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Casting a New Mold: The Story of the Iron Molders' International Union and the Organization of National Labor

Jason Dedeker

Abstract: The doings of the labor movement during the Civil War were crucial in the development of the great time of unions at the turn of the 19th-century. While the nation was focused on the issue of slavery, the free labor force of the North strove for improved working conditions and more power in the workplace. Workers and the unions they formed faced unique challenges in the Civil War era. The international labor community found the problem of slavery more pressing than the plight of Northern workers. The United States government, comprised mainly of Republicans, discouraged the tactics and goals of unions on the basis of ideology and business interests. The Iron Molders' International Union (IMIU) and the National Labor Union (NLU) were two of the most vocal unions of the time, and their stories provide a good picture of the labor situation of the day. The IMIU, led by the dynamic William H. Sylvis, laid the groundwork for the NLU, one of the first organizations to unify workers of all trades. Explored in this paper is the importance of the two unions not only to the labor situation of the Civil War era, but to the development of labor in general. The story of these unions is placed in the context of international labor and that of the United States embroiled in civil war. A look is taken at how the IMIU grew and developed, as well as how its successes and failures affected the subsequent creation of the NLU.

As the United States approached the war that threatened to tear it apart, questions loomed in the minds of many. The South was unsure if it would be allowed to retain its slaves. The North worried that the slave-holding establishment would spread its ways to new lands and future times. Many wondered if the nation born of common interests would be destroyed by sectional differences once overlooked. A new status quo was sure to develop, but what it would look like no one knew.

A new order did emerge from the ensuing conflict that was the Civil War. The North imposed their ideals on the South, and the South lost its slaves. This was not the sole consequence for labor in the United States, however. While soldiers were fighting with arms over forced bondage in the South, workers in the North fought with words and strikes against an injustice of their own. One of the most prominent groups of workers of the Civil War was the iron molders. These skilled artisans formed one of the most aggressive labor unions of their time, and were most effective in organizing workers.¹ The efforts of the Iron Molders' International Union typified the struggle of labor during the course of the Civil War and laid the foundation for a national organization of labor.

How the Story was Told Before

The focus of this particular history is the intersection of the iron industry and labor during the Civil War, and how they affected the future of workers. Scholars of labor history seem to agree that iron workers were very active during the Civil War era. They are often cited as the most powerful labor group of the time.² Foster Rhea Dulles takes such a view in his *Labor in America*. He points out that the number of labor unions more than tripled between the years 1863 and 1864.³ Dulles found very simple reasons for this increase. Inflation during the war resulted in greater profits for the rich with none of the benefit reaching the working classes. Organized strikes were instigated to bring about higher wages corresponding to the more expensive cost of living.⁴ These strikes inadvertently caused more reason for crackdown on the workmen of America.

In Dulles's narrative, employers were villains looking to lower wages in order to increase profit in any way possible. One of the many strategies used to accomplish this was to hire women, children, and immigrants.⁵ Dulles viewed immigrants as impediments to higher wages and better work conditions.⁶ Because they worked for less than American-born workers, immigrants became a valuable commodity to employers. Dulles illustrates this further by citing an 1864 law passed by the United States Congress making easier the immigration of skilled workers from Europe.⁷ Workingmen certainly had cause for fear during the Civil War. Several labor organizations fought these policies, but at the center was the Iron Molders' International Union. Dulles gives it the title of "the strongest and most closely knit labor organization in the country" in 1865.⁸ The union began as the National Molders' Union, which was formed in 1859 and collapsed at the beginning of the war. Largely through the efforts of William H. Sylvis, the Iron Molders' International Union was forged and rose to prominence.⁹ Dulles lauds Sylvis as virtuous and hardworking, the ideal model of a devoted labor leader.

