

# Labor History

Winter 1989

Volume 30

Number 1

ISSN 0023-656x

# FROM THE BARRICADES OF PARIS TO THE SIDEWALKS OF NEW YORK: German Artisans and The European Roots of American Labor Radicalism

by  
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Recent years have seen a significant series of contributions to our understanding of the developing politics of working Americans in the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> These contributions have focused on the process by which these workers, particularly artisans, appropriated republican ideological forms and transformed them to serve their own interests. Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic*, one of the best of these studies, developed and applied these concepts to the history of artisanal politics in New York City. In doing so, however, Wilentz posited a continuity in the evolution of workers' politics in New York from the end of the 18th century to a climax in the labor upsurge of 1850. The problem with this analysis, as with most other studies of mid-19th century New York (and of many other American cities as well), is that it makes insufficient allowance for the severe discontinuity which massive immigration intruded into the development of the labor movement in the late 1840s. By 1850, only a few of New York's workers had experienced the full sequence of developments which Wilentz depicts as reaching a climax that year. Most workers had not experienced these developments, at least not in the same way, be-

\*An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 1986 Statue of Liberty Centennial Conference on Immigration to New York. The author wishes to express his thanks to James Barrett, Selma Berrol, and Sean Wilentz for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

<sup>1</sup>Including works by Herbert Gutman, David Montgomery, Alan Dawley, Bruce Laurie, Leon Fink, Nick Salvatore and many others. Particularly significant is Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic* (New York, 1984).

cause they had only recently arrived in the city. In the course of the 1840s, the labor force of New York City had been almost totally transformed by a process which would continue to remake the social map of America for a century.

Early in the 1840s, New York City was what it had been for generations, an American city with an American born labor force (of mostly British descent). That was no longer the case by the end of the decade. By 1850, native born Americans constituted only 36% of *adult* New Yorkers.<sup>2</sup> Not only were two-thirds of the city's adults foreign born, but these immigrants constituted an overwhelming majority of the manual labor force. Indeed, five years later there were only about 24,000 native born whites engaged in manual labor in the entire city, and this out of a manual labor force of nearly 147,000.<sup>3</sup> Native born whites were thus less than 17% of the city's manual labor force by 1855. The native born workers were concentrated in the artisan trades, to be sure, but only in the building and printing trades did they still constitute a significant proportion of workers. The continuing influence of New York's artisanal traditions was, therefore, necessarily limited by the virtual elimination of its carriers from many sectors of the city's labor force.

This is not to say that these traditions were irrelevant to working class politics in New York after the 1840s (far from it), but rather to stress that they were only one of many sources of political ideas for the radically transformed labor force of mid-19th century New York. The European born workers, who came to dominate the new labor force, brought other traditions with them to New York. They were able to tap other sources of political ideas which did not have their roots in the American ex-

<sup>2</sup>This is a rough estimate based on data from the 1850 census and my own samples from the 1850 census manuscripts. About 42% of the city's residents were under twenty years old (*The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850*, 88-89), but only about 20% of the city's German born population was under twenty (Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion and Class in New York City, 1845-1880*, Urbana, IL., forthcoming). Assuming that the city's Irish born and other immigrant groups were demographically not too dissimilar from the Germans, leads to the conclusion that the city's native born adults numbered only 107, 489 that year while adult immigrants from abroad numbered 188,115.

<sup>3</sup>These calculations are drawn from Robert Ernst's retabulation of the 1855 manuscript census (*Immigrant Life in New York City 1825-1860* [New York, 1949], 214-17). Discrepancies between his retabulation for immigrants and the original tabulation for the entire population make this only an approximation, but it shouldn't be too far off.

perience and often had only the most tenuous connections with the American experience of the early 19th century. One group of immigrants, the German-American workers who came to dominate an increasing number of New York's artisan and skilled trades over the decades after 1845, were, in a sense, the successors of Wilentz's artisan republicans. By 1855, Germans were already a majority of the city's tailors, shoemakers, cabinetmakers and upholsterers, bakers, brewers, cigarmakers, locksmiths, paperbox-makers, potters, textile workers, gilders, turners, and carvers. Over the next two decades they expanded the range of trades where they were the dominant element to include most of the other skilled trades as well.<sup>4</sup>

German artisans came to New York with high levels of skills and brought their own artisanal traditions with them. Some of these were rooted in the ancient craft traditions of Europe where guilds and journeymen's associations had defined the artisan's world. Even in Germany, however, the guilds were a fading memory by mid-century and German artisanal traditions were in a state of ferment. It was the influence of the French Revolution which had first led to the abolition of guilds in western Germany, and it was from the experience of the French labor movement as well as their own that German artisans developed their responses to the new capitalist order.

The French artisan experience was not a foreign one for German artisans, nor one viewed from afar. By the second quarter of the 19th century Paris was a standard stopping place for German artisans of many trades. Not only were fashions set in Paris, but French artisanal techniques were reputed to be the finest in the world.<sup>5</sup> Thus, German artisans who wished to achieve true mastery of their trades went to Paris to perfect their craft. By the 1840s, there were reports that as many as 80,000 German journeymen may have worked in Paris at any one time.<sup>6</sup> Tailoring, shoemaking, and furniture making were the most common trades for Germans in Paris, but there were German artisans working

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work & Revolution in France* (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne, 1980), 153-54.

<sup>6</sup>Arnold Ruge, *Zwei Jahre in Paris* (Leipzig, 1846), 53, 431; and Karl Gutzkow, *Pariser Briefe* (Leipzig, 1842), 276.

in a large proportion of the city's most skilled trades. As the average journeyman stayed in Paris for only a limited period, perfecting his trade and then moving on, we have to assume that somewhere between 100,000 and a half million veterans of the Paris workshops had returned to Germany before the end of the decade.

In France, German journeymen learned far more than just refinements of their craft skills, they also learned the language and skills of social revolution. The tailors of Paris had been known for their commitment to republican and secularist organizations ever since the days of the *sans-culottes*.<sup>7</sup> It was German tailors who comprised the largest contingent of German journeymen in the Paris workshops, and the famous utopian communist Wilhelm Weitling formulated his ideas while working as a tailor in Paris.<sup>8</sup> The other Paris crafts most affected by an increasing division of labor and class conflict were the shoemaking and furniture making trades, and these too were among the largest of the German trades in Paris.<sup>9</sup> Even the elite makers of musical instruments were swept up in the ferment of Paris and, in later years, the German pianomakers of New York boasted that they still possessed a flag which the journeyman pianomakers of Paris had carried "upon the barricades during the stormy days of the French Revolution."<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the radicalism which tramping German artisans learned from the Parisian workers was not simply the traditional republicanism of the Jacobins and *sans-culottes*. Responding to some of the ideas promoted by the followers of Saint-Simon, French artisans began to develop an even more radical, social version of republicanism in the 1830s. The new social republicanism demanded a fundamental reorganization of society in order to end the treatment of labor as a commodity — a condition which social republicans had come to see as a barrier to true republican equality and fraternity. They proclaimed that "our industry

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<sup>7</sup>Sewell, 178; Richard M. Andrews, "Social Structures, Political Elites and Ideology in Revolutionary Paris, 1792-94: A critical evaluation of Albert Soboul's *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II*," *Journal of Social History*, 19 (1985), 71-112.

