POLES AND THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT©

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The first wave of Polish immigrants who came to the United States in the period immediately after the U.S. Civil War came largely from Wielkopolska with significant numbers of Kaszubs and Silesians. The majority of these immigrants came in family groups and had some kinds of skills such as tailoring, cigar making or sought to get into farming. Many came with the desire from the beginning to settle permanently in the United States.

Later immigrants primarily from Krolewstwo (Russian Poland) or Galicja (Austrian Poland) came as labor migrants. The majority came alone and many were single men. Increasingly by the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century young single women also joined the emigrant stream. Most of the later immigrants were unskilled rural people. The industry, which drew the largest number of these immigrants initially, was the mining industry. Pennsylvania, West Virginia and southern Ohio drew the most. By 1900 over 20% of all Polish immigrants in the United States were in Pennsylvania.

Polish immigration to the United States before 1914

2,230,000 – 2,500,000

From German Poland

450,000 – 500,000	To 1914 – Total
300,000 – 350,000	1850 – 1890
120,000	1891 – 1914
50,000	After 1900

From Austrian Poland

850,000	To 1914 – Total
150,000	To 1891
700,000	1891 – 1914

From Russian Poland

900,000	To 1914 – Total
50,000	To 1891
850,000	1891 – 1914
	(Most after 1900)

The great wave of Polish immigration came to the United States when industrial work was changing dramatically. Skilled workers were being replaced more and more by systems and machinery that broke up complex tasks into multiple single operations which could be performed by unskilled workers. The control of work was taken away from the worker and vested in the engineers who created the systems and the foremen who ran them. As the 19th century ended and the 20th century began Polish immigrants were drawn into these new mass production industries.

It is important to note that a significant number of Polish immigrants were sojourners who came to earn money to improve their lives or the lives of their families in Europe rather than to settle here. Many sojourners eventually decided to settle in the United States, but at least a third returned to their homes after a stay or several stays in America. The First World War and its aftermath extended the stay of many who would have returned and thus transformed them into immigrants.

A Polish immigrant's song tells the plight of these sojourners. This is a song about an immigrant who returned home after three years in America.

"*And my children did not know me*

They fled from me a stranger,

My dear children, I'm your papa

Three long years I have not seen you."

Right from the beginning of their stay in America Poles were willing to engage in "labor actions" and "work stoppages" in cases where they saw their treatment as unjust. Something called the "Polish strike" emerged in the industrial belt by the 1880's. It was described by observers and industrialists as a sudden, unexpected work stoppage by Polish workers. Because the bosses did not see any signs of unrest or receive complaints prior to the action, Poles got a reputation as mercurial and anarchic people. These actions were born out of the community action rather than any labor organization.

Most early American unions were trade unions for skilled workers and so aside from the fact that Poles were immigrants who were not always welcomed by American workers, they also did not have the skills which would gain them entry into the unions.

There were, however, already several Polish speaking Knights of Labor chapters in Milwaukee and Detroit by the mid 1880's.

Poles also flocked to the miner's union which opened its doors to immigrants and African Americans before the turn of the 20th century.

In the early twentieth century Poles also joined new unions in meat packing, steel and in the cigar and garment industries. Detroit was one of the major centers for the cigar industry and almost all of the cigar factories were located in the Polish neighborhoods on the city's east and west sides. (There were 240 cigar factories in the city by 1901.) Polish workers, especially women, were the largest group in the garment factories in Milwaukee and Chicago, such as Hart Shaffner and Marx.

During the early violent phase of industrialization Polish workers were often victims:

- Plow works in South Bend 1884 – 1885
- Steel rolling mills in Cleveland in 1885 and Milwaukee in 1886
- Anthracite coal fields in northeast Pennsylvania in 1887 and 1896
- Public works construction in Lemont, Illinois in 1893 and Detroit in 1894
- Railroads and steel in Chicago from 1894 to 1886
- Farm laborers in Hawaii 1888 – 1889
- Dockworkers in Buffalo 1899
- Meatpacking in Chicago 1904 and 1921 – 1922
- Sugar refineries in Brooklyn 1907, 1910 and 1917
- Jute mills in Brooklyn 1910
- Oil refineries in New Jersey 1915 – 1916

Examples:

Latimer 1897

19 dead and at least 39 wounded: 26 Poles, 20 Slavs and 5 Lithuanians

Lemont 1893

6 Poles dead and about 20 wounded

One of the earliest cases in which African Americans were used against Polish workers.