Philip S. Foner wrote a monumental history of labor contained in ten volumes. Foner takes time to examine specific movements and unions, as well as groups such as women and blacks.¹⁰ Like Dulles, Foner sees reason for Civil War workers to unionize. However, the two disagree on the main causes driving organization. Foner certainly recognizes the part played by the desire for higher wages, but another reason was much more prevalent.¹¹ Mechanization became increasingly prevalent during the war years. As more industrial processes shed the need for direct human involvement, the number of jobs decreased.¹² Foner cites this issue numerous times throughout his history, ascribing to it a major role in the increase of strikes by skilled laborers.¹³

Unlike Dulles, Foner ignores immigrants to focus on the use of convicts as a nearly free source of work.¹⁴ To make matters worse, state governments permitted such a thing to take place. Foner also saw the Iron Molders' International Union as an integral part of the labor history of the Civil War. He posits that "no account of the labor movement would be complete without an examination of the rise of the Iron Molders' International Union during the Civil War."¹⁵ William H. Sylvis also plays a central role in Foner's narrative. Foner credits Sylvis not only

with the formation of the most prominent labor union of the Civil War, but ranks him amongst the most important labor leaders in all American history.¹⁶

Another approach to the subject is to study how iron workers carried out their work, rather than the challenges posed to their job security. Robert B. Gordon penned a rather unique history of the iron industry itself in *American Iron, 1607-1900*. His focus lies with the changes in the production of iron, steel, and the processes used to make them. He notes the various discoveries of chemical reactions and the development of new machines used to make iron of ever higher quality. One of the most important factors in this change came from the workers themselves. The artisans “experimented at their furnaces and drew on their accumulated experience.”¹⁷ Iron artisans, as they were called, were central in innovation because they spent the most time working with the iron.

The profits of new techniques rarely benefited the artisans who developed them. According to Gordon, it was the financiers who invested the capital needed to implement innovations who saw the greatest monetary gain.¹⁸ Inventors also culled the knowledge of artisans, developing new technologies and then submitting the patents for them under their own names. Americans increasingly saw the artisans as nothing more than workers doing the bidding of the mastermind entrepreneurs and inventors.¹⁹ Employers took advantage of the workers who earned them the most money.

Though quite a bit of information exists about iron workers during the Civil War, a work combining this information seems lacking. No recent historical study has been devoted to the role played by iron workers and the unions they formed in the overall labor story of the Civil War. This work hopes to elucidate the importance of iron workers and the Iron Molders’ International Union in the history of worker’s rights during the Civil War and the formation of stronger unions. In this paper, the union will be traced from its beginnings as local unions scattered across the country to a strong and centralized national organization. In doing this, the union faced challenges from three main groups: the international labor community, the United States government, and those who employed iron workers. The highly organized nature of this particular union seems to have inspired later unions of a national scale to follow a similar model. Through this study of the Iron Molders’ International Union, it is the author’s hope to show that the abolition of slavery was not the only important development in the world of labor; rather, it was an integral part of the fight for workers’ rights.

William H. Sylvis: Founder of a Union

The concept of labor immediately before and during the Civil War era was different from the great age of unions in the 1900s. Instead of referring simply to those working in factories, labor during this time referred to workers like small businessmen, farmers, and mechanics; anyone with immediate involvement in the production of goods was included.²⁰ These were the free laborers of the United States, a workforce that provided an ideal in contrast with the involuntary servitude found in the South.²¹ Agricultural pursuits dominated in the South, and the main labor force there consisted of black slaves. Because of this, most labor union activity occurred in the

North. The unions discussed in this paper were comprised of industrial workers found in the Northern states.

Unions before and during the Civil War were rather different than those that immediately followed the conflict. Workers were divided along such lines as trade and income, but no division was more marked than skill level.²² Strength in numbers would become a primary tactic after the war, but it was the work members did that mattered before. Artisans, or skilled workers, were the constituents of such unions. In the iron industry, the artisans were those who judged the composition of the iron and shaped it into the desired form.²³ Making iron was dangerous. It was a task that “required strength, stamina, and, at times, courage.”²⁴ Workers spent years learning and perfecting their trade. As a result, an experienced worker represented a fairly significant investment on the part of the employer. Because of their value to the employer, highly skilled workers sat in a better position to obtain social and economic advances.²⁵ When these workers banded together at the beginning of the war, that position became much more powerful.