<sup>8</sup>Carl Wittke, *The Utopian Communist* (Baton Rouge, 1950), 11-30.

<sup>9</sup>Sewell, 158-59.

<sup>10</sup>*National Workman*, Oct. 27, 1866.

[labor], which you have exploited for so long, belongs to us alone."<sup>11</sup> Nor was this merely a rhetorical claim. In Paris in 1833, striking tailors, casemakers, shoemakers, and cabinetmakers set up producers' cooperatives to break the employers' stranglehold on their trades. (Again we must note that these were the very trades which employed the greatest numbers of German journeymen in the 1830s and '40's). The tailors, at least, saw their cooperative as a permanent institution of broad social significance and termed it a "national workshop."

While the organized trades were attempting to create new forms of property relations, the radical shoemaker and leader of the Parisian Society of the Rights of Man, Ephraim, called for a class wide "Association of Workers of All Trades" which would unite all artisans into one corporate association. Another leader of the Society, the tailor Gringnon, wrote that the workers were "the most numerous and most useful class of society." This echoed and transformed the classic assertion of the primacy of the Third Estate from the French Revolution, implying that the workers (rather than the Third Estate of classic formulation) were thus synonymous with the sovereign people—the rightful rulers of a republic.<sup>12</sup>

While these radical notions were often the preserve of only a small group of Parisian worker-intellectuals in the 1830s, they had become the basis of a widely shared discourse by the early 1840s. Étienne Cabet, Louis Blanc, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon picked up on these radical social ideas and systematized them in ways which caught the popular imagination. Cabet's Icarian communism especially appealed to a popular artisan following, and again it was the trades which included the most Germans that took the lead: "Everywhere in France, but especially in Paris, tailors, shoemakers and cabinetmakers flocked to the Icarian cause."<sup>13</sup> A leading historian of the French labor movement writes:

From 1840 on, socialist ideas were discussed regularly and openly, in workshops and working-class cabarets, in the bourgeois and working-class press, and in journalistic and literary writings of all kinds. From the beginning,

<sup>11</sup>Sewell, 194–200.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 210–14.

<sup>13</sup>Christopher Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839–1851* (Ithaca, 1974), 153–74.

manual workers played a significant role in this discourse, writing articles for workers' newspapers, publishing tracts and manifestos, and intervening by means of letters in the bourgeois press. . . . In the course of the 1840's, ideas about cooperation, about the reorganization of labors, about joint ownership of the means of production, were discussed, debated, and assimilated by thousands of French workers.<sup>14</sup>

These ideas were also assimilated by thousands of the German journeymen who passed through Paris in those years. Early in 1832 a "Deutsche Volksverein" was organized there which combined republicanism and German nationalism with discussion of the social question.<sup>15</sup> Two years later, a revolutionary League of Exiles was established in Paris to promote a German revolution. Its heroes were those of the French revolutionary left (Robespierre, Babeuf, and Lamennais), the vast majority of its members were journeymen, and its slogan was that of the 1831 Lyons silkworkers' rebellion, "Live Working or Die Fighting!"<sup>16</sup> A German tailor recalled its ideology in terms of "Strivings for German unity and freedom, for the republic and the brotherhood of peoples, for free thought, primitive Christianity and communism — all these ideas ran together there. . . ."<sup>17</sup> In 1836, the League of Exiles broke apart over the social question. Artisans who had been increasingly influenced by their French co-workers' socialism, broke with the League's leadership and established a new League of the Just to agitate for socialism. The new League promoted the socialist ideas of Saint-Simon and Fourier, and was closely associated with Auguste Blanqui's Society of the Seasons. In keeping with the League's artisanal character a journeyman shoemaker and a journeyman watchmaker were members of its central committee. They were soon joined by the journeyman tailor Wilhelm Weitling, the premier ideologue of German socialism before 1848, who later played an important role in New York.

Weitling combined the socialism of the French utopians with a call for revolutionary mass action by the workers. Like later communists, he had few illusions about the possibility of a peaceful social revolution in Europe, and he wrote about a "bloody battlefield in the streets" and the "guerilla-warfare" which would

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 219–20.

<sup>15</sup>Werner Kowalski, *Vorgeschichte und Entstehung des Bundes der Gerechten* (E. Berlin, 1962), 178.

<sup>16</sup>Ernst Schraepfer, *Handwerkerbünde und Arbeitervereine, 1830–1853* (Berlin, 1972), 41–50.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.



be necessary to create socialism.<sup>18</sup> Towards the end of the decade, the League of the Just was renamed the Communist League and Weitling was displaced as its chief ideologue. The author of the renamed League's new *Communist Manifesto* was Karl Marx.

This legacy of revolutionary Europe — from the *sans-culottes* to the national workshops and workers' barricades of 1848, from Robespierre and Babeuf to Louis Blanc and Karl Marx — was the tradition that many German immigrants would bring to New York. The legacy of revolutionary Europe was apparent even in some of the more conservative and "respectable" sectors of German New York. The city's leading German language newspaper, the pro-Democratic *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, was published by a political refugee of firmly republican bent named Jacob Uhl. Son of a Bavarian army officer, Uhl had learned the printers' trade before getting arrested for revolutionary activities in 1833.<sup>19</sup> He emigrated to New York in 1835, and he soon identified his republican ideals with the cause of the Democratic Party. Nonetheless, he also continued to follow more radical currents in Europe and helped introduce them to any German New Yorkers who had missed them in Europe. Early in 1846, for example, the *Staats-Zeitung* carried a review of Friedrich Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England*, while Uhl also published a German translation of the French socialist Eugène Sue's novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*.<sup>20</sup>

Nor was Uhl the only purveyor of radical European writings to German New Yorkers. While Uhl sponsored the translation of one of Sue's works, a competitor advertised that he had imported a German translation of another of Sue's works from Leipzig.<sup>21</sup> The booksellers' advertisements that appeared in the German papers in the mid-1840s, imply that German artisans in New York had access to a fair range of Europe's most radical ideas.

It was around that time that the German-American labor movement made its first appearance. Late in 1845, Hermann

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 52-99; Wittke, 20-22, 29, 34, 39, 48, 101, 108, 111, 115-116, 122-126, 189; Schraepler, 41-78, 98-103, 117, 122-23, 138-29, 151-163, 181-202, 299-300, 316, 335-36, 384, 432; P. Hartwig Bopp, *Die Entwicklung des deutschen Handwerksgezellentums im 19. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn, 1932), 99-132; and Kowalski, 57-81.

<sup>19</sup>*New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, April 28, 1852.

<sup>20</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Jan. 31, Feb. 2, 1846.

<sup>21</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, June 27, 1846.



