December 1931, for example, John Mattia stabbed and murdered August Nardachia during an argument at a Christmas party. The men may have been acquaintances or friends; the incident occurred while both men were visiting another home in Aliquippa (“Aliquippa Man,” 1931). The holidays also saw another potentially disastrous confrontation. In Ambridge, policemen arrested Peter Galloy after he threatened one of his roommates with “a vicious looking hunting knife.” Despite these and other incidents, the *Daily Citizen* insisted “the number who celebrated Christmas by getting drunk appeared to be smaller than in past years.” It was, in the telling words of the reporter, “a comparatively quiet holiday in Ambridge” (“Threatens Man’s Life,” 1931).

The early years of the Great Depression certainly made things worse for working men and women in Beaver County. While unemployment hit cities such as Detroit and Chicago with great force, *underemployment* beset western Pennsylvania steel towns. In 1930, only 2,920 Beaver County workers had been laid off out of a workforce of 53,465 (5 percent). Of these, 2,719 were men and 201 were women. In Aliquippa itself, only 343 workers had been laid off out of a workforce of 10,311 (3 percent). Just across the Ohio River in neighboring Ambridge, only 400 workers out of a workforce of 7,347 had been discharged (5 percent) [U.S. Bureau of Census, 1931, p. 874, 875]. While area steel mills, to their credit, adopted “share the work” programs to keep workers on the payrolls, wages and hours declined drastically. During 1930-1931, steelworkers, “didn’t receive enough working time to feed their families” (“Great Ambridge Strike,” 1980). Joseph Periello described how he visited the J&L mills in Aliquippa each day in the hopes of getting day work during the depression years. If jobs were available, he recalled, a young manager would come out and call down to the men, “Any hunkies or niggers want day work” (J. Periello, interview, 2000)? Other times, Periello and others waited outside all day without even seeing a company official. While technically employed in some cases, working-class men had great difficulty securing a steady paycheck.

Contemporaries pointed out how struggling workers had few avenues of relief during the early 1930s. “At the beginning of the Depression,” the Beaver Valley Labor History Society recalled, “the workers of Ambridge had no federal, state, county or borough unemployment insurance to fall back on.” To alleviate the crisis, workers turned to community institutions. Churches became important sources of relief. In Ambridge, numerous churches served food twice per day to “hundreds” of men and women. The networks of available relief, however, could not end the suffering among workers and their families (“Great Ambridge Strike,” 1980).

With work so hard to come by, evidence suggests that some men began deserting their wives and children. Desertion amidst the depression compelled working-class women to act decisively in defense of themselves and their families. Women in Beaver County had far fewer means of economic sustenance within the sexual division of labor found in area steel towns. They depended on husbands’ earnings for their own (and their children’s) financial support. When a husband abandoned his family and withdrew his wages from the household, many women turned to the local courts in an attempt to mend their situation. Through the courts, abandoned women challenged their husbands’ assertions of patriarchal authority and mobility.

In November 1931, for instance, McKensy Edmundson left his wife, Mattie. McKensy had been gone for nearly three weeks, and Mattie decided something had to be done. The deserted wife filed a charge of “Non-Support” at the Beaver County court in Beaver, Pennsylvania. After hearing her case, the court readily acknowledged “that he has deserted her; that she is entirely dependent upon herself for support for the past three weeks and [he] has refused to pay the rent of the house in which she lives.” McKensy relented and plead guilty to the charge of non-support. The judge, in turn, ordered him to pay three dollars per week “for the support of his wife” (“Edmundson, McKensy,” 1932). In the courts, women found a resource to challenge the imbalance of power among men and women within the region’s sexual division of labor.

Not all men deserted their wives, however. Most men looked for other ways to contend with the Great Depression's effects. Working-class men in Ambridge, with the help of Communist activists, formed an Unemployed Council in 1930. The group grew quickly as organizers went to church soup lines, asking people to report evictions and water and gas shutoffs. When evictions occurred, the Council mobilized local unemployed men and forcefully carried the furniture back into the house. "Constables who placed the furniture on the street," according to one account, "were powerless against large groups" ("Great Ambridge Strike," 1980). Unemployed Councils gave suffering men (and women) a way to do *something* about their situation.