The iron molders banded together before the war, and would continue to grow throughout. William H. Sylvis built the machine that was the Iron Molders’ International Union. The story of the union’s founding is very much the story of Sylvis himself. From looking at the picture included in his biography, one might not think him anything too special. A prominent, slightly curved nose sat below his tall forehead, which was topped with hair waving in all directions. He sported a moustache above his lips and a small goatee beneath. Following the style of the era, two clumps of beard hung like saddlebags from his cheeks. The one thing setting the face of Sylvis apart from the rest are his eyes—large round eyes exuding determination and enthusiasm. This energy welling up from within played a large part in the success of the union.

An injection of energy into the labor movement was needed by the beginning of the Civil War. Organizations of workers, including those of iron molders, were not healthy.²⁶ Small, local unions of iron molders had existed before the war. In 1859, the first national union of such workers came into being: the National Molders’ Union. This organization was never very powerful, and the war so weakened it that the national meeting intended for 1862 did not convene.²⁷ The national organization was falling apart; it would take a strong leader to bring it back together. Sylvis had been part of organized labor before the war, but took on full leadership among the iron molders after the disappointing turnout in 1862. He set to work contacting the various organizations of iron laborers around the country, urging them to attend a convention to be held in 1863.²⁸ Sylvis’s first victory came when they did indeed meet.

On January 6, 1863, representatives of fourteen unions gathered in Pittsburgh. The revived organization of iron laborers was small, but it was enough to begin work. The first order of business was to elect William H. Sylvis as president of the union.²⁹ Nearly all the dirty work of resuscitating the union was placed in his hands.³⁰ As can be imagined, the negligence of the union’s previous administration had left things in a state of disarray. Documents and finances would have to be reorganized and the local unions resurrected. There was much work to do.

Sylvis, seemingly undaunted by the large responsibility placed upon him, threw himself into the task of rebuilding what had crumbled so pitifully. He traveled across the country, visiting

every local branch of the union, managing to revive 16 branches and creating 19 new ones.³¹ His desire was for all “the moulders of such places as have not already moved in this matter, organize as quickly as possible, and connect themselves with the national organization.”³² Sylvis made it clear why such a union should be formed:

To rescue our trade from the condition into which it has fallen, and raise ourselves to that condition in society to which we, as mechanics, are justly entitled, and to place ourselves on a foundation sufficiently strong to secure us from further encroachment, and to elevate the moral, social, and intellectual condition of every moulder in the country, is the object of our international organization.³³

Nothing seemed to deter him from this goal. He was said to have begged “a ride from place to place on an engine, because he had not money sufficient to pay his fare.”³⁴ Known for his frugality with union funds, he “wore clothes until they became quite threadbare,” particularly one shawl that, at the time of his death, “was filled with little holes, burned there by the splashing of the molten iron from the ladles of moulders in strange cities, whom he was beseeching to organize.”³⁵ The hard work paid off. At the revival of 1863, eight states were represented in the union by 15 local branches; by 1865, the union encompassed the District of Columbia, Canada, and 10 additional states.³⁶ Because of its size and national scope, the union now stood to affect federal policies concerning labor, as well as exerting a more powerful influence on employers. The workings of the union during the Civil War formed a mold for the recasting of labor. Their quest would be fraught with many challenges.

American labor in the midst of the Civil War

One the challenges faced by Northern labor was that they lacked the support of the international labor community during the war. Evidence of this can be found in the works of the great minds of socialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who wrote quite a bit on the Civil War situation in general. As can be found throughout their correspondence with each other and articles written for various publications, their sympathies undoubtedly lay with the North. The potential for slavery to be abolished lay at the heart of this sympathy.

The role of slavery in North America after the Civil War was very important to the international labor cause; in fact, it seemed to be the future of labor in general. In a letter to Friedrich Engels in 1860, before the war began, Karl Marx remarked that “the biggest things that are happening in the world today are...the movement of the slaves in America...and the movement of the serfs in Russia.”³⁷ The interest in the American slaves continued into the war. After the reelection of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1864, the Central Council of the International Workingmen’s Association sent an address expressing congratulations and their hopes for his presidency. The Civil War, the letter said, carried great weight for the workingmen of Europe because “for men of labor, with their hopes for the future, even their past conquests

were at stake in that tremendous conflict on the other side of the Atlantic.”³⁸ The question of slavery in the United States, it seemed, held the key for the future of labor in general.

