

*More to Lose Than Your Chains:*  
*American Employment Schemes and Working-Class Politics*  
*in Comparative Perspective, 1870-1929*

Dissertation Proposal  
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## **Introduction**

A striking feature of American political development, as compared to her counterparts in Europe and Australasia, is an industrial working class that never fully supported a working-class party. Portions voted for the United Labor parties in 1886, the labor-populist parties in 1894, the Socialist Labor Party in the late 1890s, the American Socialist Party in the early 1900s and the farmer-labor parties after World War I. But none of these parties were able to consolidate and expand a base of industrial working-class support. Yet, an additional point of clear divergence in the US prior to the New Deal was the relative absence of state-initiated social welfare policies that had already taken root in every other advancing capitalist country. Instead, firms provided social welfare provisions. Furthermore, private fringe-benefits remain an important aspect of America's unique approach to welfare. Recently, private social benefits in the US represented more than 8.3 percent of GDP, whereas in ten other advanced capitalist countries they represented an average of less than 2.2 percent (Hacker 2002:16).

The proposed research will investigate two core research questions. First, does the unique role that firms in the US play as providers of social welfare help to explain the lack of industrial working-class support of a labor-based party in the US? Second, does variation in firms' welfare provisions across municipalities account for variation in the degree of working-class support in the US?

I hypothesize that divergence in the source of welfare provisions both nationally and locally can meaningfully help explain patterns of party consolidation and expansion of industrial working-class votes. Much of the literature on welfare states is devoted to answering how politics, especially class politics, affects social policy decisions (Hicks 1999; et al). Yet, the implementation of welfare policies often preceded both universal male suffrage and leftist

political parties supported by working-class voters (Esping-Anderson 1990:15). Instead, I consider the inverse question: historically, how did welfare policies condition a working-class party's success or failure in winning votes? In doing so, this project hypothesizes that private social provisions pushed industrial working-class political history in a radically different direction in the US than in Europe and Australasia.

## **Historical Background**

### Uneven working-class politics

The failure of working-class parties to win the support of industrial workers in large firms has led many to label America exceptional (see Lipset and Marks 1999 for review). It would be wrong, however, to suggest that working-class parties in the US *never* won the votes of workers, as the notion of exceptionalism suggests. Instead of viewing party support in binary terms, the degree of support needs to be put on a spectrum. The electoral successes of the American Socialist Party demonstrate that while the US is still on the “negative” end, it is not wholly exceptional.

The Socialist Party was formed in 1901 and by 1912, the vote for their Presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, swelled to over 900,000 before declining in later years. When expressed as a percentage of trade union members, electoral support rose from 12 percent in 1900 to 37 percent in 1912 (Bennet 1983:71). But the party was always just barely represented on the national level. Their only success was electing two members to Congress, Victor Berger (1910-1924) and Meyer London (1914-1920), who represented constituencies in Milwaukee and New York, respectively.

Much of the party's electoral victories (operationalized as significant vote percentages) were at the municipal level. Hoxie demonstrated that a great deal of this had to do with

socialism's increasing appeal among industrial workers in areas of intense labor conflict. He showed such a shift occurring in 1910 and 1911. In the 1910 local elections, he noted that about 40 percent of the socialists were elected in cities principally engaged in manufacturing. A year later, that figure jumped to 66 percent (Hoxie 1912). In 1911, for instance, the party elected, by a conservative estimate, some 1,141 Socialists to public office in 324 municipalities in thirty-four states (Judd 1989:19). In 1912 the party elected 1,200 party members to local public office, including the mayor's seat in 73 cities (Judd 1989:11; Weinstein 1967:27). Furthermore, it was many of these same municipalities that gave electoral support to the party nationally. Therefore, if an analysis is to explain the American industrial working-class' general political preference toward the major parties, it must also account for why patterns of consolidation and expansion of their votes for the Socialist Party mirrored those in Europe and Australasia in so many municipalities.

#### Divergent sources of social insurance – states or firms?

The decades around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were a period of labor history whose signature was discontent and industrial conflict (Montgomery 1987). In such a context, the workplace became a priority for reform across all advanced capitalist countries. However, the crucial difference between the US and the rest were the unique *sources* of redistributive social provisions. In the phase between the 1880s and World War I, many European states, along with Australia, New Zealand and Brazil, launched social spending policies that have come to be considered at the core of their modern welfare systems. States also enacted laws regulating hours, wages and the arbitration of industrial labor disputes (Skocpol 1992). Early social spending measures in Europe included noncontributory public pensions for the elderly in Denmark in 1891, New Zealand in 1898, Australia from 1900 to 1908, and Britain in 1908.

**Table 1. Core state-welfare provisions enacted by five countries by 1929**

| Country       | Sickness insurance | Old-Age Pensions or insurance | Workers' compensation | Unemployment insurance |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Australia     | None               | 1908                          | 1900                  | None                   |
| Britain       | 1911               | 1908                          | 1906                  | 1911                   |
| Germany       | 1883               | 1889                          | 1884                  | 1927                   |
| Sweden        | 1891               | 1913                          | 1901                  | None                   |
| United States | None               | None                          | 1911                  | None                   |

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*Sources:* Adapted from Jens Alber, "Government Responses to the Challenge of Unemployment," in Alber and Heidenheimer (eds.) (New Brunswick: Transaction Books) p. 153; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1992) p. 9; Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell Press, 1997) p. 30.

Partly contributory partly publicly funded social insurance measures were enacted in Germany in the 1880s, Britain in 1911, and Brazil in 1923.

