



The Populist President of the American Federation of Labor: The Career of John McBride, 1880–1895

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In early August of 1894, John McBride, the president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), announced his intention to form an Ohio labor party and to merge the party with the state's People's party. McBride told the state's unionists that recent labor strife had convinced "all honest, ardent advocates of labor's cause that corporate power, when aided and abetted by the judicial, executive and military arm of the state and national governments can and will override the rights of our people." Believing that labor unions, "as now constituted," had proven ineffective in protecting the rights of workers, McBride told trade unionists to reform their organizations, abandon their emphasis on strikes, boycotts, and arbitration, and enter into partisan politics. "By entering into politics," McBride explained, "we can free ourselves from the chain of slavery." Four months later McBride defeated Samuel Gompers for the presidency of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Upon taking office McBride predicted that the next year would witness a "great union of labor men" organized for political activity and that during the election of 1896 "we shall place a presidential candidate in the field." Although Gompers defeated McBride at the AFL's next election and the Federation never fielded a presidential candidate or entered into an alliance with the People's party, an examination of McBride's career suggests that a labor-Populist alliance was a viable option for many laborites and that labor republicanism and producerism remained powerful forces in Federation politics until at least 1896.¹

Historians who have examined the Federation's stance toward political action have mistakenly concluded that McBride shared Gompers' union philosophy. Gompers' unionism went by a number of names—business unionism, trade unionism, voluntarism, pure and simple unionism, prudential unionism—but it rested on two fundamental assumptions. First, Gompers saw an inherent and unalterable conflict between employers and those who worked for wages. This led Gompers and like-minded unionists to eschew alliances with farmers, small producers, and shop keepers. For Gompers the workers alone were to work out their own salvation. Second, Gompers saw the conflict between labor and capital as essentially economic in nature. Thus political activity, although at times necessary, did not confront the main source of workers' oppression. Instead, Gompers counseled workers to confront capital on the economic front through strikes, boycotts, and union labels. Philip Taft calls McBride

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¹*United Mine Workers Journal* Aug. 9, 1894; *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch*, Aug. 14, 1894; *National Labor Tribune*, Jan 10, 1895. McBride's choice of language is telling. The phrase "a great union of labor men" echoes the People's party's Omaha platform's call for "union of labor forces." As we will see, McBride borrowed heavily from the Omaha platform.

a “leading trade unionist” and argues that the main differences between Gompers and McBride were non-ideological. Stuart Kaufman agrees: “Despite differences in personality and leadership styles, John McBride shared Samuel Gompers’ faith in trade unionism and the primacy of economic, rather than political struggle.” Kaufman acknowledges that McBride was more political than Gompers, but stressed that “practical unionism governed his political stand.”²

McBride’s unionism was rooted in the American republican tradition. Labor republicans envisioned a world in which the lines separating employers and wage earners were porous and wage labor was a means of saving enough money to attain the goal of becoming an independent farmer or artisan. Unlike Gompers, who argued that the conflict between capital and labor was permanent and unalterable, labor republicans saw capital as simply the product of labor. For labor republicans, it was only right and just that those who labored and produced the products that fulfilled the nation’s wants should benefit (receive a just wage) from that production. Labor republicans viewed the concentration of capital as a threat as it deprived workers of a just wage and the opportunity to achieve economic independence, placed the needs of capital before those of labor, and corrupted the nation’s democratic institutions. To retard the concentration of capital, labor republicans looked to the state. Labor republicans would certainly agree with Abraham Lincoln that “To [secure] to each labourer the whole product of his labour, or as nearly as possible, is the most worthy object of any good government.”³

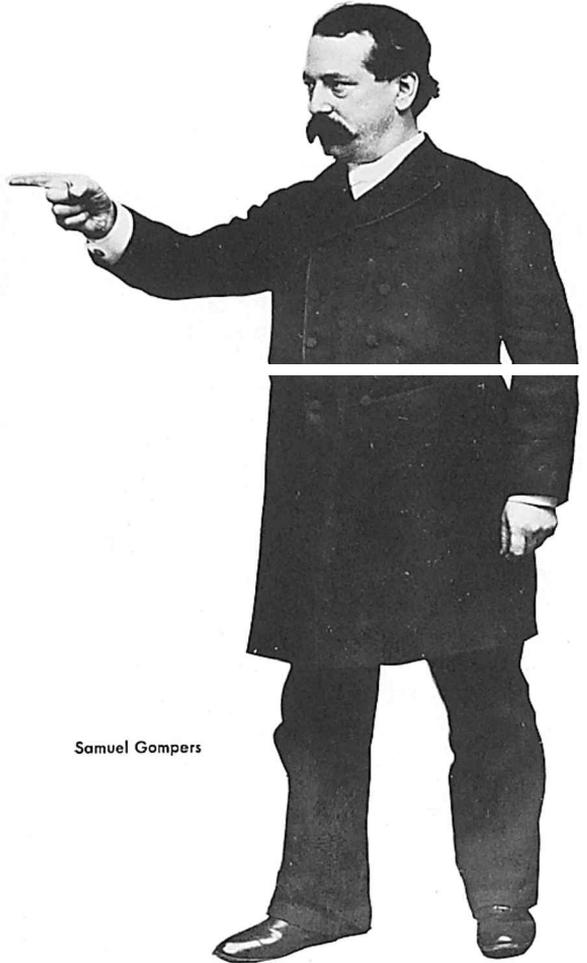
In the past decade, scholars have attempted to explain the decline of labor republicanism and the rise of business unionism in hopes of understanding the conservative nature of American politics. For in the United States alone among Western industrialized nations, the labor movement did not organize politically after the turn of the century to challenge the emergence of large-scale corporate capitalism. Led by Gompers, the AFL accepted the consolidation of American capital and stressed the importance of economic, rather than political, action. In the past decade scholars have looked to the triumph of business unionism as the key to unlocking the riddle of American Exceptionalism. Kim Voss asserts that the concentration of capital “gave employers both the ability to enforce internal discipline and the strategic advantage to hold out against their employees.... Thus, they were able to crush broad-based unionism.” Although there are important differences in their analyses, Victoria Hattam and William Forbath suggest that a hostile judiciary forced the American Federation of Labor to abandon the pursuit of political reform. Martin Shefter argues that business unionism allowed the AFL to accommodate a variety of forces—the deskilling of the labor process, the devotion of American workers to the two-party system and local political forces, the concentration of economic power, the failure of political unionism to achieve its goals, the hostility of politicians and the middle class to labor activism, the

²Philip Taft, *The A.F.L. in the Time of Gompers* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), 125–27; Stuart Kaufman, “John McBride’s Presidency of the AFL,” in Kaufman *et al.* eds., *The Samuel Gompers Papers: A National Labor Movement Takes Shape, 1895–1898* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3–8.

³The historiography on labor republicanism is voluminous. See Leon Fink, *Workingman’s Democracy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). Lincoln quotation is cited in David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 110.



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Samuel Gompers

inability of earlier labor organization to maintain effective organizations—that threatened to tear apart organized labor.⁴

In spite of their obvious differences, Voss, Hattam, and Shefter agree that by the early 1890s business unionism held sway. In the words of Shefter, by 1894 American trade unionists “called strikes to extract concessions from employers, not to topple the state; they were prepared to concede control of the nation’s political institutions to the Democratic and Republican parties.”⁵ I disagree, and by examining the career of John McBride, believe it can be seen that through the end of 1895 labor republicanism remained a powerful force in the AFL.