A close look at Beaver County steel towns during the 1920s and early 1930s, the years before the rise of the CIO, reveals the sometimes contentious and potentially violent world women and men lived, worked, and played in. Their daily experiences as members of communities, families, and peer groups revealed how men and women struggled over issues of gender right and privilege. Women and men had a lengthy history of struggle under the J&L regime in Aliquippa, men grappled with one another over issues of honor in their social circles, and conflicts between husbands and wives could undermine men's claims to patriarchal authority. The depression further jeopardized men's preferred relationship to their families, undermining men's claims to wage work and identities as breadwinners and patriarchs. In response to the chaos wrought by the Great Depression, organizations such as the Unemployed Councils offered men a new way to challenge some of the circumstances that marginalized them in their own homes and communities. Between 1933 and 1937, however, a reviving labor movement would finally allow them to affirm their manhood.

THE GREAT AMBRIDGE STRIKE OF 1933

In early October 1933, newspaper readers across the United States learned of a violent strike in the borough of Ambridge, located northwest of Pittsburgh on the Ohio River and directly adjacent to Aliquippa. In the *New York Times*, reporters told of violence between pickets and strikebreakers, and between the pickets and sheriff's deputies in front of the Spang-Chalfant mill. On October 5, just before the strike would be forcefully concluded by police deputies, two men were seriously wounded and several others had been beaten during a confrontation between workers and strikebreakers on the streets of Ambridge, "as industrial chaos spread to the rich Beaver Valley." On that day, when 100 men attempted to cross the picket lines, "a mob of 300 shouting, jeering pickets closed in [and] fists, clubs, and bricks flew" ("One Killed," 1933). Accounts of the 1933 Ambridge strike, such as the ones to be found in the *New York Times*, announced to the entire country that labor's new men were marching into battle, struggling to unionize the western Pennsylvania steel industry and gain influence over their communities.

The Ambridge strike followed on the heels of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Passed in June 1933, the NIRA sparked new attempts among steelworkers to organize or join unions. Old unions such as the Amalgamated Association (AA) witnessed a leap in membership. Before the NIRA, the Amalgamated had less than 5,000 members; by April 1934, the old union boasted a membership of at least 50,000 men (Lynd, 1972, p. 38-39). New groups also appeared on behalf of the men in the mills. In Ambridge, Communist organizers, operating under the banner

of the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), formed the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union (SMWIU). The SMWIU and Ambridge workers launched the October 1933 strike. During 1933, the passage of the NIRA set in motion the process of remaking working-class manhood via industrial unionism. The organizing efforts that began during this time set steelworkers on the path towards the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the profound labor victories of 1937.

During the years before the New Deal, revisions in women's status that accompanied the era of the New Woman, political subordination within the company-dominated mill towns, and the onset of the Great Depression challenged working-class manhood. The New Deal era, however, offered men an opportunity to remedy their anxieties about manhood; the new unionism offered men revisions in *their* status. The union struggles of 1933-1934 and 1936-1937 upheld men as citizens, workers, and breadwinners, a marked departure from their troubled past. Furthermore, women embraced their husbands' goals. When men mobilized to strike, a "gendered etiquette" circumscribed the actions of men and women (Stern, 1995, p. 206). This "etiquette" revealed how men demanded a dominant, commanding role in militant unionism, and how women lent their support. Moreover, picket line violence pointed to the sense of urgency men brought with them to the picket lines, and how they looked to seize power and use it. They brutally attacked strikebreakers, for instance, who tried to pass through their lines.

The women and men of Ambridge lived in a borough that was "pre-eminently a manufacturing city," where steel companies provided industrial employment making a variety of products: structural steel for bridges, wire and cables, metal molding, steam, gas, and water pipe, among other commodities. In 1929, the Ambridge Board of Trade praised the community for its "excellent labor market," its factories, its "unexcelled scenic beauty," and its "three strong banks." Ambridge's steel mills provided a beacon of industrial employment, and the town swelled throughout the New Era (Ambridge Board of Trade, 1929). In 1920, 12,730 people lived in the borough, and the number of residents swelled to more than 22,000 by 1929. The Great Depression, however, undermined this growth. By October 1933, the town had become a hotbed of working-class dissent.