In showing its concern for the plight of Southern slaves, the international labor community expressed its concern not for the freedom of blacks alone, but for the advancement of all labor in the United States. The workingmen of Europe recognized that workers in the North were the political force through which labor interests could be exercised in the United States. These workers “were unable to attain the true freedom of labor or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation” while slavery stood.³⁹ Free workers could not expect to make advances for the cause of labor if a large body of people were enslaved within it. Friedrich Engels took this idea further by advocating rights for blacks after the Civil War, saying “without colored suffrage nothing whatever can be done there.”⁴⁰ By freeing blacks to work as free laborers, leaders of the European labor movement hoped to advance their cause in the United States.

While European labor leaders had their eyes firmly set on the abolitionist cause, labor leaders in the United States had more conflicted views on the freeing of slaves and the effect such an action would have on industrial workers. They looked at examples where black labor had already directly competed with white labor. For instance, in 1847, white workers at the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, Virginia had refused to train any new black workers and went on strike. Joseph R. Anderson, the owner of the works, wasted no time in firing those workers and replacing them with blacks.⁴¹ Northerners with Southern sympathies used stories like these to fuel rumors of freed blacks pouring into the North, filling the positions of whites. If workers did not fight against “the plot of Abolitionists to have slaves overrun the North, all would be lost.”⁴² It seemed to Northern workers that if the goals of abolitionists and the desires of the international labor cause were realized, their position would be worse than before. Without the support of even the international labor cause, it was clear to Northern workers that they would have to support themselves. This would later lead workers to find strength in numbers by banding together with those like themselves within their own country.

With the threat freed blacks seemed to pose to their job security, Northern workers would not stand idle. In December of 1860, before the war had even begun, a meeting of iron molders called for all workers in the United States to support the preservation of the Union.⁴³ This gathering inspired similar ones across the country in cities like Chicago, Nashville, and Pittsburgh. The workmen in attendance “believed that the preservation of the Union was essential to the welfare of the country and the future happiness of the working class.”⁴⁴ If the Union stayed together, blacks would remain enslaved and Northern workers would no longer have to worry about their positions being filled.

The threat of freed slaves would not be the only cause for concern generated by the war. The Civil War is often credited as playing the role of catalyst for the rise of new industry within the United States. As one writer in the periodical *Scientific American* put it, the war had “stimulated the genius of our people and directed it to the service of our country” and increased prosperity was sure to follow.⁴⁵ This optimism lasted even unto the end of the war. Senator John Sherman,

brother of the famous general William Tecumseh Sherman, wrote that “the close of the war with our resources unimpaired gives ad elevation, a scope to the ideas of leading capitalists far higher than anything ever undertaken in this country before.”⁴⁶ It is clear that observers of Civil War industry perceived that the war had created benefits.

Despite this optimism, the industrial situation was not as strong as it appeared. Analysis of period statistics by historian Thomas C. Cochran reveals the smallest amount of growth during the Civil War period than any other in the latter half of the 1800s.⁴⁷ Iron production showed particular retardation with only a one percent increase in production, while the five years following showed a hefty 100 percent increase.⁴⁸ Such poor industrial activity would surely have caused a decrease in job prospects and an increase in worker anxiety.

Government and Industry

The rather small increase in production did not seem to cause much worry among iron workers. Though output was not rising, what was being produced was made secure by the Union government. Congress drafted bills calling for things like iron-clad gunboats, as well as articles such as “cannon, projectiles, and castings, required for military purposes.”⁴⁹ The gunboats were in a state of particular demand. In December of 1861, the House of Representatives passed an act empowering the Secretary of the Navy to build “twenty iron-clad steam gunboats for the use of the navy of the United States.”⁵⁰ Not three months later, the Senate passed a similar measure. Once again, the idea was to “enable the Secretary of the Navy to construct iron-clad steam gunboats.”⁵¹ A greater relationship between the government and the iron industry seemed inevitable.