Information about McBride’s early life is sketchy. McBride was born in 1854 in a coal mining village in Wayne County, Ohio, about a dozen miles from the town of Massillon. McBride’s father, Thomas, was an Irish sailor who had emigrated to the United States from Cumberland County, England, in the early 1850s. Thomas had married McBride’s mother, Bridget, before he left England. In the United States Thomas found work as a miner and, for a time, owned a share of a mine not far from Massillon. Thomas was also a labor leader. During the Civil War he was the president of the eastern division of the short-lived American Miners’ Association. In 1859 Thomas McBride moved his family to Massillon, a small industrial town of about 4000 people located in the Tuscarawas Valley along the Ohio Canal in Stark County. The county’s largest city was Canton, located about ten miles to the east. In the years following the Depression of 1873–1877, Massillon and Stark County prospered. The region’s coal mines produced high quality coal which was shipped on the canal either north to Cleveland or south to the iron furnaces along the Tuscarawas and Muskingum rivers. By 1880 Massillon had just under 7000 residents, while in 1890 over 10,000 people inhabited the town.

McBride entered the mines at eight as a water boy. Three years later he was promoted to helper and at age 12 became a full-fledged miner. Around his 18th birthday, McBride joined Newman’s Creek Lodge No. 15 of the Miners’ and Laborers’ Benevolent Association and, soon after, was elected the local’s secretary. A few weeks later the Tuscarawas Valley Miners’ Association selected him to be their secretary. In the mid-1870s McBride joined the Knights of Labor. After playing an active role in local miners’s unions throughout the 1870s, McBride was, in the words of a contemporary, “the leading spirit in organizing” the Ohio Miners’ Union in 1882. McBride became the state union’s first president and was reelected annually until 1889. Under his tenure Ohio miners were the best organized in the nation.⁶

By the early 1880s McBride realized that local or state unions could not be effective in a national economy and sought to create a national miners’s union. In September of

⁴Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 12; Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 101–48; William Forbath, *Law and the Shaping of the American Labor Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Victoria C. Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

⁵Shefter, 101–02. As Hattam points out, Forbath has trouble with timing: “Forbath seems to consider the injunction and the failed attempts to reform it to have been influential in the AFL’s turn to voluntarism. But, as the AFL’s anti-injunction campaign took place between 1906 and 1932, it is difficult to sustain the causal argument, because these were the years in which voluntarism held sway” (Hattam, 165).

⁶*Stark County Democrat*, Sept 2, 1886; *The New York Times*, Feb 23, 1895; *Columbus Dispatch*, Dec. 17, 1894; Robert P. Skinner, “The New President of the American Federation of Labor” *Harper’s Weekly*, 39, Jan. 5, 1895, 4.

1885, McBride called on miners throughout the nation to meet in Indianapolis where they formed the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers. McBride chaired the first convention, and the miners elected him to the executive board. As the National Federation was being formed the leaders of the Knights of Labor were forming a national assembly for coal miners. Hoping to unite the National Federation with the rival Knights, in 1889 McBride led the formation of the Coal Miners' and Laborers' National Progressive Union. The formation of the new union did not heal the split. Unity came a year later when the National Progressive Union and Knights of Labor National Assembly 135 merged to form the UMWA. Although McBride had been the president of the National Progressive Union, he severed formal ties to facilitate the merger. In 1892, however, McBride accepted the presidency.⁷

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Massillon and Stark County residents continued to believe that the United States was, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, a land in which "a prudent penniless beginner in the world labors for wages for a while; saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account for another while, and at length hires a beginner to help him." McBride's father was a prime example. He had come to this country and lived in poverty, yet saved and bought a share in a mine. Andrew Roy, the state mine inspector, called starting a coal mine in Ohio "simple and inexpensive." In much of the eastern third of the state, a person could find an outcropping of coal on the side of a hill and start digging. A few feet into the hill the coal turned "compact and bright, and fit for commercial use." In 1880 more than 100 coal mines occupied the western part of Stark County alone. Although outside capitalists owned the large mines, local residents owned the numerous smaller mines. A large number was owned by farmers who mined part time with the aid of a helper or two.⁸

The decentralized nature of the mining industry and the miner's faith in economic mobility created a labor force that did not see a rigid line dividing labor and capital. In 1886 a committee composed of members of the National Federation of Miners and Mine Laborers and representatives of mine owners announced that:

Apart and in conflict labor and capital become agents of evil while united they create the blessings of plenty and prosperity, and enable a man to enjoy the bounteous resources of nature intended for his use and happiness by the Almighty. Capital represents the accumulated savings of labor, while "labor is the most sacred part of capital".... Capital is entitled to a fair and just remuneration for its risks and its use, and must have security and protection, while labor on the other hand, is as fully and as justly entitled to reward for its toil and its sacrifices.⁹

The belief that there was no inherent conflict between labor and capital led McBride to feel that labor disputes should be solved through negotiation and, if needed, compulsory arbitration. Negotiations in which the participants respected the needs and contributions of the other side would produce agreements that benefited all. Through-

⁷Andrew Roy, *A History of Coal Miners in the United States* (Columbus, OH: Trauger, 1907), 178–261; United Mine Workers of America, *Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Convention of the United Mine Workers of America* (Indianapolis: Cheltenham Press, 1911), 580–581. The UMWA maintained ties to both the AFL and the Knights until February 1895. In fact, McBride was Master Workman of the Knights of Labor National Assembly 135 when he was elected president of the Federation.

⁸Andrew Roy, *The Practical Miners' Companion; or Papers on Geology and Mining in the Ohio Coal Field* (Columbus, OH: Westbote, 1885), 91; William Henry Perrin, ed., *History of Stark County with an Outline Sketch of Ohio* (Chicago: Baskin and Beatty, 1881), 167–68, 402.

⁹Cited in S.M. Jelly, *The Voice of Labor* (Philadelphia: H.J. Smith & Co., 1888), 351–352.

out the 1880s McBride participated in numerous conferences between the miners and the operators held to negotiate a uniform wage scale and was one of labor's most enthusiastic advocates of arbitration. At one conference an operator introduced McBride as the person who "has done more to bring harmonious relations between miners and operators than any other man in the country today."¹⁰

In spite of his faith in negotiation and arbitration, McBride felt that strikes had a legitimate purpose. Through strikes miners could limit production in times of glut, causing the price of coal to rise. This in turn would allow the operators to increase the wages of the miners. McBride saw strikes not as weapons to be used against mine owners, but as a way to insulate both miners and operators from the harsh realities of the market. Indeed, in the mid-1880s McBride and the National Federation saw competitive market forces—not mine owners—as the greatest threat to the welfare of the nation's miners. The preamble of the National Federation's constitution, which McBride drafted, began:

As miners and mine laborers, our troubles are everywhere of a similar character. The inexorable law of supply and demand determine the point where our interests unite. The increased shipping facilities of the last few years have made all of the coal-producing districts competitors in the markets of this country. This has led to indiscriminate cutting of market prices and unnecessary reductions in our wages, which for some time have been far below the living rate. Our wages are not regulated by our skill as workmen, nor by the value of the products of our labor, but by competition with cheaper labor.