During 1933, after the NIRA Section 7(a) had been announced the Communist TUUL launched a new organizing drive in the western Pennsylvania steel industry. Their organization, the Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union (SMWIU), became a political force in Ambridge. As the October 1933 strike highlighted, women and men supported the SMWIU. The group's organizers had been active with the earlier Unemployed Councils ("Great Ambridge Strike," 1980). The Steel and Metal Workers Industrial Union, like the Unemployed Councils, enlisted the support of both men and women in the "man's fight." In its newspaper, the *Steel and Metal Worker*, the union reported the events of Labor Day 1933: "Not since the great 1919 steel strike has Ambridge seen such an inspiring Labor Day, such a magnificent show of workers' strength." Men and women marched together in a parade through the streets of Ambridge. A dance concluded the day's festivities, where women from Ambridge's National Electric Company signed SMWIU membership cards ("SMWIU Leads," 1933).

“The Great Ambridge Strike” began over the issue of union recognition. Previously, after the announcement of the NIRA Section, 7(a), a majority of steelworkers in Ambridge voted in support of the SMWIU. On October 2, the SMWIU locals held a meeting with respect to the presentation of a list of demands to their various employers: Spang-Chalfant, HH Robertson, Central Tube, Wyckoff, Byers, and National Metal Moulding Works. The locals wanted recognition of their unions under the provisos of the NIRA, as well as improvements in working conditions. They agreed to submit their demands. On October 3, elected committees went to the local steel mills and presented their lists to company officials. Employers asked the committees if they could have time to “think it over.” In response, the SMWIU locals decided to “stay out” (“Great Ambridge Strike,” 1980). The strike had begun.

Picketing began immediately. Spang-Chalfant became the center of picket activity, while other picket lines appeared in front of the National Electric Products Company factory, the HH Robertson mill, and at Central Tube. That night, pickets materialized at the Wyckoff Drawn Steel Company. Within a twenty-four hour period, workers and SMWIU organizers effectively stopped production in the borough. Strikers refused to allow those who wanted to remain on the job to enter the plants. During the same week, strikes also erupted at the Carnegie Steel Company in Clairton, Pennsylvania, Weirton Steel in Steubenville, Ohio, and Weirton, West Virginia, and among miners across western Pennsylvania (“Coal Peace,” 1933).

The tensions on the picket lines quickly escalated. And events in front of the mills demonstrated that picketers and the union understood the struggle to be a “man’s fight.” SMWIU organizer and a leader of the strike in Ambridge, James Egan, set the tone for the pickets: “We’ll have this whole valley shut down until the bosses give you fellows what you’re asking for” (“Beaver Valley Groups,” 1933). Striking men appeared determined to do exactly that. During the first night, a large assembly of angry men stopped an effort to bring a bus carrying deputy sheriffs into Ambridge. “Threats were made,” and the bus quickly turned around. Strikers also assaulted a group of men who approached the lines at the Spang-Chalfant plant. Believed to be strikebreakers, they ended up “bruised and scratched.” According to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, however, the battered victims simply wanted to watch the strike (“Plants Are Closed,” 1933).

The readiness of strikers to physically assault other men echoed the potential for violence found in everyday life. When men of working-class backgrounds threatened another’s honor, as discussed earlier, Beaver County men demonstrated their tendency to retaliate and punish the offender. In front of the plants in Ambridge, strikers reproduced this dynamic in earnest. On October 4, a group of 300 pickets fell upon 100 men who tried to report for work at Spang-Chalfant. A riot ensued, and two men ended up in the hospital. Pickets violently battered Alton Curry, a would-be strikebreaker. “The most seriously beaten of the workers who tried to enter the plant,” Curry suffered serious injuries at the hands of enraged men (“One Shot, Many Clubbed,” 1933). Given the exigencies of the Great Depression, when men were losing wage work as a pillar of manhood, violence may have given them a way to experience a sense of control over their surroundings (Connell, 1995, p. 83; Beneke, 1997, p. 34-72; Seidler, 1996, p. 63-75; Messerschmidt, 1998, p. 132, 149).