Kriege, a republican propagandist and member of the League of the Just, arrived in New York City and sought to promote its doctrines among New York's German speaking immigrants. He immediately established a small and secret German-American branch of the League.<sup>22</sup> Then, early the next year, Kriege and his associates set up a *Sozialreformassoziation* (Social Reform Association) to be the public arm of their secret organization (thus establishing the first "communist front" in American history). The *Sozialreformassoziation* was intended to be a workers' political association which would draw in large numbers of German workers and encourage them to engage in independent political action of a communist nature. To draw in large numbers (and perhaps harking back to the *Deutscher Volksverein* of Paris), the *Sozialreformassoziation* sponsored a large variety of social activities which were extraordinarily successful. Soon the Sozialreformers numbered nearly a thousand and had become the leading voluntary association in German New York.<sup>23</sup>

Kriege came out of an international movement for social reform and he had rapidly sought out like minded reformers among English speaking New Yorkers. He found them among New York's "subterranean radicals," and the German *Sozialreformassoziation* was affiliated with the National Reform Association of George Henry Evans.<sup>24</sup> In keeping with its American affiliation, and a measure of the Anglo-American reformers' influence on the Germans, the *Assoziation* concentrated its political efforts on agitation for a homestead law, a program which was then known as "land reform." Kriege's overblown sentimental appeals and the *Sozialreformassoziation's* concentration upon "land reform" rather than communism soon led to the Sozialreformers' expulsion from the League of the Just.<sup>25</sup>

With many of their members poorly educated and attracted by social activities, the Sozialreformers were politically very unstable. Early in 1846, the *Sozialreformassoziation* set up its own

<sup>22</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Jan. 3, 1851; Philip S. Foner and Brewster Chamberlin, eds., *Friedrich A. Sorge's Labor Movement in the United States* (New York, 1977), 76-77; Hermann Schlüter, *Die Anfänge der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika* (Stuttgart, 1907), 23-25.

<sup>23</sup>Schlüter, 24; and Nadel, *passim*.

<sup>24</sup>Wilentz, 326-362.

<sup>25</sup>Sorge, 77; Schlüter, 28-40; and Wittke, 116-119.

newspaper, the *Volks-Tribun*, with the slogan "Up with Labor! Down with Capital!" displayed prominently on the masthead. Named after the French revolutionary Babeuf's *Tribune du peuple* and edited by Kriege, the paper advocated a "communism" which would protect producers from capitalist exploitation.<sup>26</sup> Hardly had the *Volks-Tribun* appeared, than it was attacked by the *Staats-Zeitung* for distorting reality by depicting American workers as poverty stricken and living in a society divided by hard and fast class lines.<sup>27</sup> This attack was followed by many more, including a very effective polemic which ridiculed the utopianism of the communists. The radicalism of the Sozialreformerers waned rapidly under this barrage.

Realizing that partisan considerations had been an element in the attack by the Democratic *Staats-Zeitung* and noting fellow land reform advocate Mike Walsh's success within the New York Democracy, Kriege sought to adapt the *Sozialreformassoziation* to New York partisan politics. In May of 1846, he called upon the *Sozialreformassoziation* to establish itself as the "left wing of Tammany Hall," and on July 4th, the *Volks-Tribun* dropped the slogan "Up with Labor! Down with Capital!" from its masthead and declared that the *Sozialreformassoziation* was no longer communist.<sup>28</sup> Stating that America was "the asylum of the oppressed, land of the workers and free farmers," the Sozialreformerers became intensely patriotic and even sent 50 of their members to fight against Mexico — in a war condemned by both the European left and the American National Reform Association.<sup>29</sup>

While the Sozialreformerers and the *Volks-Tribun* quickly abandoned their advocacy of class struggle and communism, some of German New York's workers began to experiment with unions. Just as the *Volks-Tribun* first appeared, the German handweavers met to protest the reduction of their wages from \$4 to \$2.50 a week.<sup>30</sup> By the end of the summer they had organized a carpet weavers union (along with their English speaking co-workers) which had over 1000 members in 31 factories. The union declared

<sup>26</sup>Schlüter, 40-41.

<sup>27</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Jan. 10, 1846.

<sup>28</sup>Schlüter, 40-41.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 45-47.

it would resist any further wage cuts by strikes if necessary.<sup>31</sup> Nothing more was heard from this union, which was the only German union of the 1840s. None the less, with the *Sozialreform-assoziation* and the *Volks-Tribun*, it marked the beginnings of a German-American labor movement in New York City.

Wilhelm Weitling, the famous German utopian communist and Hermann Kriege's mentor, had been invited to come to America by the Social Reform Association when it began its agitation in the spring of 1846. By the time he arrived at the beginning of 1847, the union movement had ended, the Sozialreformers had abandoned communism, and the *Volks-Tribun* was bankrupt. Little daunted Weitling soon hit upon the idea of setting up a communist fraternal order, the *Befreiungsbund* or Liberation League. Weitling's new League had little impact on German New York, though it is of interest to note that a leading member was Eugen Lievre, owner of the Shakespeare Hotel and afterwards host to a generation of radical activities. What ended Weitling's agitation (and Kriege's) was the news of the outbreak of the German Revolutions of 1848. The New York lodge of the *Befreiungsbund*, turning its attention to a real revolution, sent Weitling to Berlin to organize the workers of Germany for the League and Kriege too returned to Germany.<sup>32</sup>

Weitling's and Kriege's departures did not leave German New York entirely bereft of radical activists. A German saloonkeeper named Erhard Richter tried to keep the pot simmering. Richter, who was active in a broad range of radical causes over the next decade, took a leading role in a little known *Deutscher Arbeiter Verein* (German Workers Union) in 1848. The organization first attracted notice in May of 1848, when it marched in German New York's grand parade celebrating the outbreak of revolution in Germany.<sup>33</sup> In June, Richter published a piece in the *Staats-Zeitung* which claimed that the Workers Union was the only real representative of the working class. More interesting than this grandiose claim was the rhetoric he used in presenting it. Echoing the French socialists, Richter used their characteristic phraseology

<sup>31</sup> *Staats-Zeitung*, Aug. 23, 1846.

<sup>32</sup> Schlüter, 49-56; Wittke, 120-23.

<sup>33</sup> *Staats-Zeitung*, May 13, 1848.

in referring to the worker as "the most numerous and most powerful class in society," and went on to talk of a new society in which Workers would elect the heads of their workshops.<sup>34</sup> If there was any connection between the workers Union and Weitling's *Befreiungsbund* no record remains, but there can be no doubt about the *Arbeiter Verein's* debt to the Paris socialists.

The German Revolutions dominated the politics of German New York for the remainder of the decade. Revolutionary organizations, fraternal orders, singing societies, newspapers, and the vast majority of German New Yorkers seem to have thrown all their organized activity into celebration of, or support for, revolutionary activities in the homeland. Political thought focused on Berlin, Vienna, and Frankfurt — a German constitution and German politics — rather than on New York and American conditions. This revolutionary agitation continued well into the 1850s, especially in the social circles of the post-revolution refugees — the real "forty-eighters." It totally dominated the political life of German New York, however, only as long as the revolutions themselves appeared to have serious prospects for success.

The labor movement which had appeared so briefly in 1846, returned to German New York as a serious force in 1850. Industry was booming and the expected influx of gold from the California gold fields was contributing to a rapid increase in prices. While prices were rising, employers were attempting to continue the practice of cutting wages which they had become accustomed to in the deflationary 1840s. Meetings were called to protest wage cuts or to demand higher wages (leading to strike calls and the formation of trade unions) and the German workers were conspicuous in their participation. The first workers to go out on strike, at the end of February, were the cabinet-makers who were resisting a wage cut. It was reported that a large number, representing all the nationalities in the trade, were participating.

While all nationalities were represented among the strikers, the cabinetmakers' union was German-led. Union President Steffens came from Hamburg, the German furniture manufacturing center which was known for its advanced politics — said to be years ahead of southern Germany and only weeks behind

<sup>34</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, June 17, 1848.