In response to the new Urban industrial order, Poles created a new "family economy" that included the ability to get a secure job as well as to procure jobs for children and relatives, pooling of all resources to buy a family home, and amassing funds to collectively create and support an infrastructure that included a parish church and school, halls, religious and patriotic societies, insurance fraternals, banks, hospitals and newspapers

This community and neighborhood along with the family became the major support of the of the workers during strikes, lay offs, industrial accidents, illness and death.

One of the things which surprised observers was the active role women and families played in the strikes in support of the men. American commentators never clearly understood how much these struggles were communal.

For example, in Hartford, in 1915, Polish and other Slavic women took to the streets in support of a baker's strike to help the workers hold out for a wage settlement that would include a promise by the owners not to raise the price of bread to pay for the raise. In the bloody battles in the coals fields, the women fought with skill and courage in support of their men.

In the wake of the Latimer massacre in the Pennsylvania anthracite field in 1897, "Big Mary" Septek led a "wild band of women" armed with clubs, rolling pins and pokers who waged a guerrilla war against strikebreakers. In one incident they routed over two hundred male washery workers. It finally required the intervention of state militia to end the so-called "foreign women raids".

The incidents bewildered the authorities. General Gobin, charged with maintaining order, was "in a quandary over the foreign women raids" and the problem of how to deal with the "Amazons". *The Wilkes Barre Record* criticized the unseemly behavior of immigrant femininity:

"The appearance of women as a factor in a coal region strike is a novelty of not very pleasing nature. Those who have made themselves so conspicuous the past week in . . . the Hazelton region were the wives, mothers and sisters of the strikers, and it is assumed that they had to sanction of the husbands, sons and brothers in their ill-advised and unwomanly demonstrations."

The reporter mourned the passing of better times when "such scenes would have been impossible in the troubles between capital and labor . . . when our mines were manned by English-speaking men. This . . . is only another . . . forcible illustration of the great change that has taken place in these coal regions since the importations of cheap European labor commenced."

During the 1910 strike in a Brooklyn sugar refinery when threatening shots were fired at strikers, women rushed into the streets holding their children on high and daring the police to shoot. Frank Renkiewicz in his study of Polish American workers notes that during the strikes: "Time and again women, wives usually, bolstered the flagging spirits of their men and took the led in demonstrations and in sustaining resistance.

In many cases, the women acted on their own behalf as workers and family wage earners. It was the walkout of the Polish women weavers in response to a pay cut that sparked the famous Lawrence Strike of 1912.

Polish immigrant women showed the greatest energy and boldness when they were involved both as workers and as the defenders of their families and communities. No incident makes that more clear that the rioting in the Back-of-the-Yards during the great Chicago packinghouse strike of 1921-1922 when the employers sought to cut wages and break the union.

The ferocity of the attacks by Polish women on Police and strikebreakers astounded even the Polish press, as the following excerpts from the Dziennik Chicagoski indicate:

- "Many women participated in the rioting this morning and they withstood the onslaught of the police longer than the men."
- "The women who lead the males with the cry "beat the Cossacks" threw themselves at the police."

- "Amidst the crowds, women with ruffled hair, torn dresses and ragged skirts could be seen scuffling with the police as they tried to break up the gangs."
- "One of the women workers, Mary Buczynska, pounced upon policemen Mueller and Jungblut. The crowd dragged them from their motorcycles and beat them."
- "The women with bags full of pepper, flung the powder into the eyes of the police horses, rendering them temporarily blind."

A second important encounter took place at 49th Street and Racine Avenue. Here again a woman, Miss Sophia Horoszka, threw herself at five policemen who were patrolling the area. One of the officers fell to the ground as he was struck on the head with a club. Meanwhile, Miss Horoszka escaped with her colleagues. When police attempted to extricate her from one of the houses, they were showered with pepper. However, after a long battle the police succeeded in making the arrest.

A woman was arrested at 49th and Racine Avenue when she flung an empty bottle at a mounted policeman, striking him with such force that he dropped to the street.

Women took about half the casualties and suffered about as many arrests as the men in the failed struggle. They also took a major share in the organizational effort. More that 40% of the strike relief committee, for example, was made up of women workers. They were also one-third of the committee to aid the strikers created by the Business Association of the Town of Lake, made up of Polish businessmen.

The post-World War I period saw the decline or breaking of many of the unions that Polish immigrants were involved in, especially meat packing and steel. A second upsurge of union organizing activity took place in the 1930's. It was triggered by the Great Depression which had a devastating effect on American Polonia.