McBride put it more succinctly in 1887 when he declared: "The future prospects of the coal miners are anything but encouraging ... the fact cannot be denied that there are too many mines and too many miners."¹¹

Realizing that the oversupply of mines and miners threatened both miners and operators, McBride was at the forefront of efforts to reach an industry-wide agreement to limit competition. Operators could divv up the market geographically to reduce the effects of competition, while an agreement would also equalize wages so that operators would not be forced to compete with one another by cutting wages. Efforts in the 1880s to reach such an agreement always fell short, as there were a few operators who refused to join and lowered prices and wages to capture market share. McBride, though, remained convinced that an agreement could be reached and that most operators wanted to treat their workers with dignity and pay a fair wage.¹²

The nature of the coal industry, "too many mines and too many miners," also made it necessary for miners and their unions to look toward legislation to ameliorate their condition. The competitive environment penalized mine owners who invested in safety equipment or paid miners a decent wage, while rewarding the operators who required long hours and made no investment in safety devices. Aware of these conditions, miners sought to improve working conditions through legislation which would force all operators to incur the costs of creating safe conditions. The National Federation's constitution stated that the organization's first objective was to help miners register to vote so "that we may secure, by the use of the ballot, the services of men friendly to the cause

¹⁰Chris Evans, *History of the United Mine Workers of America* (Indianapolis: United Mine Workers of America, 1918–1920), Vol. 2, 285.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 256–297; John McBride with T.T. O'Malley, "Coal Miners" in George McNeill, ed., *The Labor Movement; The Problem of To-Day* (Boston: Bridgeman & Co., 1887), 254, 267.

¹²Evans, 157–304; McBride, "Coal Miners," 253–267.

of labor.” The second objective was to obtain “legislative enactments for the more efficient management of mines, whereby the lives and health of our members may be preserved.”¹³

The miners’s need for legislation, the centrality of politics to 19th-century life, and personal ambition led McBride into politics. McBride’s belief that conflict between labor and capital was unnatural led him to eschew class-based, political movements during the 1870s and the 1880s. McBride threw in his lot with the Democratic party and in 1881 received the Democratic nomination to represent Stark County in the Ohio House of Representatives. McBride lost the election by 63 votes, but he tried again in 1883 and was elected. The voters of Stark County sent him back to the state capital, Columbus, in 1885.¹⁴

During the mid-1880s McBride called for a *de facto* alliance between labor and the Democratic party. McBride praised the Democratic party as the party of the working-man. In speeches to Ohio miners, McBride enumerated the accomplishments of Democratic-controlled state assemblies: the passage of mine and factory inspection bills; the adoption of a lien law which made it easier for workers to collect wages; the establishment of the Bureau of Labor Statistics; and the abolition of contracting prison labor to private firms. McBride told the miners that the Republicans had promised to pass each of these measures, yet, when in power, they had failed to deliver.

Eastern monied-interests, according to McBride, controlled the Republican party and passed laws to enrich themselves at the expense of the nation’s working people. McBride criticized the Republican-dominated Congress’s funding of the Commissioner of Emigration. McBride argued that the Commissioner of Emigration “legalized slavery” and that mines in Pennsylvania using these workers had “men and women working day and night, side by side, poorly fed, scantily clothed, filthy, depraved, and immoral, working for a mere pittance.” The importation of these workers forced native-born miners to accept miserable conditions. Moreover, the cornerstone of the Republican party’s labor program, a protective tariff, offered no aid to miners as American coal was the cheapest in the world. The tariff raised consumer prices for miners. McBride also blamed the Republican fiscal program for falling wages and labor unrest.¹⁵

In 1886 McBride lobbied for and received the Democratic nomination for Ohio Secretary of State, the state’s second highest office. Ohio’s gubernatorial elections occurred in odd-numbered years, so the secretary of state’s office was the most important position contested in 1886. Many of the party’s leaders, especially those from Cincinnati, opposed McBride’s nomination. Before the 1886 Ohio Democratic convention *The Enquirer*, Cincinnati’s Democratic newspaper, denounced the possible nomination of McBride. The paper’s only stated reason for opposing the nomination was that as a labor leader McBride represented class interests. *The Enquirer* felt that nominating a labor leader would alienate too many people and warned the delegates “that it is not wise to go wandering away after false gods and cranks.” At the convention McBride’s supporters were able to convince the delegates to ignore the pleas of the party’s leadership and nominate McBride.¹⁶

¹³ McBride, “Coal Miners,” 255.

¹⁴ *Stark County Democrat*, Feb. 9, 1886.

¹⁵ John McBride, “The Best of All Yet!: Speech of Hon. John McBride, President of the State Miners’ Union, Delivered to the Miners at Nelsonville, October 4, 1884,” n.p.: n.d.; John McBride, “The Democratic Party the Party of the Workingmen: Speech of the Hon. John McBride at Nelsonville, on Thursday, September 24, 1885,” n.p.: n.d.; McBride, “Coal Miners,” 258.

¹⁶ *Cincinnati Enquirer*, Aug. 16, 1886.

After McBride's nomination, *The Enquirer* simply asserted that the "Democratic Party had made its choice" and "McBride will do." During the campaign the paper offered little aid to the McBride campaign and refused to print the party's slate under its masthead. There were no editorials singing the praises of McBride or denouncing his opponent. Although *The Enquirer* urged Democrats to vote a "clean ticket" and castigated the state's Republican governor, in the week before the election the paper did not even mention McBride by name.

In an age in which politicians relied on party organs to rally the faithful, *The Enquirer's* failure to support McBride spelled failure for his candidacy. Not only was *The Enquirer* the widest read paper in the state, smaller Democratic papers throughout the state reprinted its political coverage. The state's other large Democratic papers, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Columbus Times*, commented on *The Enquirer's* lack of support and did not express much hope for McBride's election. In the end McBride lost the race by over 11,000 votes. In Cincinnati's Hamilton County, which the Democrats had won the year before and had the largest concentration of Democrats in the state, McBride lost by more than 4000 votes.¹⁷ The election of 1886 must have created tensions between McBride and the state's Democratic leadership. In 1884 and 1885 McBride had traveled to mining areas telling crowds that the Democratic party was the party of the workingman, yet when he, a union leader, was nominated the party's leaders failed to support him.

By the early 1890s the ties that bound McBride to the Democratic party were eroding for both political and personal reasons. In Ohio the Democratic party was coming under the increasing influence of United States Senator Calvin Brice and Governor James Campbell. Brice, a railroad president, was a notorious enemy of labor, and labor organizations throughout the state complained that he represented Wall Street, not the state of Ohio. Campbell, who served as governor from 1890 to 1892 and received the party's nomination for governor in 1891 and 1895, alienated miners when he accepted a position on the board of directors of the Hocking Valley Coal and Iron Company, the state's largest coal producer. The company had a history of anti-labor activity stretching back to the 1870s.¹⁸

McBride was probably disappointed with the Cleveland administration for personal reasons. McBride unsuccessfully lobbied the Cleveland administration for a political office. First, he wanted to be appointed U.S. Marshal. Later, McBride asked to replace Carroll Wright as head of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. In both cases the Cleveland administration refused.¹⁹

McBride also must have been alarmed at the economic pressures on coal miners in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Clearly, McBride's alliance with the Democrats was not paying dividends to the miners. McBride told coal miners in Corning, Ohio, that Ohio miners earned an average of \$324 from May 1, 1890 to May 1, 1891. Reformer Edward Bemis compiled Census Bureau statistics and found that 79% of a sample of 500 miners earned less than \$500 in 1890. Bemis suggested that \$530 was the minimum

¹⁷Philip D. Jordan, *Ohio Comes of Age* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1943), 455–59; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 19, Aug. 21, Oct. 25–31, Nov. 1–4, 1886; *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, Aug. 20, 1886; *Columbus Times*, Aug. 20, 1886.