Paris. Steffens took the lead in exhorting the strikers to maintain their solidarity and to keep up their courage, but his speeches went beyond the issues and tactics of the strike. He also addressed the strikers' long term problems and he advocated socialist solutions. Like the French artisan socialists of Paris, he advocated cooperative workshops both as a strike tactic and as a longer term solution to the increasing subordination of the artisan crafts to capitalist control. Beyond the adoption of producers' cooperatives, Steffens urged the creation of a Trade-Exchange Bank to destroy capitalist relations of production and exchange — and the Trade-Exchange Bank was the key to Wilhelm Weitling's version of communist ideology.<sup>35</sup>

Weitling himself had returned to New York at the end of 1849, having fled from Hamburg only hours before the police moved in to arrest him.<sup>36</sup> He lost no time in reviving his New York contacts and was able to get out the first issue of his new newspaper, *Die Republik der Arbeiter* (The Worker's Republic), in January 1850. He was again preaching his distinctive form of utopian communism to the workers of America (that is to those who could read German). Unlike the multi-class appeal of the utopianism of Owen, Fourier and Proudhon, Weitling appealed to the workers to make their own revolution — though he did include petty employers who had "once been workers themselves" in his scheme for social reorganization. He supported unions and strikes as means of organizing workers, but saw their potential for raising wages as limited (real success, he argued, could only lead to an inflationary spiral which would then eat up the gains).<sup>37</sup>

Producers' cooperatives were an important element in his scheme, but only when organized into his master conception, the *Gewerbetauschbank* or Trade-Exchange Bank. He described the Bank in the first issue of this paper:

The founding of a Trade-Exchange Bank, if it is to serve its intended purpose, requires the issuing of a new workers' paper money and the opening of stores and warehouses. In these warehouses (or to their agents) workers, employers and farmers can sell their products at any time for workers'

<sup>35</sup> *Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 2, 1850, Schlüter, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Wittke, 132-33.

<sup>37</sup> Schlüter, 89.

paper-money. With this paper-money they can buy whatever they need in return, so that with the founding of this Exchange Bank each member always has work and can always sell and buy his products without appealing to the capitalists and middlemen and submitting to their swindling. Everyone will always, by the exchange-rules of this Trade-Exchange Bank, receive the full value of his expenses and labor.

Weitling went on to describe how the Bank would produce massive profits which would finance cooperative factories and utopian colonies.<sup>38</sup>

Part of the idiosyncratic flavor of Weitling's communism lay in his appeal to Christian principles when most of his fellow German radicals were flaming atheists. In this respect Weitling was much more in the French tradition of Lamennais, Cabet, Proudhon, and the other Christian Socialists— a tradition despised by German heirs of the enlightenment like Karl Marx.<sup>39</sup> Weitling wrote his *Evangelium der armen Sünder* (Testament of a Poor Sinner) while he was still in Europe and he referred to Lamennais as an inspiration for his own work.<sup>40</sup> An especially fine example of Weitling's religiosity was a poem he wrote for young communists, which was sometimes recited at gatherings of his followers:

Ich bin ein Kleiner kommunist  
Und frage nicht nach Geld,  
Da unser Meister Jesus Christ  
Davon ja auch nichts halt.

I am a little communist  
and do not ask for cash,  
because our master Jesus Christ  
has no regard for wealth.

Ich bin ein kleiner kommunist  
Und bins mit Lieb und Treu,  
Und trete einst als treuer Christ  
Dem Arbeitsbunde bei.<sup>41</sup>

I am a little communist  
and am with love and faith,  
and as a faithful Christian, I  
support the Workers' League.

Back in 1846, Weitling's followers had been ridiculed by *Staats-Zeitung* owner/editor Jacob Uhl for suggesting "utopian" schemes.

<sup>38</sup>Sorge, 89–91; Schlüter, 71–79; Wittke, 220–25; *Republik der Arbeiter*, Jan. 1850.

<sup>39</sup>Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 48, 93–95, 100, 142, 173–74, 189, 195, 214–18, 231–35, 254–55; Edward Berenson, *Populist Religion and Left-Wing Politics in France, 1830–1852* (Princeton, 1984), especially 37–46; K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford, 1984), 33–118.

<sup>40</sup>Schlüter, 58–59; *Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 2, 1850.

<sup>41</sup>Schlüter, 102.



Now Weitling was a (minor) hero of the German Revolution and deserved respect. The *Staats-Zeitung* thus expressed sympathy with Weitling's goals, but gently suggested that the Trade-Exchange Bank was thoroughly impractical. Uhl demonstrated his familiarity with European socialist thought when he then pointed out that without the Bank's profits, producer's cooperatives were possible only for the elite workers who had the money needed to finance them. Cooperatives would therefore be of no use to the majority of workers unless they received state support (referring to the state sponsored socialism of Louis Blanc and the Paris workers in 1848).<sup>42</sup> Having verged on an advocacy of socialism Uhl then retreated to a more traditional republican position and concluded by stressing the possibilities for promoting the workers' interests through electoral politics in a democracy.

Referring to a "Socialistischer Revolutionsfieber" where Weitling was a star speaker, the *Staats-Zeitung* noted with regret that all of the socialist heroes whose portraits decorated the hall were Europeans.

The *Staats-Zeitung* had no objection to any of those included in the pantheon, but asked that some republican heroes from America be added — notably Paine, Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson. The *Staats-Zeitung's* bracketing of Washington and Franklin between Paine and Jefferson is itself an indication of Uhl's left republicanism and deism (Uhl was apparently a supporter of Paine's ideas and he published an anti-religious magazine, *die Asträa*, as well as the *Staats-Zeitung*). This more noticeably left wing orientation of the *Staats-Zeitung* didn't last very long, but it might have been expected in the newspaper that had just become the New York agent for the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* of "Carl" Marx.<sup>43</sup>

With Weitling and even the *Staats-Zeitung* urging them on, the German workers organized rapidly. The cabinet-makers were only the first. The house carpenters immediately followed their example. Even as they prepared to strike, the German carpenters met with the cabinetmakers and with a shoemakers' organizing committee. They agreed to unite their organizations on a "social

<sup>42</sup>Vincent, 138-40; Sewell, 232-36, 243-55, 265-72.

<sup>43</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Jan. 26, Feb. 9, Mar. 2, 1850.



basis" and lead their joint membership of over 1000 in an attempt to implement Weitling's ideas.<sup>44</sup> The next day the German shoemakers held a mass meeting at the Shakespeare Hotel to organize an association based on Weitling's program.<sup>45</sup>

German unions, German workers' associations and German sections of multilingual unions were also formed by upholsterers, carvers, paper-hangers, shade painters, varnishers, polishers, clockmakers, cigarmakers, and bakers.<sup>46</sup> Weitling took credit for all this activity. He claimed that his agitation had led to strikes in 20 trades and achieved wage increases averaging 25%. The communist tailor was especially proud of New York's German tailors, who (he reported) signed up 2000 members in only one day in March. He also claimed that the German example provided the impetus for the organization in New York of English speaking unions with 60-80,000 members.<sup>47</sup>

Weitling immediately proposed a central labor body for the unions and was selected by his fellow tailors to represent their union in organizing one. At the end of April they succeeded in organizing a Central Commission of the United Trades which represented the organized German workers in 15 trades. Weitling then represented the Central Commission in the Industrial Congress set up by the English speaking workers the next month.<sup>48</sup> The United Trades had about 2400 members, most of them from the unions, though it also had representatives from the Sozial-reformers and an "Economic Exchange-Association."<sup>49</sup> Weitling's influence soon waned, however, as it became clear that his program focused on the Trade Exchange Bank and that he didn't really support either trade unions or cooperatives for their own sakes. The fact that Weitling seemed to demand complete deference to his leadership also generated conflict, and he resigned from the Central Commission in October, saying: "Under the ex-

<sup>44</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 16, 1850.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, April 27, May 11, 18, 1850; *New York Tribune*, April 9, 20, 23, 24, July 26, 1850; *New York Sun*, Mar. 25, May 4, 1850; *New York Herald*, Mar. 11, 13, April 12, 1850; *New York Evening Post*, April 17, 18, 1850; Schlüter, 79-80.