The Great Depression, like nothing before it, attacked two of the most important pillars of Polish American working class life: a secure job and a homestead. These had provided the fabric of respectability, pride and dignity that held the community together. A threat to jobs and homes also threatened all of the other institutions of the community, including the parish.

The records of one large Polish American parish at the heights of the depression in 1933 showed that 75% of the parishioners gave less than $10 that year and 18% (71 families) gave less than a dollar. Only 2% or eight parishioners gave more than $30.00 per annum. Hungry children of the parish lined up daily at the door of the convent to get a warm meal before school.

Other data from the period give additional indications of the problems and marginal condition of Polish American families as a result of the hard times. The tuberculosis death rate in the Polish neighborhoods of Midwestern cities ranged from 40 to 79 per 100,000 a rate exceeded only in some of the poor black and southern white areas of the same cities. The infant death rate in Detroit's Polish neighborhoods in the late 1930's was one of the highest in the city, ranging from a low of 40 to over 60 per 1,000 live births.

In many industrial areas the Polish American unemployment rate was over 50%.

Those who had jobs often had to endure inhumane conditions and speed ups or to give regular bribes to the foremen to keep their jobs.

Women were subjected to sexual harassment or even required to grant sexual favors to hold on to desperately needed jobs. In one department staffed entirely by women in an auto factory with a workforce that was more than 50% Polish, investigation revealed that all of the women were suffering from venereal disease. All were infected by the foreman.

The drive to organize the new Unions was treated by Polish American workers as a battle to save their community and its institutions and to preserve their dignity.

The Polish American Labor leader Steve Sadlowski recounted the story of his grandfather who was part of a delegation of workers who asked for more wages from their employer. He illustrated their plight to the boss by noting that they could not afford decent clothes in which to go to church. “Go in your overalls then” replied the boss. Fifty years later, the man was still insulted by the answer. All he could say was, ”What kind of people did he think we were that we would go to church in work clothes.”

Studies of the organization of factories with large number of Polish workers showed that the Poles came over to the union collectively rather than individually which was often the case with American Protestant workers such as Appalachian migrants. For Poles it was a decision about a social and communal good. For Protestant Americans it was personal moral choice.

Polish workers also in many cases initiated the organizing activity in factories where there were no union representatives because they had heard about such activity through community sources. There are several cases of Polish workers staging sit down strikes and taking over factories with no guidance or orders from union organizers.

These actions had very wide support in the entire Polish community which encouraged the workers. As a result, Polish workers were among the most committed. The President of the UAW said in 1937 that "In the struggle with GM, the Poles showed themselves the most militant and progressive workers in America." Another leader George Addes said " Without the Poles we could not have succeeded.

Polish American participation was one of the keys to the victory of the CIO unions that organized the industrial workers in the 1930's.

600,000 Polish American workers came over to the new unions in the late thirties *en masse*. They were the single largest ethnic group in the key unions that made up the new CIO – steel, auto, agricultural, machinery, coal and meat packing.

The infrastructure of the Polish community was also of great importance for the new unions, which had few resources. They used halls, newspapers, radio programs and community networks to organize.

As a result, during the early days of industrial unionism a close tie developed between the industrial unions and the Polish community. There is even a case of an Ohio local becoming a branch of the Polish National Alliance.

a.) Development of voting auxiliaries in Polish locals such as Dodge local headed by John Zaremba which involved the families of the workers

b.) There is even the invitation to a communist organizer to become a godfather (Chrzesny Ojciec) to a new parish church bell.

As in previous struggles Polish Women played a decisive role both in support of the movement and on their own behalf.

The movement against the high cost of living led by Mary Zuk began in Detroit and spread to Chicago, Cleveland and Milwaukee in 1935. This gave many women the experience that made them leaders in the late thirties. Their rallies drew over 5000 people.

The Cigar workers in Detroit who were more than 85% Polish staged the longest sit-downs in US history in 1937.

Their strike led to a major wave of strikes by women in laundries, restaurants, institutional kitchens, retail stores, and on cleaning crews in Detroit and across the Midwest in 1937. Many of the initial leaders were Polish women who were neighbors and friends of the cigar women.

The union movement also created a new cadre of Polish American leaders and a new ladder to mobility and status in the community. Much of this was later lost as Polish American labor leaders found themselves, by virtue of their positions, in the left-wing of the Democratic Party which supported recognition of the new "People's Poland" and the Soviet version of the Katyn Massacre story.

As the union movement became better organized and funded it developed its own infrastructure and bureaucracy which no longer needed the immigrant community as much as it once did and so the gulf between them widened after World War II.