The two entities did indeed become close over the course of the war, though the benefits did not always reach the workers. An article from 1863 in the *New York Times* reported that several foundries were “at present crowded with Government work.”⁵² Civilian work had been laid aside. The same article stated that “the ordinary business of contracts is delayed at least six months.”⁵³ Government interest was certainly paramount in the iron industry.

Because of the importance of iron in the war effort, the government would take steps to ensure the companies producing it stayed functional. An act was passed in 1864 encouraging the immigration of workers.⁵⁴ Other sources of labor were tapped into, as well. State governments got in on the action by approving the use of convict labor in factories and foundries.⁵⁵ In addition to assistance with a steady, cheap labor supply, manufacturing interests were protected by financial measures. That included “a tariff which shuts out foreign competition and gives them a virtual monopoly of the home market.”⁵⁶ Even through a slowdown in economic growth, industry enjoyed privileges and support from the United States government. As will be seen, workers did not benefit from this treatment.

Labor in the North

Republicans were by far the dominant political force in the North. This meant that the cause of free labor in the United States was very much affected by the views of Republicans. The party saw free labor as a class of men who had the chance of one day leaving wages behind to become a holder of property.⁵⁷ Even men like Abraham Lincoln believed that “the salient quality of northern society was the ability of the laborer to escape the status of wage earner and rise to petty entrepreneurship and economic independence.”⁵⁸ This idea of rising above wages to own property was a central component of the argument against slavery. The argument was given in support of the Northern system of free labor capitalism, offering it as the superior option between the two factions.⁵⁹

Republicans in the time of the Civil War scoffed at the idea of a conflict between classes. In their eyes, the beauty of the Northern capitalist system was that any wage earner in the working class could amass enough wealth to join the propertied class.⁶⁰ Conflict between classes seemed insensible simply because membership in both working and propertied classes was fluid. Anyone who did not move up the social ladder was viewed as lazy; the capitalist system was not to be blamed for their troubles.⁶¹ It is evident that Republicans believed moving upward in economic status was possible for anyone.

While the concept of Northern capitalism was so central to its government’s rhetoric, those within the working class did not always agree regarding its fairness. William H. Sylvis made known his view of the system. He saw a small, wealthy class of individuals as those holding ultimate control over society.⁶² In it, “the weak are devoured by the strong.”⁶³ Social mobility was an appealing concept, but the ability of laborers to work beyond the need of wages increasingly diminished during the 1860s.⁶⁴ The amount of wages in dollar form increased year by year, but the value of those dollars decreased. The iron molders illustrate this concept well. Molders were considered artisans, skilled workers who boasted a high amount of training and could demand higher wages.⁶⁵ These demands were often granted. In 1860, a skilled worker earned on average one dollar and 62 cents per day.⁶⁶ By the end of 1865, this average had raised by 88 cents to a total of two dollars and 50 cents per day.⁶⁷ A steady rise in wages is never a bad thing for workers, but it was not sufficient for the iron molders.

Although wages did rise during the Civil War, their buying power decreased. By 1864, inflation had caused a 20 percent cut in the wages of Northern workers.⁶⁸ This cut in wages is made all the more drastic when considering the number affected by this cut. By the end of the war, “67 percent of the productively engaged Americans were dependent for a livelihood upon employment by others.”⁶⁹ With so many suffering wage increases insufficient to keep up with inflation, discontent was sure to follow.

The lack of sufficient wages was a real problem for workers seeking to fulfill the ideals of economic status. Workers sought to earn wages to buy useful property and become independent of a wage giver.⁷⁰ Over the course of the 1860s however, very little wealth passed from the wealthiest in society to those below. In 1860, the top ten percent of the free male population in the United States held 76.8 percent of total assets, while that number fell to just 70 percent by 1870.⁷¹ The Republican ideal of workers gaining property was more a dream than reality.