<sup>47</sup>Schlüter, 79-80.

<sup>48</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, May 7, 31, June 8, 1850; Wittke, 190; *New York Tribune*, April 24, July 3, 1850; Schlüter, 131; Sorge, 91-92.

<sup>49</sup>*New York Tribune*, April 24, Aug. 18, 1850; Schlüter, 131.

isting circumstances it would be more damaging than useful to the movement which I lead in spirit, should I continue to let my feelings be abused at your meeting." The United Trades replied, "... that we feel strong enough to guide the movement of our brothers and ... we need no spiritual leader which Weitling pretends to be."<sup>50</sup>

The most dramatic events of 1850 were precipitated by the Irish tailors calling a strike in July. The German tailors also walked out, with the support of most of German New York — including the conservative *Staats-Zeitung*. The *Staats-Zeitung* particularly attacked the exploitative putting-out system which predominated in the ready-to-wear clothing trade. In this trade, clothing merchants drove down wages by cutting cloth in their factories and then distributing the pre-cut cloth to sewers who stitched the seams at home. This system put skilled tailors into competition with semi-skilled women sewers and drove the tailors' wages down sharply.

Although most of German New York supported the strikers, Father Müller of Most Holy Redeemer Church attacked the strike as anti-religious. He even called the police to arrest a tailors' committee which came to remonstrate with him. The *Staats-Zeitung* was outraged at the arrests, but the nativistic New York *Herald* was delighted and claimed that they had gone to burn the church. A few days later a group of 60–80 tailors, "apparently all Germans," tried to picket the uptown home of an employer. Again the German and English papers reported the events very differently. The *Staats-Zeitung* reported that the tailors were attacked by the police and an armed mob of "loafers and niggers," leading to many injuries and arrests. The English papers reported that the tailors rioted, breaking windows and fighting the police, leading to about 40 arrests. The police denied reports that three tailors had died of their wounds. In the end, 39 tailors were convicted of rioting and served prison sentences.<sup>51</sup> The *Staats-Zeitung* concluded that it was proud of the leading role the Germans had played, but perhaps a cooperative might be better than a strike.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Sorge, 93.

<sup>51</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 2, July 27, Aug. 2, 10, 17, 24, 1850; New York *Herald*, July 23, 25, 1850; New York *Tribune*, July 25, Aug. 6, 7, Dec. 16, 1850.

<sup>52</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Aug. 24, 1850.

The tailors and many of the other German unionists seem to have agreed with the *Staats-Zeitung*. The majority of the workers who had won their strikes soon drifted out of the unions, because they saw no further need for the organizations (a common weakness of early trade unions). The majority of those who remained turned enthusiastically to the creation of cooperative workshops. These projects then absorbed the energies of both the unions and the Central Commission for the remainder of their existence. That existence was brief, however, as the Central Commission and many of the unions soon collapsed from the recriminations and disillusionment which followed the failure of the undercapitalized and inexperienced cooperatives.

The Germans' preference for forming cooperatives was predictable. Not only were cooperatives generally the rage in labor circles, including Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, they also had a natural appeal for proletarianized artisans — a fair description of most of New York's organized German workers. These artisans had no objections to a petty producer capitalism where workers had a reasonable prospect of becoming their own masters. What they resented was the prospect of indefinite servitude. Cooperative workshops offered them the renewed prospect of becoming their own masters and did so with an appeal to the artisan ethic of cooperation, rather than through the alien notions of competition and conflict. Because cooperative workshops seemed such an obvious solution to artisan proletarianization, the ideal survived the failure of the 1850 cooperatives and was resuscitated nearly every time there was a labor movement revival in small scale industries.

Weitling himself continued his agitation for another four years. He organized his followers into the *Arbeiterbund* (Workers' League), and promoted its activities in his *Republik der Arbeiter*.<sup>53</sup> For a while, the New York Society of the *Arbeiterbund* had several hundred members who continued to look to him for leadership. Weitling promoted his vision of cooperatives, the Trade-Exchange Bank, and a utopian colony at Communia, Iowa. Indeed, the New York local of the League was prosperous enough in October 1852 to open a Workers' Hall which provided the usual range of German

<sup>53</sup>Wittke, 188-275.

social activities — theater, singing, dancing, bowling, and beer. The League began to fade in New York with the creation of a Marxist rival in the spring of 1853 and then finally collapsed in 1854 as charges flew around the bankruptcy of the utopian colony at Communia. Fighting against charges of dishonesty, Weitling tried to keep the League alive and continued publishing his newspaper until July 1855. It was a bitter end. In later years, Sorge (the Marxist leader of the First International and Weitling's friend) continued to defend Weitling's honesty as "above suspicion" and honored him as a founder of the German-American labor movement.<sup>54</sup>

While the *Sozialreformassoziation* and the *Arbeiterbund* constituted two major early incarnations of German-American radicalism, possibly the most important incarnation in the 1850s was the *Turnverein*. The *Turnverein*, or Gymnastics Union, had its roots in a nationalistic physical culture movement which arose in Napoleonic Germany. By mid-century the German movement had added republicanism and free thought to its ideology, was largely a working class movement and had strong links to the German artisan colony in Paris.<sup>55</sup> When the revolutions of 1848 broke out in Germany, thousands of Turners (as they were called) played an active and leading role in the fighting, particularly in Baden. Some of the activist Turners had been recruited from revolutionary Paris, where hundreds of German journeymen enrolled in an armed force known as Herwegh's Legion. It was organized to carry social republicanism back to Germany on the points of French revolutionary bayonets, and was subsidized by a French Provisional Government anxious to be rid of the turbulent German radicals.<sup>56</sup> When the revolutions in Germany failed, many of the Turner veterans of the Baden Legion, Herwegh's Legion, and other revolutionary forces, joined comrades who had emigrated to the United States in earlier years. Together they formed the German-American Turner Movement.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*; Schlüter, 79-127; Sorge, 89-94.

<sup>55</sup>The *Turn-Zeitung's* "History of the Turners" described the Turner membership in quite limited terms. Its opening, "We are united under the name of Turners, not as artisans, wage earners or as day laborers, but as spiritual people . . ." did not even allow for the possibility of members who might be from other social strata. *Turn-Zeitung*, 1 (1851-52), 274-6.

<sup>56</sup>Schraepler, 224-32.

<sup>57</sup>H. C. A. Metzner, *Geschichte des Turner-Bundes* (Indianapolis, 1874), 1-20.