¹⁸*United Mine Workers Journal*, Dec. 31, 1891; *Cleveland Citizen*, Aug. 29, 1891.

¹⁹Skinner, "New President," 4; *Cleveland Citizen*, Mar. 18, 1893.

needed for a family to survive. Bemis contended that the situation for miners got worse in the years after 1890 as miners' wages fell by another 33%.²⁰

The miners were powerless to stop these reductions in wages. Attempts to establish an industry-wide scale of wages and prices failed forcing operators into cut-throat competition. Miners resorted to strikes in hopes of keeping wages high, but the oversupply of both coal and labor gave miners little leverage. From 1886 through 1894 desperate Ohio miners struck 155 times hoping to increase wages. Only nine of these strikes were even partially successful. The other 146 strikes ended in complete failure. During the same period Ohio miners struck 140 times hoping to stop wage reductions. On only one occasion did the miners achieve their goal.²¹

McBride's growing frustration with the Democratic party and the American economic system was evident in his 1891 Labor Day speech to the workers of Findlay, Ohio. McBride warned the crowd of the increasing "oppression from concentrated wealth." He noted that "in the past ten years ... the wealth of the state shows a remarkable increase of \$273,777,949," yet workers were not sharing in the wealth which they were creating. McBride added that during the same decade the value of Ohio farms decreased by \$27,000,000. Whereas in the mid-1880s McBride's speeches at these types of occasions told workers to align with the Democrats, the Findlay speech suggested a new direction. McBride no longer blamed only the Republican party for the misery in workers's lives. Instead, McBride chastised state and national legislatures for the "enactment of laws and the establishment of systems which rob laborers of liberty and reduce them to a condition of serfdom." As McBride and the audience knew, since the mid-1880s these legislatures were as likely to be controlled by Democrats as Republicans. The situation was not hopeless. McBride told the crowd: "Possessed of the ballot, free speech and the right to organize, the workingmen of this country should work out their own salvation." He argued that this salvation would come through the efforts of organized labor: "Within the ranks of the American Federation of Labor, Knights of Labor, the Farmers' Alliance and other labor organizations we find a powerful contingent of intelligence."²²

Shortly before McBride's Findlay speech two of the three labor organizations to which he alluded, the Knights of Labor and the Farmers' Alliance, helped form the People's party. The founders of the People's party felt that a class of wealthy men dominated the national and state governments as well as the two major parties. The wealthy manipulated the government and the nation's financial system to rob the true producers of wealth of their just rewards. The Populists offered a complete platform that they thought would restore the government to the people and allow the nation's producers to keep the wealth which they had created. The platform included the expansion of currency, the prohibition of private bank notes, the free and unlimited coinage of silver, the end of alien land ownership, the passage of a graduated income tax, government control of communication and transportation networks, and the direct election of the president, vice president, and U.S. senators.²³

²⁰*United Mine Workers Journal*, July 28, 1892; Edward W. Bemis, "The Coal Miners' Strike," *Outlook* 49, May (12, 1894), 822-23.

²¹"Tenth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor 1894: Strikes and Lockouts" (Washington, DC Government Printing Office, 1896), Vol. 2, 1785.

²²*United Mine Workers Journal*, Sept. 10, 1891.

²³*Ohio State Journal*, May 21, 1891; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 19-21, 1891.

In the early 1890s the UMWA was moving toward Populism. In December 1891 Ohio miners voted to send delegates to the People's party's St. Louis convention. In the spring of 1894, the UMWA's Indiana district endorsed political action in concert with the People's party. The Indiana miners declared, "The two great political parties, Democrat and Republican, have formed one policy on financial legislation, by which to protect the usurer and money lending class." In Spring Valley, Illinois, miners created a municipal ticket to work with the People's party in local elections. The Spring Valley platform denounced industrial capitalism and declared, "our ultimate aim being the establishment of a co-operative commonwealth." In Ohio's Hocking Valley miners flocked to a joint Socialist Labor party–People's party meeting. Local tickets were almost wholly composed of UMWA members, including A.A. Adams, who would be elected president of the Ohio miners a month later.²⁴

The miners were not alone in moving toward Populism. In 1893 and 1894 labor organizations throughout Ohio and the Midwest were casting their lot with the People's party. Cleveland's Central Labor Union allied itself with the People's party in the Spring of 1893. In February of 1894 Cincinnati's Central Labor Council followed suit. In Illinois, upstate laborites, led by Chicago machinist Thomas Morgan, met with downstate Nationalists, Single Taxers, and Alliance members in hopes of formalizing a state labor–Populist alliance. In March of 1894 Eugene Debs, the president of the American Railway Union, announced to the Terre Haute, Indiana, People's party that he was "an out and out People's party man."²⁵

While Midwest laborites were forming alliances with the Populists at the local and state levels, Thomas Morgan began a movement to take the AFL into an alliance with the People's party. At the 1893 AFL convention Morgan proposed a political program which called for the collective ownership of the means of production and would have committed the Federation to the formation of an independent political party. As Morgan was at the forefront of the movement to create a labor–Populist alliance in Illinois, many delegates interpreted the call for independent political action to mean the formation of an alliance with the People's party. The debate over the program proved to be so contentious that the Federation postponed its consideration for a year. In that year constituent unions were to vote on the program.

At the United Mine Workers 1894 convention, McBride endorsed the AFL's proposed political program. He told the miners that the "only way to deal a death blow to tyranny and oppression as practiced upon wage workers, and give improved wages and conditions to labor's forces, is for the laborers themselves to join in an independent political movement and administer a telling and lasting rebuke to legislative imbecility and administrative corruption." McBride concluded, "the people must either own or control the means of production and distribution or be subjected to the dictation, as they now are, of those who do own and control these two powerful agencies." The convention agreed with McBride and endorsed the entire political program.²⁶ In spite of his declaration in favor of independent political action at the miners' convention, McBride maintained his ties to the Democratic party. His final break with the

²⁴*United Mine Workers Journal*, Sept. 10, 1891, Feb. 15, 22, Mar. 18, 15, 1894.

²⁵*Cleveland Citizen*, Feb. 4, 1893; *Cincinnati Chronicle*, Mar. 1894; Chester McArthur Destler, *American Radicalism, 1865–1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966), 166–211; Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 147.

²⁶*United Mine Workers Journal*, Apr. 12, 1894.

Democrats did not come until August of 1894, after a nationwide miners's strike and the Pullman boycott.