Without property of one's own to work, man was dependent on the whims of the market and how much a boss was willing to pay. In the eyes of workers, this amounted to little more than wage slavery.⁷² This seemingly helpless position of the American worker increasingly caused tension between those who labored and the employers who appeared to hold control over their lives.

The question of wages caused a rift between workers and employers. Artisans in various industries believed that wage labor created a sense of class, alienating workers from their employers.⁷³ The leader of the Iron Molders' International Union believed that

laborers ought of right, and would, under a just monetary system, receive or retain the larger proportion of their productions; that the wrongs, oppressions, and destitution which laborers are suffering in most departments of legitimate enterprise and useful occupation, do not result from insufficiency of production, but from the unfair distribution of the products of labor between non-producing capital and labor.⁷⁴

With employers controlling the amount of wages and no tangible way to escape wage earning in sight, it is no wonder that workers complained of disparity.

Workers against Employers

Relations between employers and workers have historically suffered tension, and the Civil War era was no different. Workers in various industries worked for better conditions and wages, fighting to close the gap between those who had and those who had not. They regarded "capital as an enemy instead of a friend to labor," and felt the "inclination to wage war against it."⁷⁵ This conflict was not lost on the people of the day. One observer, writing for the *New York Times*, agreed that workers had reason to organize. At the beginning of the war, "no pressing need was felt" for unions.⁷⁶ The need for such groups increased "as the war went on, however, and workmen became scarce, and the increased cost of living imperatively demanded an increased amount of wages."⁷⁷ Workers had reason to organize against employers, but there was danger in doing so.

English journalist James Burn lived in the United States during the war and published a book on his perceptions. When business was good, there existed "a constant struggle between the man and their employers about prices."⁷⁸ Workers took on a fair amount of risk, of course. Those who had spent a good amount of time in the company "[dared] not open their mouths or use their influence...for fear of being blackballed."⁷⁹ Anyone who defended their employer against attacks from workers "would be sure to be branded as a traitor as well as being made a butt of ridicule."⁸⁰ Employers stayed on sharp lookout for anything or anyone looking to lessen their share of the profit.

Labor unions were the one of the biggest threats to employer interests. Labor historian David Montgomery described such organizations as "patently coercive" and asserted that their tactics were an affront to an employer's right to do what he wished with his own property, as well as

affecting the lives of workers not belonging to the union.⁸¹ This idea existed during the Civil War, as well. Employers believed that they had the right to control their property, which included all parts of their business. To them, workers had no right to demand certain wages because they had entered into a contract with those who had the right to dispense wages. Workers and the unions they formed “cannot dominate over him, for he is an employer; and it has never been claimed that their power, which is delegated, extends over that class.”⁸² Unions were accused of trying to “usurp functions that must necessarily be distributed between various classes, and to exercise a control over capital that is utterly inconsistent with the laws of economic progress.”⁸³ This idea was used against the Iron Molders’ International Union.

The strong position enjoyed by the Iron Molders’ International Union made it a prime target for opposition. In an attempt to counter the strength of the union, those who owned iron factories, and employed the workers therein, themselves banded together. In September of 1863, a group of employers known as the Iron Founders’ and Machine Builders’ Association convened to discuss the issue. Those in attendance decided that the Iron Molders’ International Union had “gained such strength that it is making its power felt, and in a manner very injurious to the interest of the public.”⁸⁴ Utilizing an argument used against unions in general, employers asserted that if the union of iron molders was allowed to do as it would, business would suffer. They protested the actions of the union to “arbitrarily decide not only as to what wages must be paid...the number of apprentices each shop is to employ, the kind and amount of work the laborers in our foundries may or may not be allowed to do, and to prevent any molder from working in a shop who is not a member of their union.”⁸⁵ Employers and unions found themselves locked in a struggle for control of business.

The Future of Labor

Despite the challenges posed by the international labor community, the United States government, and employers, the Iron Molders’ International Union managed to gain attention as a strong voice for labor. This power was gained mainly from the centralization of many local unions into a unified movement of a national scale. This was largely accomplished through the work of strong dedicated leader, William H. Sylvis, who threw his entire being into the effort. National trades organizations were an innovation in the Civil War era, and the iron molders provided a great model for centralization. These characteristics would be important in the workings of future labor movements, but they did not serve to keep the Iron Molders’ International Union flourishing.