The first move towards establishing a Turner movement in New York had come in 1846, when the *Staats-Zeitung* ran a long story on the founder of the German movement, "Father Jahn."<sup>58</sup> It was another two years, however, before the Turners in New York set up a small *Turngemeinde*, or Gymnastics Society.<sup>59</sup> The *Turngemeinde* members practiced their gymnastics and occupied a minor place in the social life of German New York for two years. Then the Society was disrupted by an influx of more revolutionary Turners who had recently fled from Germany. These radicals pushed for greater political activity, and, when their proposals were not accepted, they withdrew to form their own organization — the New Yorker *Socialistischen* (Socialist) *Turnverein*.<sup>60</sup>

The socialism of the *Socialistischen Turnverein* ran the full gamut from social republicanism which was more republican and atheist than social, to a proletarian communism expounded by followers of Karl Marx. The editor of the *Turn-Zeitung* proclaimed that "the communist visionary, with a hatred of all Capital and dreaming of revolution, is as well represented in our association as the prudent reformer who would be satisfied with a fair compromise between Labor and Capital created by government regulation of wages" and announced that the pages of the *Turn-Zeitung* would be open to both.<sup>61</sup> The common denominator, disclosed in an article on Turners and socialism in the second issue, was a mixture of the classic formulations of the French Revolution ("the socialist is an opponent of all monarchical or aristocratic state formations; he is an opponent of all hierarchical or religious power . . . privilege and monopoly") and the newer social republican formulations of 1848 ("he is an opponent of any system of exploiting workers and is finally an opponent of a society which contains the seeds of future destruction in its neglect for their well being . . .").<sup>62</sup> In the same issue, the *Turn-Zeitung* contained a sophisticated analysis of the transformation of workers from artisans into proletarians.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup>The story was written by Wilhelm Schlüter, later editor of the *New Yorker Demokrat* and active Turner. *Staats-Zeitung*, Oct. 17, 1846.

<sup>59</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Nov. 18, 1848.

<sup>60</sup>Schlüter, *Anfänge*, 199-200; Metzner, 21-23.

<sup>61</sup>*Turn-Zeitung*, vol. 1. 297.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 325, 329-48.

The *Turn-Zeitung* turned out to be an important element in the introduction and spread of European notions of social radicalism to the United States. It ran regular articles and series on the history and meaning of socialism. One article attributed the origin of socialism to the independent organization of the workers of Paris in 1834, while a series devoted to "The Socialism of the French" devoted its first article to events from the outbreak of the Revolution to the fall of Robespierre.<sup>64</sup> New York's German workers were also introduced to different varieties of socialism through the pages of the *Turn-Zeitung*, with the series on French Socialism extolling Louis Blanc and concluding with a quote from Karl Grün, while other articles promoted a Marxian "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" or condemned French communists for a materialism which "would abolish art and science and make spiritual life a crime."<sup>65</sup>

Even as the *Turn-Zeitung* introduced European ideas to a widening circle of German-American workers, it also introduced the Germans to the radical traditions and history of their new home. In the Spring of 1853 the paper ran a series of articles on American labor history which focused on the New York City labor movement of the 1830s.<sup>66</sup> In this way, part of the historical development which Wilentz' *Chants Democratic* explores was introduced as a minor influence on the developing labor tradition of German New York.

As recent refugees, the Turners naturally threw their first efforts into preparing for a new revolutionary outbreak in Europe, but they also expanded the scope of local Turner activities in ways reminiscent of the Sozialreformer. The first addition was (of course) a singing society, followed by a drama society, a German school, a rifle company and a chess club. Before long it was possible for a resident of German New York to carry on an active *Vereinsleben* without ever leaving the *Turnverein*. About 200 German New Yorkers joined the new *Verein* in its first year and it had over 500 members by 1853.<sup>67</sup>

The republican principles of the Turners carried them into

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 325, 329-48.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 329-48; 18-19; 294.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 187-88, 203-04.

<sup>67</sup>Schlüter, 199-200; Metzner, 21-23; and Turnverein records, Scholer Collection, New York Public Library, Feb. 24, 1854.



the struggle against slavery, and many followed the anti-slavery impulse into the Republican Party. Their renown as effective fighters also brought them out of German New York to act as defense squads for anti-slavery meetings in English-speaking sections of the city.<sup>68</sup> The Turners' main struggle, however, took place within the German community. There they had to combat the active pro-slavery propaganda of the *Staats-Zeitung* and the efforts of the Democratic Party machine (which included the Sozialreformer and some of the fraternal orders).<sup>69</sup> These groups used their own versions of republican ideology and even social republicanism to attack abolitionism and the Republican Party as capitalist conspiracies designed to drive down the cost of labor and thus to intensify the exploitation of immigrant wage slaves. Whatever success the Turners may have had in generating anti-slavery sentiment (and they claimed a great deal), it was never translated into a Republican majority in German New York.<sup>70</sup> They were sufficiently successful, however, to lay claim to a fair amount of Republican patronage in later years. Leading Turners filled posts in the County Coroner's office and the New York office of the Internal Revenue, among other places.<sup>71</sup>

While the reform impetus of the Sozialreformer and the Turners lost much of its strength after their first years, these two successful social organizations were tremendously important in establishing and maintaining a generally pro-radical climate of opinion in German New York. It was in this atmosphere that the German-American trade union movement of New York developed and the seeds of a socialist movement began to germinate in American soil.



<sup>68</sup>New York *Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1854; and Bruce C. Levine, "In the Spirit of 1848" (unpublished PhD diss., Univ. of Rochester, 1980).

<sup>69</sup>At first the *Staats-Zeitung* simply took an anti-free-soil position and favored Colonization, the re-settling of freed slaves in Africa, April 1, 1852, July 6, 1853, but it denied that it supported slavery May 16, June 6, 1855. When some southern Turners split the national organization over its pro-abolition stand, the *Staats-Zeitung* tried to promote a split in New York too Nov. 22, 1855. By 1856, however, the *Staats-Zeitung* was referring to its opponents' "Niggerblatter" [Nigger Papers], Aug. 26, 1856, and to "black Republican Nigger love," Sept. 26, 1856.

<sup>70</sup>Nadel, ch. 7.

<sup>71</sup>Former Union General Franz Sigel, for example, was appointed assessor at the Internal Revenue Office in New York in the 1870s (Pickard typescript, NYPL Scholer Collection, 221A) and Dr. Scholer of the Turnverein, who was also a Republican Party activist, was later the New York County Coroner (Scholer Collection, NYPL).



Full employment and satisfaction with the gains of 1850 had proved the downfall of most of the German unions, whose members appear to have envisioned them as temporary organizations designed to achieve immediate goals. The continuing boom offered little incentive to further organization in 1851 and 1852, but continued inflation began to reduce the value of wages — and the rate of inflation began to increase sharply towards the end of 1852. By the beginning of 1854 it was said that the cost of necessities had increased 30% in eight months.<sup>72</sup> As the situation worsened, first the *Staats-Zeitung* and then the *New York Times* urged employers to raise wages voluntarily in order to not provoke strikes.<sup>73</sup>

Everyone was concerned about the effects of inflation, but most of the “respectable” elements were more worried about unions and strikes than about the workers’ living conditions. Even Weitling and his *Arbeiterbund* were now saying that communism was the only solution to the workers’ plight and had joined the opposition to wage conscious unions and strikes.<sup>74</sup> There was, however, a new faction in German New York ready to urge militant action.