Women in Ambridge did not experience the strike as striking steelworkers for the most part. Indeed, mill work was regarded as “men’s work.” Working men, employers, and the state believed that women “did not belong in the steel mills,” and as a result, women’s employment in steel remained less than 1 percent between 1910 and 1939 (Rose, 1995, p. 24-25). The majority of women who joined the picket lines in Ambridge were married to the men who worked in the mills. While the sexual division of labor in Beaver County determined that women would not share equal status with men, they nonetheless participated in the effort on behalf of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. Women could easily be seen down at the picket lines, leading one reporter to note they were “as militant as their husbands and brothers.” At Spang-Chalfant, women distributed copies of the SMWIU demands. The wives of strikers, like their husbands, had a vital stake in the strike’s outcome. “I’m tired of being hungry and seeing my kids without clothes,” noted one wife and mother. “I’ll stand here in this picket line until they give us what we want.” Another woman exclaimed, “They think they can starve our men. We’ll show ‘em!” Not all women were as outwardly expressive, however. Others stood silently nearby, anxiously watching the action (“Militant Women Aid,” 1933).

The strike collapsed as a result of police violence. On October 5, an estimated 200 police deputies attacked the pickets massed at the Spang-Chalfant mill, using an arsenal of guns, clubs, and tear gas. They forcefully brought the Ambridge insurgency to an abrupt and brutal conclusion. As a result of the violence, fifteen men were wounded, and one man, Adam Petesuski, died from a gunshot wound to the neck. One steelworker suffered a fractured skull during the fighting, while another was shot in the stomach. The tear gas fog saturated the area near the mill, and strikers and onlookers struggled to get away from the fumes. Blinded strikers and spectators ran headlong into the deputies’ lines, suffering beatings as a result: “I ran into two deputies,” John Caster, a spectator, told reporters. “One of them hit me on the head with his club. I fell down. When I tried to get up another one hit me two or three times and knocked me out.” The picket line collapsed (“One Slain,” 1933). While men and women had hoped that union representation would allow men to solidify their jobs (and their identities as workers and breadwinners), the police insisted that the status quo would remain in place. Men were to be subordinated to the order of the mill town.

Despite the strike’s violent conclusion, the 1933 Ambridge strike set the tone for steel unionism in Beaver County during the depression decade. SMWIU activity continued, a rank-and-file movement continued to grow within the Amalgamated Association, and by 1936 the SWOC began organizing for the CIO. During 1937, the victorious strike in Aliquippa signaled the greatest successes of the labor movement in steel, and the height of masculine redemption in Beaver County steel towns.

THE 1937 STRIKE IN ALIQUIPPA AND THE CIO VICTORY

During the 1930s, the borough of Aliquippa served as another important stage upon which several unions would play. A series of organizations came, went, and ultimately stayed. Early attempts to build a union movement in Aliquippa appeared in 1926 when Pete Muselin, a J&L worker, was arrested for possessing Marxist literature. Along with four other men, Muselin received five years

in the Allegheny County workhouse for “attempting to organize a union” (Casebeer, 1995, p. 634-635). During the early 1930s, steel companies, including J&L, installed Employee Representation Plans (ERPs) in response to the passage of the NIRA. The NIRA fervor sparked the growth of the SMWIU, and led to the revival of the Amalgamated. Due to the militancy of the rank-and-file, the Amalgamated Association urged a national strike. Such a demonstration proved too difficult to coordinate, however. The plan never materialized (Lynd, 1972, p. 44-45). In Aliquippa, local unionists formed Beaver Valley Lodge #200 under the auspices of the AA. Due to J&L firings of local unionists, however, Lodge #200 began to lose members and momentum. But in 1936, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee began an organizing drive in western Pennsylvania. In the wake of the successful May 1937 strike in Aliquippa, the SWOC -- later the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) -- became the workers’ union.

Despite their approach or structure, their successes or failures, these different organizations did share one goal: They tried, in one way or another, to effect changes in the lives and status of working men in Beaver County mill towns. Unionists in Aliquippa, for instance, struggled to rectify the degrading “tyranny” of the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation. Each of these unions, from the Amalgamated to the SMWIU and the CIO, upheld and enhanced the demands of male steelworkers: Working-class men wanted unions that could protect and strengthen their status as workers and breadwinners, the preservation of their identities as patriarchs, and assurance of their civil liberties as residents of the United States. Men wanted greater power and control over matters that affected their daily lives. Union organizers, whatever organization they represented, wanted to help working men secure those demands. The Amalgamated Association, the SMWIU, and the SWOC all affirmed men’s notions of manhood.