At its 1894 convention, the UMWA voted to launch a nationwide strike to enforce a wage agreement with mine operators. In most areas miners were making less than 60% of the negotiated scale as the Panic of 1893 had cut demand and created an oversupply of coal. McBride knew that the operators would not agree to restore the negotiated scale unless the price of coal increased. Therefore, McBride urged miners to stay on strike as long as they could endure. Then the union would sanction a temporary return to work to enable the miners to recover. Once recovered, the miners would go back on strike. McBride told the convention that this pattern would continue until the coal glut had been eliminated, prices rose, and operators restored the negotiated scale. The convention unanimously agreed to this strategy. At noon on April 21, 1894, 125,000 of the nation's 193,000 bituminous coal miners left the mines and the United States' first nationwide coal strike began. By the middle of May, close to 180,000 miners were on strike.²⁷

McBride realized that for the strike to be successful the flow of coal out of non-striking mines and from existing stockpiles had to be stopped. Only a severe shortage and a rise in coal prices would allow the operators to capitulate. To this end, McBride met with Eugene Debs, the head of the American Railway Union. Debs and McBride agreed that the ARU would refuse to carry non-union coal and, if the ARU went on strike, the UMWA would refuse to provide coal for scab trains.²⁸

By the middle of May, the miners were on the verge of collapse. They had not been paid in over a month, and the hard times that precipitated the strike ensured that miners entered the strike without savings or an adequate food supply. In desperation, miners and railroaders began stopping coal trains heading west from non-union mines in West Virginia, Virginia, and Maryland. The confrontations were concentrated in the railroad towns of southern Illinois, southern Indiana, eastern Ohio, and southwestern Pennsylvania. The railroads and coal companies sought relief through the Federal courts. In Illinois a Federal judge dispatched a U.S. Marshal and deputies to Coal City and Steator to make sure that the trains moved. In Terre Haute railroad lawyers secured an injunction preventing miners and railroaders from blocking the shipment of coal. In Ohio Judge William Howard Taft issued a similar injunction.²⁹

Just as disturbing for McBride was the willingness of mine operators to take advantage of the strike to sell their stockpiles of coal at a premium. McBride's unionism was rooted in the belief that there was a harmony of interests existing between miners and operators. The miners had undertaken the strike to raise coal prices for the benefit of both miners and operators, but while miners were on the verge of starvation, the operators acted out of self-interest. Operators profited from the strike-created rise in coal prices, yet they continued to insist that miners accept a reduced scale. At a conference of miners and operators held to end the strike, McBride exploded in rage

²⁷Bemis, 822-23; *United Mine Workers Journal*, Apr. 12, 1894; "Address of Ex-President McBride"; Andrew Roy, *History of Coal Miners*, 302-11.

²⁸*Columbus Dispatch*, May 22, 1894. The parallels between the lives of McBride and Debs are striking. Both were sons of immigrants who grew up in small Midwestern cities and led efforts to organize industrial unions. They mixed Democratic politics with union activity and served in state legislatures. Both ran unsuccessfully for state-wide office in the mid 1880s. Feeling the Democratic party had sold its soul to Wall Street, both men turned to Populism in 1893 or 1894. See Salvatore, 3-177.

²⁹*The New York Times*, June 5, 1894; *United Mine Workers Journal*, June 14, 21, 1894.

after hearing the operators' proposal. He suggested that the operators' selfishness made any settlement "utterly impractical" and walked out of the talks.³⁰

Throughout the region governors called out troops for the stated purpose of protecting property, but the troops were often used to break up demonstrations and rallies. Ohio's Governor William McKinley dispatched so many troops that the state of Ohio did not have enough money to pay the soldiers. To solve this problem Columbus banks with ties to local coal syndicates advanced the state the needed money. McBride and the miners saw the cooperation between the bankers and McKinley and between the railroads and Federal judges as further evidence that the national and the state governments were nothing more than instruments of corporate interests.³¹

Unable to stop the flow of coal out of non-striking mines, McBride knew that the miners could not win and the continuation of the strike would serve no purpose. In June of 1894, the United Mine Workers and the operators agreed to a new, lower scale. This new scale did not last as operators cut wages even further in the summer of 1894.

In July of 1894, on the heels of the miners' strike, the American Railway Union agreed to assist the striking Pullman workers. The ARU announced a nationwide boycott of Pullman cars. The boycott was a disaster. Federal judges issued injunctions forbidding the boycott, and Cleveland's Attorney General, a former railroad lawyer, ordered federal troops to ensure that the trains continued to run. Debs and ARU leaders were thrown in Federal prison for violating an injunction. The actions of the Cleveland administration during the Pullman strike reinforced McBride's belief that the Democratic party had become antagonistic to the interests of labor.³²

After the miners' strike and the Pullman boycott, McBride made his final break with the Democratic party by resigning his membership in Columbus's local Democratic club. A week later, in early August 1894, McBride announced the formation of a state labor party. He told the state's workers that "corporate power, when aided and abetted by the executive, judicial, and military arm of the state and national governments, can and will override the rights of our people and oppress wage workers, regardless of the efforts of organized labor, as now constituted and directed, to prevent it." For McBride it was "evident that labor cannot hope for relief at the hands of either the Republican or Democratic party." McBride scheduled the new party's first convention on the eve of the Ohio People's party convention in hopes that a merger could be worked out. The response to McBride's call was tremendous. Locals unions sent over 150 delegates to the convention. Although the UMWA and the American Railway Union sent the largest contingents, delegates represented locals from almost every craft and trade. The central labor bodies of Columbus, Toledo, Zanesville, and Springfield endorsed McBride's move and dispatched members to the convention. Although the central bodies of Cleveland and Cincinnati endorsed McBride's move, they did not send delegations as they had already formed alliances with the People's party.³³

³⁰Evans, Vol. 2, 304–320. While most of the operators sought to profit from the strike, a few sided with the miners. A New Straitsville, Ohio, coal company continued to pay its miners during the strike even though no coal was dug. The miners made repairs to the mine and were paid union scale for the work. Other operators were extremely furious that their fellow operators were selling coal during a strike designed to eliminate a glut and raise prices. *Columbus Post Press*, May 16, 1894; *New Lexington (Ohio) Tribune*, April 25, 1894.

³¹*United Mine Workers Journal*, June 14, 21, 1894.

³²*Ibid.*, July 12, Aug. 9, 23, 1894. For the Pullman boycott see Salvatore, 114–146.

³³*Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 1894; *Columbus Dispatch*, Aug. 8, 14, 16, 17, 1894.

On August 15, McBride opened the convention by telling the crowd that capital's use of the labor injunction "will allow only one kind of strike on the part of labor, and that strike must be with the ballot box." The convention adopted a broad political platform that demanded the free and unlimited coinage of silver; the nationalization of telegraph, telephone, mines, and railroads; a form of the single tax; compulsory school attendance; an eight-hour work day; and restriction of "undesirable" immigration. McBride's platform also offered a qualified endorsement of collective ownership:

We believe that the power of the government should be expanded as rapidly and as far as the good sense of intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify along the lines of collective ownership by the people of all such means of production and distribution as the people may elect to operate.³⁴

The next day McBride sat under a tree with Jacob Coxey and the other leaders of Ohio's People's party and convinced them to adopt the labor party's platform. The merger effectively transformed the Ohio People's party into a labor party. Not only did the state's largest union, the United Mine Workers, support the People's party, but so did the central labor bodies of the state's three largest cities—Cleveland, Cincinnati and Columbus. The state's farmers, on the other hand, demonstrated little enthusiasm for Populism and remained loyal to the traditional parties.³⁵

Three months after the merger of McBride's labor party with Ohio's People's party, the AFL held its annual convention in Denver. The convention promised to be divisive as it was due to consider a political program that would have committed the AFL to independent political action. The political program was nearly identical to McBride's party platform. There was one difference. Whereas the AFL's program called for the "collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution," McBride's party platform offered a qualified endorsement. The political program had been proposed during the 1893 convention, but due to its controversial nature the convention postponed consideration for a year. During that year delegates were to take the program to their individual unions for consideration.