In late 1867, the union was assailed by the National Stove Manufacturers’ and Iron Founders’ Association. Workers went on strike to protest the layoff of union members and wage cuts, but ran out of funds before their terms were met.⁸⁶ The union survived, but in a considerably weakened state; the influence it once wielded would never be regained. Of course, this did not end the need felt by the labor movement to push their cause. The Civil War “abolished the right of property in man, but it did not abolish slavery...we must push on the work of emancipation until slavery is abolished in every corner of our country.”⁸⁷ The Gilded Age, Upton Sinclair, and

the great days of organized labor were still ahead. Karl Marx remarked that “after the Civil War phase the United States are really only now entering the revolutionary phase.”⁸⁸ Much work was still necessary to advance labor’s cause.

Discouraged with the failure of the Iron Molders’ International Union, Sylvis turned his attention toward improving the general labor situation in the United States, instead of focusing simply on iron workers.⁸⁹ In August of 1866, workers of various trades had made one of the first attempts at bringing workers across the United States into a single organization. Delegates representing various trades’ unions, both national and local, convened to form the National Labor Union.⁹⁰ In the past, each trade organized and ran its own unions, whether the scale was national or local. The delegates recognized “the necessity of some way consolidating the forces of labor in such a manner as to secure a harmonious unity of all the parts.”⁹¹ Now, for the first time since the 1830s, labor would unite in a common cause.⁹²

Previous labor unions were, of course, formative in the methods used by the new union, but the Iron Molders’ International Union in particular provides many parallels. The value of a national union had been partially realized by the iron molders before 1866, through the work of William H. Sylvis. Though ultimately failing, the union had been influential in its time. In an address to the iron molders of the United States in 1859, their leader stated that:

‘In union there is strength,’ and in the formation of a national organization, embracing every moulder in the country, a union founded upon a basis broad as the land in which we live, lies our only hope. Single-handed, we can accomplish nothing; but united, there is no power of wrong we may not openly defy.⁹³

That labor act as a national force was a common theme for Sylvis. This view would appear later when Sylvis threw himself into the cause of the National Labor Union.

Sylvis was not present when the National Labor Union first met in 1866, but the efficacy of his leadership was felt after his attendance of the convention of 1867.⁹⁴ In 1868, he was elected president of the union. The Executive Committee of the union entrusted him with building local unions and “sowing the seeds of the National Labor Union in many places.”⁹⁵ There was only one thing for Sylvis to do; he immediately set to work. Instead of answering calls for a speech, “he took the gavel in his hand and said, ‘I have made all the speech I am going to make this morning. The union will now proceed to business.’”⁹⁶

The National Labor Union had many things in common with the Iron Molders’ International Union which had come before. This is hardly surprising, as the union of molders attended more conventions of the National Labor Union than any other trade union and were a potent force during its formative years.⁹⁷ Much of the similarity could also be ascribed to the work of William H. Sylvis. Sylvis was the man responsible for bringing together the iron molders of America into a strong union. This leadership would continue with the National Labor Union. Upon his election as president, he attended nearly every “meeting of workmen...in person or by letter, advocating those principles, and asking indorsement and co-operation.”⁹⁸ His desire

for a centralized union and his work towards that end would have an effect on the leadership of the National Labor Union.

A man named J.C.C. Whaley served as president of the National Labor Union for the first years of its existence. He did not travel near to the extent of Sylvis, but he still used communication to bring his organization together. In 1867, he sent a circular to local organizations around the country, urging them to attend the union convention.⁹⁹ He did some speechifying of his own, visiting various trades unions, speaking “at length and with much feeling in regard to the dignity of labor.”¹⁰⁰ The effective use of personal, passionate leadership by Sylvis seems to have inspired this leadership style within the National Labor Union. This would prove to be just one of several similarities between the new union and the Iron Molders’ International Union.