The 1937 strike in Aliquippa was the crescendo of industrial unionism in Pittsburgh’s Steel Valley. As a result of the strike, the SWOC and the CIO emerged as the voice of men in steel, and the organizations won the respect and support of the working-class community. Moreover, whether workers supported the SWOC or not, they would all ultimately enjoy the fruits won during May 1937. With the institutionalization of the CIO in Beaver County through the establishment of the later United Steel Workers of America, all steelworkers came into the orbit of organized labor -- and would gain new rewards through “industrial democracy” via collective bargaining and the election of labor-friendly Democratic Party candidates at the local and national levels. The 1937 strike demonstrated how embattled Aliquippa men finally won long-denied power, status, and influence.

Unionists organized clandestinely in Aliquippa during the early 1930s. With the fervor surrounding the National Industrial Recovery Act’s Section 7(a), however, union activities intensified. Between roughly 1933 and May 1937, Aliquippa unionists struggled to conduct business under the probing and vengeful eye of the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation. After the NIRA, working-class men and women actually held a parade to demonstrate their support for the New Deal, but J&L “tightened its control over Aliquippa to meet the threat” (Green, 1993, p. 10). However, J&L crackdowns and the new ERP did not stop organizers’ activities.

During the mid-1930s, union men fought against J&L on multiple fronts: in local politics, in public space, and on the shop floor. Company efforts to repress unionism continued despite the passage of the 1935 Wagner Act. Between June 1935 and January 1937, the company fired over 100 unionists. Targeted for organizing, union men were discharged for violations of company policy. Thirteen of these workers took charges of unfair labor practices to the new National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). What would become the *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.* led to key changes in workers' rights. Clinton Golden, who investigated the situation in Aliquippa as a member of Pennsylvania's Labor Department, substantiated the charges, and hearings began in January 1936 (Casebeer, 1995, p. 658-665; Green, 1993, p. 10). All of the workers who had been fired were members of the Beaver Valley Lodge #200, and J&L repression came to the fore during the proceedings. On April 9, the NLRB ruled that the discharged workers were to be reinstated. That same month, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the workers in *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.*, upholding the constitutionality of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (Zieger, 1995, p. 60; Casebeer, 1995, p. 664-665). This landmark decision marked a watershed in the history of organized labor. Men finally won the legal right to "self-organization and to have representatives of their own choosing for the purpose of collective bargaining" (Casebeer, 1995, p. 683). Throughout this period, union activists continued to organize in Aliquippa as political and legal changes began to take shape. By 1936, "the CIO [was] on the job" in Beaver County (Vorse, 1985, p. 174).

The Steel Workers Organizing Committee guided Aliquippa from the "non-union" era into the "union" era. During the mid-1930s, unionists believed a new organizing drive had a strong chance to succeed. The timing, organizers believed, was ideal. With an increasingly militant rank-and-file, support from the faltering Amalgamated Association, dissatisfaction within company ERPs, relative autonomy in its actions, the services of veteran organizers from the United Mine Workers (UMW), and a respectable budget, John L. Lewis announced the creation of the SWOC under the auspices of the Committee of Industrial Organizations during June 1936. These changes would have a profound impact on men and women living in "Little Siberia." Within a year, the SWOC and the Democratic Party became the focal points of the social and political transformations in Beaver County steel communities.

In the summer of 1936, the SWOC began its work in the Pittsburgh district. In an attempt to generate momentum, the organization coordinated a massive Labor Day parade in Aliquippa. Beginning in the early afternoon, "thousands of people" marched in a procession through the streets of the town ("Labor Day," 1979). An array of working-class groups and organizations took part: the Amalgamated Association, the International Workers Order, the Workers Alliance of Ambridge, and Farmer Labor activists. Even those who did not march joined in the festivities. "Large numbers of people watched the parade," witnesses noted. "People leaned out windows and stood on the curbsides." In the evening, women and men enjoyed an outdoor banquet in nearby Ambridge. Towards the end of the event, they heard a radio address from CIO chairman John L. Lewis. The large turnout for the parade and the festivities, according to one account, "helped convince steelworkers that the SWOC had a good chance to force companies to sign union contracts" ("Labor Day," 1979).