Although only four of the AFL's constituent unions had failed to endorse the political program prior to the convention, Gompers opposed parts of the program. Gompers disliked the preamble which called for the adoption of the "principle of independent labor politics," and plank ten calling for the "collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution." In opening the 1894 convention Gompers told the delegates that "[i]t would be ridiculous to imagine that wage-workers can be slaves

³⁴ *Columbus Dispatch*, Aug. 16, 1894; *United Mine Workers Journal*, Aug. 23, 1894. McBride lifted much of the quotation from the People's party's Omaha platform of 1892. The platform states: "We believe that the powers of the government—in other words of the people—should be expanded (as in the case of the postal service) as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice and poverty shall eventually cease in the land." McBride, though, mentioned "collective ownership," a term that the People's party avoided for fear that it would splinter the party.

³⁵ The Ohio Farmers' Alliance, the Ohio State Grange, and the Ohio Farmers' Union refused to endorse the state's People's party. For the attitudes of Ohio farmers toward the People's Party, see Michael Pierce, "Farmers and the Failure of Populism in Ohio, 1890–1891," *Agricultural History*, 74 (Winter 2000).

in employment and yet achieve control at the polls” and that partisan politics led to “misery, deprivation, and demoralization.”³⁶

Although the supporters of the political program were called socialists, they really came from two distinct groups—Midwestern labor–Populists and East-Coast Socialist Labor Party (SLP) followers. This same coalition ousted Terrence Powderly from his position as Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor in 1893. As the Knights’ experience has demonstrated this was an uneasy alliance. The Midwest labor–Populists—McBride, Morgan, William Mahon, Phil Penna, Patrick McBryde—blended Jefferson’s republicanism, Jackson’s fear of monopoly, and Lincoln’s faith in free labor to create a powerful critique of industrial capitalism. With their roots in antebellum political thought, the labor populists were willing to compromise with farmers, small businessmen, and even professional politicians. The Socialists, led by John Tobin and J. Mahlon Barnes, were schooled in various strands of European socialism and were less willing to compromise with other classes. SLP leader Daniel DeLeon saw socialism and Populism as fundamentally incompatible and disparaged the People’s party as a bourgeois party of small farmers.³⁷

Gompers and his allies set out to defeat what they saw as the two most pernicious parts of the program—the call for collective ownership and the creation of a labor-based political party. Gompers used his power as chairman to limit debate, while his allies offered amendments designed to prevent the passage of the program. Early in the debate the delegates decided to vote on the planks individually instead of the program as a whole. Adolph Strasser, a cigarmaker and long-time ally of Gompers, attacked the preamble which called for the Federation to emulate British trade unionists by creating an independent labor party. Strasser told the convention that the preamble misrepresented the actions of the British labor movement as there is no independent labor party in Britain. Strasser did not attack the idea of independent politics, but just the characterization of British action. By asserting that the preamble mischaracterized the British situation, Strasser gave delegates who opposed independent political action, but represented unions on record as supporting the political program, justification to vote down the preamble. Strasser’s motion carried 1345 to 861, and the preamble was defeated.³⁸

The delegates approved the first nine planks of the program before turning to plank ten which called for the “collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution.” As soon as it was introduced, opponents rose to offer substitutes in the hope of diluting the amendment. In the end the opponents of plank ten were able to secure passage of a substitute that called for “the abolition of the monopoly system of land holding.”

Debate around the preamble and plank ten proved to be so contentious that even supporters, including McBride’s closest allies, feared that their passage could splinter the AFL. N.R. Hysell, a UMWA delegate, warned the convention: “You adopt this plank [ten] and you will break up the unions.” Patrick McBryde, the secretary of the UMWA, told the convention that he intended to vote for plank ten, but hoped to see it defeated. He feared that the opponents of plank ten would not be able to accept

³⁶American Federation of Labor, *Report of the Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor, 1894* (Bloomington, In 1905), 14.

³⁷On the SLP and Populism see Howard Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism; Origins of the Modern Movement* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1953), 210–247.

³⁸AFL, *A Verbatim Report of the Discussion on the Political Programme, at the Denver Convention of the American Federation of Labor, December 14, 15, 1894* (New York: The Freytag Press, 1895), 4.

defeat as well as the supporters of plank ten could. William Mahon, who headed of the street car employees's union and helped organize McBride's Ohio labor party, felt that transforming the Federation into a political party would have precipitated a split in the Federation just like it had in the Knights of Labor. He declared, "I have been in independent politics and never lost an opportunity to get on the stand and plead for independent political action.... but [I] don't intend to do anything that will destroy this great machine."³⁹

After the defeat of the original plank ten the convention turned its attention to the election of a president. McBride had challenged Gompers in 1893 and lost 1314 to 1222. McBride had reason to hope that he would defeat Gompers in 1894. By endorsing the political program and a labor-populist alliance, McBride helped to differentiate himself from Gompers. Moreover, many delegates criticized Gompers for his failure to aid Debs during the Pullman boycott. Other delegates viewed Gompers as too powerful and wanted to see new blood in the Federation. In the end McBride defeated Gompers by a vote of 1170 to 976. Although delegates voted for McBride for a number of reasons, it is clear that the most vocal supporters of the political program supported McBride, while the most outspoken opponents of the program supported Gompers. Upon taking office McBride predicted, "I trust and expect to see a great union of labor men before another year, and believe that we shall place a presidential candidate in the field."⁴⁰

In spite of McBride's desire to see the Federation enter into the political arena, he announced a policy of moderation. Not only fearful of breaking up the fragile Federation, McBride was constrained by the convention's failure to pass the preamble and plank ten. Seeking to reassure those who feared that he was too radical, McBride told reporters that he was only a "limited socialist" in that he thought that the "government should ... take charge of such productions as the people may elect to operate. That leaves the opening broad enough to admit or exclude anything." McBride later suggested that taking the Federation into politics would be "very foolish and almost suicidal" under present circumstances. McBride told the readers of the *American Federationist* that he was aware that there had been "much speculation" and "great anxiety" concerning the direction that the Federation would take during his tenure. He reassured the readers: "I shall be guided by the constitutional provisions of the American Federation of Labor, and in all important cases not covered by constitutional provisions, will be governed by my own judgment and the directing advice of the Executive Council."⁴¹ In spite of these attempts to reassure the conservative forces within the Federation, McBride never suggested that he had retreated from his earlier beliefs or that he did not desire to take the Federation into politics.