The rhetoric used to define the purpose of each union also shared great similarities. In the address to the iron molders, Sylvis had urged local unions to join together to “rescue our trade from the condition into which it has fallen...and raise ourselves to that condition in society to which we...are justly strong to secure us from further encroachment.”¹⁰¹ The call to lift workers to a better position carried over into the new National Labor Union. J.C.C. Whaley advertised the 1867 convention with newspaper articles inviting all those organizations “having for their object the amelioration of the condition of those who labor for a living.”¹⁰² Ideals from Sylvis and the Iron Molders’ International Union clearly made their way into the National Labor Union.

The similarities did not stop there. Sylvis had stressed the importance of a unified front in the cause of iron molders. Leaders of the National Labor Union also asserted that “to make [it] a *complete* success, it will be necessary for every workingman to put his shoulder to the wheel, by giving the movement moral and *material* aid.”¹⁰³ J.C.C. Whaley also expressed further the need for total involvement. “To successfully inaugurate such a movement,” he said, “it is essential that the representation at Chicago should be national in its character, embracing representatives from all parts of the country and from every branch of industry that can send a delegate.”¹⁰⁴

While rhetoric and leadership from the Iron Molders’ International Union was important in the formation of the National Labor Union, the new organization had to make changes in order to continue on where the old had failed. While the new union still recognized the importance of trades unions and encouraged them to stay in existence, they also sought to broaden its base.¹⁰⁵ Where the union of molders included only skilled artisans, the union of all trades saw unskilled labor as vital to their interests.¹⁰⁶ Women and children had worked in factories during the war, proving their usefulness in industry,¹⁰⁷ and their work and pay were addressed by the union.¹⁰⁸ Even the rights of Native Americans were touched upon.¹⁰⁹ Recognition of these groups not only acknowledged a greater unity of labor, but also helped in the political side of the National Labor Union.

One of the most important new aspects of the National Labor Union was the formation of a political party. Such a thing was seen as an alternative to strikes, which had played a part in the downfall of the Iron Molders’ International Union.¹¹⁰ Sylvis discouraged such activity in the newly formed National Labor Union.¹¹¹ It is evident that William H. Sylvis desired such a labor

party anyway, as the platform of the Republicans was incongruous with labor and the Democrats were against blacks, a group now recognized by labor circles. "We have been the tools of professional politicians of all parties long enough," he declared in 1868, "let us now cut loose from all party ties, and organize a workingman's party."¹¹² By sending those with labor sympathies to fill the White House and Congress, the National Labor Union hoped to be rid of labor's woes. If a labor party was not part of an election, Sylvius urged "every man who earns his bread by the sweat of his brow, to vote for every man of either party who is more favorable to the cause of labor than his opponent."¹¹³

Through political means, the National Labor Union hoped to distribute wealth more fairly in proportion to the labor performed, obtain for women equal pay for equal services, end convict labor, and an eight-hour day for all workers.¹¹⁴ The eight-hour day was particularly important to labor in general, as it was not uncommon for workers to toil ten or even twelve hours per day. The iron molders and others had called for an eight-hour day during the war, though without much success.¹¹⁵ The National Labor Union would pursue a similar goal because they believed that "no question of greater magnitude than the eight hour law can be placed before the American people."¹¹⁶

The National Labor Union would not be a long lasting organization. While the union did not succeed in obtaining all of its objectives, it did serve as a voice of discontent and managed to form the first meaningful organization of workers of all kinds. Emerging from the unique labor situation found in the Civil War, the National Labor Union was a new frontier for the labor movement. It had built upon the successes of past labor unions and worked to improve upon their failures. The Iron Molders' International Union served as the greatest source of influence. The National Labor Union would retain the centrality of the iron molders, while expanding their base to widen their influence. The experience of the iron molders typified the labor experience of the Civil War era, but also represented the strongest attempt of a trade union to exact change. Its organizations and leadership were emulated by one of the first American unions of all workers. The National Labor Union, in turn, would serve as a source of inspiration, and also of caution, to future labor unions seeking to affect change in the workplace.

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Endnotes

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