During the spring of 1937, SWOC won its landmark victories with US Steel. In March, John L. Lewis and US Steel president Myron Taylor renegotiated the terms of employment in the steel giant's facilities: those on the payroll received a 5 percent pay increase, a forty-hour work week, time-and-a-half for overtime, and US Steel officially recognized the SWOC as the workers' bargaining agent. The Lewis-Taylor agreement was a coup for the labor movement. In its wake, steelworkers "flocked into SWOC," while the Little Steel independents "broke ranks" with US Steel, vowing "to fight SWOC to the finish" (Zieger, 1995, p. 58-60). By May, CIO organizers and the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation had been in negotiations for weeks. However, the talks broke down, and the SWOC called for workers to strike on May 12 ("Wage Conference Tomorrow," 1937).

"Thousands" of the 32,000 men employed by Jones & Laughlin in Aliquippa and Pittsburgh were now on the picket lines. In Aliquippa, events on the picket lines recalled patterns displayed in the earlier Ambridge strike. Once again, working-class men and women took control of the streets of a Beaver County borough. SWOC organizers reveled in the massive display of working men's newfound strength and power:

The strike is doing wonders for the men. Remember that Jefferson once said something about a revolution every twenty years or so being a blessing? The same is true of a strike. There is real solidarity now. And certainly no fear. In fact workers go out of their way to thumb their noses at company police by whom they have been cowed for years. Thousands of men have joined the union ("1937 Strike in Aliquippa," 1981).

The organizer's observations captured how working-class men in Beaver County seized upon the strike to build a new "workers' democracy" in what had been known as "Little Siberia." However, picketers in Aliquippa also used the strike as a way to wield the power and control they associated with manhood. The "workers' democracy" offered them a renewed sense of manliness. The SWOC organizer's statement disclosed a newfound sense of strength, bravado, and catharsis ("thumb their noses at company police") among the men. There was no longer any fear, and working men in steel ("thousands") were rushing to join this powerful organization.

On the picket lines, men engaged in acts of violence against those who tried to cross the picket lines that were reminiscent of the earlier strike in nearby Ambridge. "Of course there has been violence," noted SWOC organizer Meyer Bernstein, clearly not surprised by Aliquippa working men's aggression and hostility. "Five old men who had no notion of what was going on tried to get through the picket line" and the workers forcefully turned them back. However, "the return was run through a gauntlet. They were badly beaten and most of them were bloody." In another incident, a foreman who tried to drive through the lines had his windshield "smashed by a picket." Strikers nearly attacked a SWOC organizer who tried to get reinforcements for other picket lines at the J&L mill. One man reported, "Some zealous souls, not knowing who he was, tried to stop him." The organizer "was just barely saved from an attack" ("Settlement Held Near," 1937). Picket line dramas illustrated how men acted militantly and aggressively, reclaiming the control and power that had been withheld for so long. Men remembered J&L worker Pete Cekoric for his incredible bravado. During the strike, "Pete was standing on a picket line . . . when plant guards threatened to shoot at the pickets. Pete stepped forward and said, 'Shoot! Shoot you b----! You can

kill Pete, but you'll never kill the union" ("Pete Cekoric," 1979)! Composed of such men -- men of strength, determination, and passion -- the SWOC and the CIO were thought to be established on the strongest possible foundations.

As men rose to new levels of prominence as a result of the strike, women readily lent their support to the struggle, adopting a visible though auxiliary identity. Women organized food and drink for the men on the picket lines. "We had a place on Kiehl Street we called our club," remembered Mary Cozzicoli, "and they [women] would make sandwiches for the people and hot coffee." While women completed this labor that allowed men to sustain the strike, they also directly asserted themselves into the action on the picket lines, in some ways challenging the strike's subtext of making manhood. Some women literally placed themselves in the middle of the action. To keep policemen away from the strikers, "so that the men wouldn't get beat up," women lined up between the ranks of pickets and the police. "We were down at the tunnel," Cozzicoli asserted, "and if the cops would go after the men, we'd be right there" (M. Cozzicoli, interview, 1975). Women's actions during the Aliquippa strike highlighted extensive, community-based support for husbands', sons', and brothers' demands, as well as a version of labor militancy that allowed for women's auxiliary participation in strikes and steel unionism.