The composition of the AFL's Executive Council made moderation McBride's only choice. Five of the six members of the Executive Council had supported Gompers at the 1894 convention and were committed to economic action. Led by P.J. McGuire,

³⁹ *Verbatim Report*, 40, 44, 50-51.

⁴⁰ All five delegates who argued for passage of the preamble voted for McBride. Only one of the seven delegates who spoke against the preamble voted for McBride. Of the eight delegates who spoke in favor of plank ten, seven voted for McBride. Only three of the sixteen delegates who spoke in opposition to plank ten voted for McBride. Of the 23 delegates who voted for both the passage of the preamble and the retention of the original plank ten, 19 were for McBride. Nine of those 19 delegates represented unions that voted for Gompers in 1893. *Verbatim Report*, *passim*; *National Labor Tribune*, Jan. 10, 1895.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 27, 1894; *Columbus Dispatch*, Jan. 29, 1895; McBride, "Our Official Policy," *American Federationist*, 1 (Feb. 1895), 282.

the first vice-president, Gompers's supporters kept a close eye on McBride. The simple act of McBride writing an article supporting compulsory arbitration provoked an angry response from McGuire who noted that the Federation's 1893 convention had rejected compulsory arbitration. For McBride to have worked toward the establishment of a political party would have surely provoked more than an angry letter from McGuire.⁴²

Scandal also cut down McBride's effectiveness as a leader. At the annual UMWA convention, the president of the Ohio miners, A.A. Adams, charged McBride and the leaders of the UMWA with selling out the miners during the strike of 1894. With these charges came rumors of bribery. The convention appointed a committee to investigate Adams' charges, and the committee concluded that there was no evidence to substantiate the charges. During the investigation, Mark Wild, an organizer for the ARU, levied new charges against McBride. Wild accused McBride of giving him \$600 to bring about the settlement of the Hocking Valley Railway Strike in the summer of 1894.⁴³

While the UMWA launched an investigation of Wild's charges, McBride told the convention that he had given Wild the money, but that it had been collected after the strike had been settled. McBride said that the money, about a year's salary, had come from the Hocking Valley coal operators who knew that Wild was destitute yet had settled the strike knowing that he would be blacklisted. The operators felt that McBride, as a labor leader, would be the proper conduit for the money. The UMWA investigation committee concluded that there was no evidence that McBride had bribed Wild. Calling the decision a "Scotch verdict"—guilty, but not proven—McBride demanded that the committee continue its investigation. In the end the miners cleared McBride of all charges.

In addition to being an organizer for the ARU, Wild served as president of the Columbus Trades and Labor Assembly. After the UMWA convention vindicated McBride, Wild asked the Columbus Trades and Labor Assembly to investigate the charges. Wild said that the UMWA had labeled him a bribe taker and, if this was true, that he was unfit to serve as the Assembly's president. After much debate the Trades and Labor Assembly opened an investigation. News of the charges circulated, and opponents of McBride within the Federation demanded an investigation. The AFL's executive council sent P.J. McGuire to Columbus to work with the local investigating committee. McBride was not cleared of the charges until December when McGuire concluded that he found no evidence "that John McBride had betrayed the interests of organized labor, or been guilty of corrupt practices as alleged by Mark Wild or others."⁴⁴

Soon after the UMWA's convention, McBride's health deteriorated. In October 1894 McBride had been stricken with nicotine poisoning. This illness kept him from attending the AFL's convention, yet he recovered in time to take office. In the middle of February McBride fell ill with the "grippe" and suffered a relapse of nicotine poisoning. Doctors ordered McBride to take a six-week cure at Hot Springs, Arkansas. In his absence McBride delegated his authority to James Duncan, the AFL's second vice president. Duncan's appointment provoked a controversy. In making the appointment McBride bypassed the Federation's first vice president P.J. McGuire, a close associate of Gompers and the man dispatched to investigate the Wild charges. Execu-

⁴²P.J. McGuire to August McCraith, Feb. 18, 1895, cited in Taft, 127.

⁴³*Columbus Dispatch*, Feb. 14, 15; Mar. 12; May 10, 1895; *National Labor Tribune*, Feb. 21, 1895.

⁴⁴AFL, "National Executive Council Minutes", Apr. 24; Dec. 9, 1895.

tive Council member John Lennon complained that McBride had no authority to appoint his replacement “without the consent of the proper authority of the union.”⁴⁵

When McBride recovered from his illness, he found that the AFL’s finances were in trouble. In the first three months of 1895 the Federation spent \$5490.66 while taking in only \$2406.44. Most of the \$3084.22 deficit was the result of “extra expenses”—lobbying for the Seamen’s Bill, moving the Federation’s offices from New York to Indianapolis, a contribution to the Debs defense fund, and publication of the debate over the political program. August McCraith, the Federation’s secretary, concluded, “we have no money for special appropriations or anything of a costly nature.” The Federation’s financial straits kept McBride in Indianapolis and deprived him of the opportunity of using the presidency as a bully pulpit to spread his brand of unionism.⁴⁶

Toward the end of summer and into the fall, McBride’s criticisms of capitalism and the American political system grew more pointed. In the August 1895 *American Federationist*, McBride’s editorial called for the restructuring of the American financial system. He told the readers: “the remonetization of silver ... would, under existing conditions, only act as a palliative and reduce rather than remove the defects in our system of finance from which labor suffers the most.” Although offering no specific program he concluded: “We must take from speculators, bankers and brokers the power to control our medium of exchange before interest can be reduced to a minimum, usury be wiped out, and business done upon a cash rather than a credit basis.”⁴⁷

In the *American Federationist*’s October issue McBride attacked the rising economic inequality of the late 19th century. Using census figures, he argued that in 1850 American workers owned 62.5% of the nation’s wealth, while the “non-producers” controlled only 37.5% of the wealth. By 1890 workers controlled only 17% of the nation’s wealth, while “non-producers” controlled 83%. He blamed the change on “governmental favoritism to capital and the indifference and neglect of wage workers to the system of robbery.” McBride then documented the increasing of criminal activity from 1850–1890 and concluded, “Capitalism, pauperism and crime go hand in hand, and the history of the world evidences the fact that wherever the former increases the two latter spread and flourish.” Quoting Noah Webster as saying, “An equal distribution of property is the foundation of the republic,” McBride announced, “It is time the foundation was commenced.” As a first step McBride recommended the nationalization of railroads, telegraphs, telephones, and mines as well as municipal ownership of street cars and gas, water, and electric plants.⁴⁸

By fall the AFL’s improved financial situation allowed McBride to tour the northeast. In every speech, according to the *Cleveland Citizen*, McBride “spoke in favor of independent political action along the lines of Populism.” In Pittsburgh he declared: “Corporate power must be dethroned and the people become the owners of all public necessities.” The way to achieve this was clear: “If you want to restrict the privileges and abuses of capital you must pursue a different course in your trade unions, and I say to you it has come when labor must shake off partisan shackles and be free men. Be patriots, not partisans ... If I had my way there would be a labor party that would sweep

⁴⁵*American Federationist*, 2 (March 1895); John Lennon to August McCraith, Feb. 27, 1895; John Lennon to John McBride, Feb. 27, AFL Records, Microfilm edition, reel 143.

⁴⁶“National Executive Council Minutes,” April 22–24, 1894; AFL, *Report of the Proceedings of the Annual Convention of the American Federation of Labor, 1895* (Bloomington, IN: Pantagraph, 1905), 12.