In November 1851, a close political associate of Karl Marx named Joseph Weydemeyer had arrived in New York. He was determined to create a revolutionary workers’ movement by spreading the new ideas of “scientific” socialism to America. A former Prussian army officer converted to socialism, Weydemeyer had had extensive editorial experience during the German Revolution and he plunged into leftist journalism in New York. Only two months off the boat, he took over a small atheist paper, *Luzifer*, and renamed it *Die Revolution*. It died after two issues. Weydemeyer had also, however, begun to write for the new *Turn-Zeitung*, and he was able to reach a lot of German workers through its pages. Soon, the Turners were publishing Weydemeyer on “The Dictatorship of the Proletariat” and the meaning of “class consciousness.”<sup>75</sup> In these and other writings, Weydemeyer, like all

<sup>72</sup>New York *Herald*, Nov. 20, 1852; New York *Sun*, Dec. 3, 1852, Feb. 22, 1854.

<sup>73</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, April 15, 1853; *The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1853.

<sup>74</sup>Schlüter, 88–93.

<sup>75</sup>*Turn-Zeitung*, vol. 1, pp. 10, 18–19, 114–15.

good Marxists, stressed the importance of trade unions and strikes as basic forms of class struggle.

Weydemeyer also moved to generate a revolutionary political organization. He considered trying to take over the *Arbeiterbund*, but Marx had advised him to avoid Weitling, so he joined the *Sozialreformassoziation* instead.<sup>76</sup> In six months he had enough followers to set up a small Marxist club called the Proletarierbund, which was influential in Turner circles.<sup>77</sup> He became even better known when he became the leading publicist for the defendants in the notorious Cologne anti-communist trial of 1852-53 and was given access to the pages of the literary newspaper, the *Belletristisches Journal*, for his campaign. By the spring of 1853, therefore, he was an influential journalist with a small organized following in the reviving labor movement, and was ready to try and create a new, militant labor organization.

The German trade unionists, who had allowed their unions to lapse into dormancy, or had only maintained them as mutual benefit societies, began to plan a spring organizing campaign during the winter of 1852-53. While the *Arbeiterbund* planned a fund raising banquet for a renewal of the German Revolution (the *Staats-Zeitung* reported that they "spent more on beer than on revolution"),<sup>78</sup> the Marxists were meeting with the trade union leaders. Even as the first strikes were getting underway they planned to set up a new central body for the German workers. The unions and strikes that followed involved dozens of trades, starting with the German hatmakers' unsuccessful strike for a 12% raise. The carpenters and other construction workers were more successful, as were the gilders, typesetters, piano-makers, gold workers and engravers. The tailors again had the best organization, with shop and district committees in addition to the central office. Even the German waiters organized a union with about 700 members and won a raise from \$15 to \$18 a month. The year 1853 also saw the German cigarmakers organize their first real trade union. At the request of the Marxists (who also wanted to organize English-speaking workers), the cigarmakers

<sup>76</sup>Franz Mehring, "Neue Beiträge Zur Biographie von Karl Marx und Friedrich Engels," *Die Neue Zeit*, 25 (1907), 99.

<sup>77</sup>Karl Obermann, *Joseph Weydemeyer* (Berlin, 1968), 270.

<sup>78</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 4, 1853; Wittke, 213.

set up an English-speaking section of their new union. All of the new and revived unions were clearly much more oriented toward trade-unions than their 1850 predecessors (which had stressed cooperatives and mutual benefits).<sup>79</sup>

On March 15, 1853, Weydemeyer and his colleagues put out a call:

To the Workers of All Trades! For a broad workers' alliance. Not only to win a wage increase in each work place or to forge a purely political union. No, now is the time to create a platform on a modern basis and recommend practical ways to achieve our goals.<sup>80</sup>

Some 800 German American workers responded to this call for a "practical" organization — including a large number of Weitling's followers.<sup>81</sup> They founded the *Amerikanische Arbeiterbund* (American Workers' League) on the 21st of March, in close association with the trade unions ("the house-painters', tailors', shoemakers', cabinet-makers' and cigarmakers' unions participated as organizations), the Sozialreformers, and the Turners.<sup>82</sup> Proclaiming the irreconcilability of capital and labor, the "practical" platform focused on 10 hour and child-labor laws, a homestead act, the creation of a mechanic's lien law to protect workers, and similar reforms to be implemented by a Labor Party.<sup>83</sup> Weitling denounced this platform as reformist, having nothing to do with the "real emancipation of the workers." Even the Marxist historian Hermann Schlüter was forced to conclude that the new program "poured a goodly portion of petty-bourgeois water into the proletarian wine."<sup>84</sup> Despite the watering of the wine, it seems to have been just what the German proletariat of New York wanted and they flocked to the table of the new *Amerikanische Arbeiterbund*.

The new League actively encouraged the unions and participated in some of the strikes which followed in the spring and summer. Despite the influence of the Marxists on the League, however, they were forced to contend with a strong strain of sen-

<sup>79</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 3, April 1, 8, May 6, 1853; Schlüter, 132-134; Obermann, 297-303.

<sup>80</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 18, 1853.

<sup>81</sup>Obermann, 298; Wittke, 215.

<sup>82</sup>Schlüter, 138.

<sup>83</sup>*Turn-Zeitung*, vol. 1, pp. 220-21; *Die Reform*, Oct. 12, 1853.

<sup>84</sup>Schlüter, 135-39; Obermann, 298-300.

timental reformism typical of 19th century Romanticism. Weydemeyer reported to Marx that he had had to smuggle himself into a meeting of the committee drafting the organization's constitution, to oppose "as far as possible" the sentimentality of the proposed draft, "so that the final product wouldn't be too pitiful [*jammerlich*]."<sup>85</sup> The sentimental tide was only temporarily stemmed. The *Amerikanische Arbeiterbund* suffered heavy membership losses about a month later when many of the sentimentalists went over to a newly formed Freethinkers' Society.

German unions, however continued to form and to affiliate with the League, until both were brought down by the economic crises of 1854-55. At the time of the crash, late in 1854, Weydemeyer and the Marxists were trying to get the League and the German speaking unions to merge with their English speaking equivalents in an attempt to create class wide organizations. This attempt to implement the slogan "workers of all tongues unite" carried unity too far for most German-American workers. Working class unity in New York, after all, would have reduced them to a tongue-tied minority in a union dominated by other ethnic groups who the Germans considered culturally backwards at best. Weydemeyer resigned in disgust and soon left New York, but by that time, the economic crises had wiped out most of the unions, and the League was being kept alive only by its mutual benefit and singing societies.<sup>86</sup>

Unlike the labor upsurge of 1850, the labor movement in German New York had not died of lack of interest. It had been crushed by mass unemployment on a scale which made survival rather than organization the most pressing concern for New York's German workers. The *Staats-Zeitung* reported that there were over 3000 unemployed skilled workers in the mostly German 11th Ward alone and called for public works projects.<sup>87</sup>

The radical saloonkeeper Erhard Richter (who had led the *Deutscher Arbeiter Verein* of 1848) and the Freethinker leaders, doctors Schramm and Försch, addressed a large protest meeting of the unemployed in City Hall Park. There, they too called for

<sup>85</sup>Obermann, 316.