The strike concluded on May 14, some forty hours after it began. However, ill feelings lingered after SWOC and Jones & Laughlin announced the settlement. Crowds of workers refused to leave the mill gates, lingering to jeer and boo company officials and those workers who remained inside the mill during the strike. "CIO leaders became alarmed at the temper of the crowd," noted the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. "Anybody who walked out of the mill was spat on by the women," Irving Bernstein once wrote, "and attacked by the men." State policemen had to hurry to save construction superintendent Robert Blum, who had been "badly beaten" by pickets (Bernstein, 1970, p. 477). Despite the favorable resolution of the strike, men and women's anger with Jones & Laughlin did not immediately evaporate. Given their troubled history with the company, lingering violence underscored the depth of workers' resentment.

Union and government leaders were simply glad the strike ended. Governor George Earle described the strike's resolution as a "favorable omen" for labor-management relations. Emboldened by SWOC's victory, CIO chairman John L. Lewis noted he was pleased by the strike's outcome, adding that Aliquippa would be a "lesson" to other companies who refused to sign contracts with SWOC ("Returning Steel Strikers," 1937). SWOC and the steelworkers won a resounding victory in "Little Siberia." For the first time, J&L submitted to the will of working men. "Think of it," as members of the Beaver Valley Labor History Society recalled years later, "the toughest corporation in America brought to its knees" ("1937 Strike in Aliquippa," 1981). Numerous changes followed the strike's conclusion. J&L announced it would create a common labor rate of five dollars for eight hours of work; but more significantly, workers established SWOC Union Local 1211 with an "overwhelming" 2:1 vote (69.9 percent) on May 20 ("Union Wins," 1937).

Workers also looked to the electoral arena in order to capture and protect their rights. Activists within the orbit of the Amalgamated Association had previously formed the Democratic Social Club in 1934, hoping to expand on the astonishingly low number of 8 registered Democrats in the borough. Support for the group made the organization “the political arm of the union movement in Aliquippa” (Casebeer, 1995, p. 657). The majority of voters in Aliquippa voted Democratic in the 1936 presidential election, and they successfully elected men “into offices ranging from mayor and council down to tax collector and inspector of elections” in 1937. These years witnessed the first Democratic majorities in Aliquippa’s brief history (Davin, 2000, p. 256; Casebeer, 1995, p. 657). For working people, the achievement of elected officials of their own choosing was a crucial development. For the first time, elected officials came from the working-class communities of western Pennsylvania. Through their ballots, working men won a voice in the offices that governed them; J&L could no longer control men’s political options or voices.

Working-class men’s desire to secure power and control as foundations of their manhood were at the center of these social and political changes during the 1930s. In Aliquippa and Ambridge, organizations ranging from the SMWIU, the Amalgamated, the SWOC, the CIO, and the Democratic Party worked to elevate and strengthen the status of the male steelworker. The strike in Aliquippa and its successful conclusion symbolized the attainment of what men had long fought for: the CIO victory conferred new levels of authority and power upon working-class men.

CONCLUSION

Why was the CIO so popular among working men during the 1930s? In Aliquippa and Ambridge, the fervor surrounding industrial unionism followed in the wake of men’s reactions to transformations in the status of women during the 1910s and 1920s, the subordinating effects of political repression in the pre-union steel town, and the tumultuous impact of the Great Depression upon working-class men’s preferred identities as workers, earners, and patriarchs. The shortcomings of gender and class relations upset men’s notions of power and control, thus making unionization an attractive way to resolve these discrepancies.

In Aliquippa and Ambridge, working-class men and women built the gender politics of the CIO -- which emphasized male authority in the union, the family, and the community, and supporting roles for women -- from the bottom-up. The gender hierarchies that would plague the labor movement in the years after the Great Depression were not imposed on steelworker unionism; instead, working men *and* women actively defined the gender politics that would shape the institutionalization and subsequent history of the CIO (Faue, 1991, p. 192).

While discussions of working men and gender consciousness during the 1930s are by no means new, the case of working men in Beaver County steel towns suggests that historians need to look beyond the depression era’s “crisis of masculinity.” Anxieties about gender in mill towns like Ambridge and Aliquippa ran deeper than depression-era circumstances. The popularity of the CIO in western Pennsylvania was closely tied to broader conflicts over the meaning of working-class manhood that had been going on for many years.

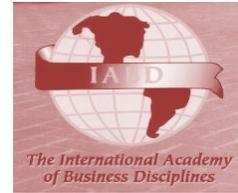
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