⁴⁷McBride, “The Kind of Money Needed,” *American Federationist* 2 (August 1895), 106–107.

⁴⁸McBride, “Producers vs. Non-Producers,” *American Federationist* 2 (October 1895), 144–145.

all evils from the land.” McBride concluded, “You can’t strike a blow by strike or shot—you can’t repeal a law by a boycott, but you can rout corporate power by intelligent use of the ballot.”⁴⁹

In early December 1894 the *Chicago Tribune* billed the upcoming AFL convention as a “fight to the finish” between the radical McBride and the conservative Gompers. The paper boldly predicted that “upon the outcome of the struggle will depend largely the future of organized labor in this country.” Commentators expected a close race. While McBride had the advantage of incumbency, Gompers had reason to be hopeful that he could return to the Federation’s top office. McBride had alienated a couple of unions that had supported him the year before. McBride accused the head of the Brewery Workers of having a “distorted brain.” Later he told the head of the International Machinists’ Union: “writing me as you do you simply exposed your ignorance as an official and gave evidence of your boorishness as a man.” Gompers had spent a good part of 1895 traveling the nation on behalf of the garment workers. He made hundreds of speeches, while McBride remained in Indianapolis.⁵⁰

Before the convention the coalition of midwestern Populists and east coast Socialists that had put McBride into office showed signs of coming apart. J. Mahlon Barnes and John Tobin were disappointed with McBride. His year in office did not produce the anticipated results. Not only was McBride’s administration beset by scandal, financial difficulties, and health problems, it was constrained by the fragile nature of the Federation and the 1894 convention’s defeat of the preamble calling for the creation of a labor party. The Socialists talked of nominating Tobin to run against McBride, but on the eve of the convention decided to back McBride.⁵¹

Possibly trying to attract undecided delegates, McBride moderated his rhetoric at the convention. He continued to stress the need for political action on the part of organized labor. He declared, “The self evident truth confronts us that wage workers cannot hope to be free in the shops, mines and factories while trudging in party slavery to the polls.” Yet he retreated from his call for the creation of a labor party. McBride realized that organized labor did “not agree as to the scope of the political work needed” or “the methods employed in political reform work.” As such he told the delegates: “*At this time* it is not independent party, but independent voting that will accomplish beneficial and speedy results” (my emphasis).⁵²

On the afternoon of the convention’s fourth day, Barnes introduced a resolution stating “[t]hat it is as clearly the duty of union workingmen to organize and maintain a political party devoted exclusively to their own interests as to organize in trade and labor unions.” As it did with all of the resolutions, the convention sent Barnes’s resolution to the Resolutions Committee. Delegates would not vote on the resolution until the convention’s eighth day.⁵³ Although Barnes’s exact intention remains unknown, clearly the passage of the resolution would have given McBride the authority to move the Federation into partisan politics if elected to a second term. Barnes’s original resolution can best be understood as the second step in a process to provide McBride the constitutional justification to steer the AFL into partisan politics. The first step was the reelection of McBride.

⁴⁹*Cleveland Citizen*, Nov. 16, 1895; *National Labor Tribune*, Oct. 31, 1895.

⁵⁰*New York Press*, July 21, 1895; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December, 1895 clipping found in the AFL records; *Cleveland Citizen*, Nov. 9, 1895.

⁵¹*The New York Times*, Dec. 10–12, 1895.

⁵²*Proceedings*, 1895, 15–16.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 53, 77.

The presidential election took place in the afternoon of the convention's sixth day. When the votes were counted, Gompers eked out a victory 1041–1023. The press reports confirmed that those favoring independent political action voted for McBride, while the dyed-in-the-wool trade unionists supported Gompers. The vote was so close that it turned on a number of smaller issues. The brewery workers, whose leadership McBride had insulted, had supported McBride in 1894 and favored independent political action, yet cast 60 votes for Gompers in 1895. James Gelson, delegate of the Printing Pressmen's union, had planned to cast his 25 votes for McBride, yet became ill on the morning of the election and could not cast the votes.⁵⁴ Gompers's reelection thwarted the ambitions of the political unionists. Gompers remained opposed to any sort of partisan political activity, and, as president, he could effectively block the movement of the Federation into the political arena.

Two days after McBride's defeat the convention considered Barnes's resolution, but with the election of Gompers the issue became meaningless. Opponents of political action rose and offered a substitute, declaring "party politics whether they be democratic, republican, socialistic, populist, prohibition or any other, should have no place in the conventions of the A.F.L." Political unionists put up almost no fight. Only Tobin voiced opposition to the substitute accusing the traditional parties of "perpetuating the wage system." In the end the resolution passed by a lopsided margin, 1460 to 158. Delegates representing close to 500 votes did not bother to cast ballots. Some delegates who had vocally supported political action, like Phil Penna and Patrick McBryde, perhaps out of a desire for unity, voted for the resolution, while other supporters of political action, like Tobin and Mahon, simply did not vote.⁵⁵

Historians have pointed to the lopsided passage of the resolution as the death of political unionism. This is not the case. The real test of the strength of political unionism and producerism at the 1895 convention was the McBride–Gompers contest. Gompers alluded to this after the convention. In an editorial in the *American Federationist*, Gompers noted that many people considered "my election ... as squelching and annihilating a certain school of thought in the American Federation of Labor." In a private letter he suggested that his election was a referendum "upon the issue that party politics should have no place in our Federation." Gompers made no reference to the vote prohibiting partisan activity in the Federation. Clearly, for Gompers the contest with McBride was the decisive vote in the defeat of political unionists at the 1895 convention.⁵⁶ If the test of the strength of political unionists at the 1895 convention was the McBride–Gompers contest, then political unionists were stronger than historians have argued. Only the illness of the Printing Pressman's delegate secured victory for Gompers.

After his defeat McBride announced his resignation from union politics in order to devote his energies to the People's party and journalism. He returned to Columbus and transformed a local paper into a labor weekly. No copies of this weekly survive and McBride's paper trail all but vanishes. The weekly folded by the turn of the century, and McBride opened a saloon. McBride never reentered politics. After the fusion of 1896, he probably was not welcomed back into the Democratic party.⁵⁷

To understand the triumph of business unionism in the American labor movement

⁵⁴*The New York Herald*, Dec. 15, 1895.

⁵⁵*Proceedings*, 1895, 79–80.

⁵⁶*American Federationist*, 2 (February 1896), 224–225; Gompers to W.H. Milburn Sept. 23, 1896.

⁵⁷*Patterson Labor Standard*, Jan. 4, 1896.

and the conservative nature of American politics in this century, historians have to be aware that through the end of 1895 producerism and political unionism remained powerful forces in the Federation. If anything, producerism reached its peak in the AFL in 1894 and 1895, the very time that Voss, Hattam, and Shefter claim that business unionism had triumphed. By emphasizing forces external to the labor movement (e.g., the rise of big business, the hostility of the courts, the devotion of workers to political forces) these historians have missed the most important threat to Gompers-style unionism that the early AFL faced. By looking at what happened to the coalition of forces that put McBride in office—Eastern Socialists and Midwestern Populists—after the convention of 1895, historians will have a better handle on the triumph of business unionism.