<sup>86</sup>Obermann, 318-340; Schlüter, 135-56.

<sup>87</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Dec. 21, 1854, Jan. 12, 1855.

a broad municipal public works program to alleviate the mass suffering.<sup>88</sup> In the *Republik der Arbeiter*, Weitling waxed eloquent in his protest:

Need pounds with heavy fists on the door of public attention, which has offered only beggars-soup in response. Beggars-soup! Beggars-soup! In America it has already come to that.<sup>89</sup>

German New York, like the rest of America, was in the throes of economic and social flux. Independent artisans and small factory owners who survived the panic of 1854–55 were faced with another major panic in 1857. Many businesses did not survive and their owners were driven down into the ranks of the wage earners (though many still hoped to rise again). Panics were times of opportunity as well, however, and the more solvent among the German employers were able to expand their business at bargain prices (picking clean the corpses of their failed rivals). By the end of the decade, many of the more successful businessmen from German New York had accumulated substantial fortunes and had risen well above the nebulous line which divides the middle from the upper classes. In the 1860s they would move to assume the social and political prerogatives which they felt were owed them by virtue of their new status.

The short prosperity after 1855 did little to revive the German labor movement, and the slavery question absorbed most of the energies of those who were reform activists. A second panic, in 1857, did stimulate something of a revival in the way of labor reform organizations, though. In October 1857, Weydemeyer's associate Albert Komp gathered some of his friends and fellow radical "forty-eighters" into a *Kommunisten Klub*, dedicated to free-thought and the equality of all mankind (once again, as in the days of the League of Exiles, mixing "Strivings for German unity and freedom, for the republic and the brotherhood of peoples, for free thought, primitive Christianity and communism").<sup>90</sup> The 30 members of the new club (including the Free-thinker Adolf Sorge, who seems to have moved towards Marxism through this association) joined with the English speaking labor

<sup>88</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Jan. 9, 1855.

<sup>89</sup>Schlüter, 156.

<sup>90</sup>See excerpts from the Club's statutes in Obermann, 345; and Schlüter, 161–62.

leader James Maguire in organizing mass demonstrations of the unemployed. On November 5, 15,000 unemployed English and German speaking workers marched from Tompkins Square in German New York to Wall Street, carrying banners reading "Work-Arbeit" and chanting "we want work."<sup>91</sup>

With this encouragement, the *Kommunisten Klub* took the lead in reviving the dormant *Amerikanische Arbeiterbund*, but the revived League was much more successful in attracting all sorts of reformers (including a contingent of Fourierist utopian socialists) than it was in appealing to the German workers of New York. Without Weydemeyer's leadership and confronted by prestigious social republican activists like Gustav Struve, the Marxists were unable to dominate the increasingly reformist League. Under Struve's leadership the League took on an increasingly Jacobin cast with members addressing each other as "citizen" in the French revolutionary tradition.<sup>92</sup> The Marxists even had to accept the addition of an anti-communist declaration to the League platform in 1859. By that time the League included both a Republican Club and a Consumer Cooperative Union, but it had failed to attract any of the trade unions which had begun to revive once more with the return of prosperity. Marxists later claimed that the League soon died from lack of relevance.<sup>93</sup>

The unions had been slow to revive even after the economy recovered from the 1857 Panic. All that was left of the militant cabinetmakers' union, in the spring of 1858, was a small mutual benefit society with 40 to 45 members. The cigarmakers were likewise reduced.<sup>94</sup> This time it was the old *Sozialreformassoziation* which took the lead and called on the workers of all trades to meet in its hall. The piano-makers and furniture-makers were first to heed the call and soon there were German trade unions and associations flourishing in New York once more.<sup>95</sup> Once again an economic boom was followed by a period of widespread un-

<sup>91</sup>*The New York Times*, Nov. 3, 1857; *New York Herald*, Nov. 3, 6, 1857; *New York Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1857.

<sup>92</sup>On "Citizen" see, *Soziale Republik*, Sept. 11, 1858. For an extensive glorification of Robespierre see *ibid.*, July 16, 1853.

<sup>93</sup>Schlüter, 165-74; Obermann, 344-357.

<sup>94</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, April 26, May 5, 1858.

<sup>95</sup>*Staats-Zeitung*, Mar. 7, April 21, Aug. 3, Nov. 10, Nov. 26, 1859; *New York Sun*, Mar. 11, 22, 25, April 2, 29, 1859; *New York Tribune*, Sept. 28, 1859; April 3, 30, 1860; Schlüter, 176-77.



employment, this time as the country drifted into civil war, and the German trade unions of New York again mostly evaporated. However, there were some survivors — the capmakers', cigar-packers', tailors', and shoemakers' organizations.<sup>96</sup>

While only a core of four unions survived the economic crises of the late 1850s, and all the efforts to create a labor movement seemed to have been unsuccessful, many thousands of German-American workers had participated in the struggles of the decade. Building on European experience and traditions, they had created a German-American labor movement. Despite its weaknesses, this movement had undergone an important evolution and had laid the foundation for the future.

In political terms, German-American workers had moved from the flaming romanticism of Hermann Kriege, through the utopianism of Wilhelm Weitling, to the Marxian socialism of Joseph Weydemeyer — with its stress on organizing class conscious trade unions. Although Weydemeyer gave up on German New York, concluding that in America "the workers are incipient Bourgeois and feel themselves to be such . . .,"<sup>97</sup> his "proletarian propaganda" would be remembered by New York's German workers as class lines hardened over the next few years.

The unions themselves had evolved rapidly from temporary instruments for achieving immediate results, into organization which were intended to be permanent institutions, devised for extended struggle. Even in the economic crises which broke the unions in the winters of 1854–55 and 1857–58, the German labor movement of New York had pioneered in organizing the unemployed — a form of organization which would culminate in the famous Tompkins Square Riot of 1874.

Although this first German-American labor movement failed to keep its organizations alive through the depressions of the 1850s, it was the veterans of this movement who later applied the lessons drawn from its experience to create the powerful German-American labor and socialist organizations of New York City in the 1860s and 1870s. Samuel Gompers claimed that these organi-

<sup>96</sup>Lawrence Costello, "The New York City Labor Movement, 1861–1873" (unpublished PhD diss., Columbia Univ., 1967), 173; *New York Sun*, May 21, June 4, Oct. 28, 30, Nov. 8, 18, 19, 1862; *New York Herald*, Dec. 8, 1863.

<sup>97</sup>Obermann, 347.



zations were the most "virile and resourceful" part of the New York City labor movement in those years and credited New York City with being the "cradle of the labor movement." Gompers also attributed both his own labor education and a formative influence on the early American Federation of Labor (an organization that initially was officially bilingual in English and German) to New York's German-American labor movement.<sup>98</sup> The veterans of the early German-American labor movement in New York thus provided a crucial link between the late 19th century American labor movement and the radicalism of the European socialists of the 1840s (and later years). Given the immigrant basis of so much of America's urban and industrial work force after 1850 and the influence of German-America on so many other foreign language speaking immigrants, this link was arguably the true tap-root of the American labor movement.

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<sup>98</sup>Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor* (New York 1925), 47, 61; Costello, 165-85; Nadel, ch. 7.