European social insurance was workingmen's insurance, a means by which the state enforced and supplemented contributions by entire categories of employees and employers in order to partially protect wage workers against the risk of losses of income associated with illness, disability, and old age. The German state, an early innovator, initiated health, disability, and old-age insurance measures in the 1880s (Rimlinger 1971). From the start in 1889, contribution toward old-age and disability insurance was compulsory for all employees whose annual income did not exceed 2000 marks. These were gradually extended – by 1910 actual pensions or prospective eligibility reached 52 percent of the economically active German population and 22 percent of the total population. In 1911, the British adopted programs for health and unemployment insurance. Initially, the least skilled or most economically vulnerable workers might not be targeted in the contributory insurance schemes, but the coverage of social insurance soon tended to spread both up and down in the working-class hierarchies – reducing social risk across the board (Skocpol 1992:131). Table 1 offers some comparative data.

The relationship between business and the government in the US, however, was unlike that found in other countries, whose states played a more directive role in providing welfare. The response to the upsurge in labor militancy in the US moved in a sharply different direction. While reformers in the American Association for Labor Legislation sought to establish workingmen's insurance along the lines of the European model, few of their policies were taken up by the state. Unlike the legislative profiles of nascent welfare states in Europe and Australasia, the US was exemplified by its lack of nationwide public protections for male workers and the elderly. It was not until the 1920s that old-age pensions were enacted at either the national or state-level and as late as 1928 only six states had pension laws on the books for the very needy elderly. Still, most striking about the US is the almost complete absence of public assistance for adult male workers prior to the New Deal. There were no laws that guaranteed sickness or unemployment insurance and none that enforced minimum-wage laws that covered male workers (Skocpol 1992:157-8).

The US government did, however, become marginally involved in the management of labor affairs in 1870s (Tone 1997:18). The labor question was so central in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the federal government had to intensify its interventions. For instance, lawmakers passed measures that circumscribed employer's liberties and mandated workplace reform by 1900. Yet, much of this activity took place at the state level. Starting with Massachusetts in 1877 and ending with Rhode Island in 1894, every northern state except Illinois passed a general factory act mandating sanitation and safety features. By 1899, 28 states had established similar regulations (Tone 1997:24-25). In 1898, the passage of the Erdman Act (passed after the Pullman strike, which granted government recognition of unions on interstate railroads and banned yellow-dog contracts) and the Industrial Commission Act (authorized

Congress to appoint a federal commission to investigate labor conditions, among other things) suggested that the federal government could be sympathetic to working people's needs (Tone 1997:27-8). By the turn of the century, almost every Northern industrial state had passed legislation requiring that factories be clean and well ventilated, and that safety guards be used on dangerous equipment (Nelson 1995).

But, while European workers found legislative pursuits increasingly rewarding between the 1870s and the 1910s, American workers encountered effective retrenchment. During the 1880s and the early 1890s, the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor and other trade unions won some legislative victories in areas such as legal hour's limits, prohibitions on sweated labor, prohibitions on company stores, and union protections. But these gains were not sustained, often paltry and too often unenforced. By 1920, the courts struck down roughly three hundred labor laws (Skocpol 1992:227). And, between 1877 and 1903, federal or state troops were deployed in over 500 labor disputes to put down striking workers (Forbath 1991:118).

#### American welfare capitalism

However, direct public spending on social provisions does not exhaust the available strategies for concessionary intervention. While governments may provide goods directly or enforce its subsidized private distribution, firms may also offer it voluntarily. This was the case in the US. Major industrialists, eager to check and repel labor militancy and a short-lived tide of government regulation, proffered welfare capitalism as an alternative to the welfare statism they saw taking form abroad. According to the National Civic Federation, welfare capitalism involved, "special consideration for physical comfort whenever labor is performed; opportunities for recreation; educational advantages; and the providing of suitable sanitary homes...plans for saving and lending money, and provisions for insurance and pensions" (Nelson 1995:99).

Between 1886 and 1888, perhaps two dozen firms had initiated welfare programs. But, by 1890 welfare capitalism was well under way (Brandes 1970:17). Most major employers associations promoted welfare capitalist policies from the turn of the twentieth century onwards (Swenson 2002:56). And due to growing employer support, the period after 1900 saw a greater willingness to experiment with a variety of paternalistic techniques designed to make workers loyal to firms – especially in large firms employing an industrial workforce. In 1914, the National Civic Federation listed over 2,500 companies being engaged in some form of welfare work (Jacoby 2004:40). And, a 1926 survey of the 1500 largest firms found that 80 percent had adopted at least one form of welfarism and about half had comprehensive programs (Brandes 1970:28). Furthermore, these policies were quite resilient to economic downturns (Moriguchi 2005; Swenson 2002:68).

The major pillars of welfare capitalism were health insurance<sup>1</sup>, employee representation plans, pensions, housing and profit sharing and stock ownership. For example, in 1890 just 48 percent of families owned homes. Select employers began to provide homes for loyal employees to own by financing mortgages and renting housing at below-market rates (Tone 1997:89; Brandes 1970:38). This effectively controlled the labor supply for particular enterprises. The reason was clear: by providing good housing at low cost, employers could attract superior employees or at least induce current employees to stay. The central factor was low rents. Favorable rents were, in effect, partial subsidies (Brandes 1970:44). The welfare director of one large firm advised companies to "get [workers] to invest their savings in their homes and own them. Then they won't leave and they won't strike. It ties them down so they have a stake in our prosperity" (Jacoby 2004:40).

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the twentieth century, health insurance had no substantial presence in the US. The only exception was the federally run US Marine Hospital Service, established in 1789. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mutual aid organizations were the principal source of "sickness insurance" (Hacker 2002:191).

Profit sharing schemes and stock ownership plans were also practically non-existent in the US in the 1880s. But by 1926, approximately 1.5 million industrial workers owned an estimated six million shares of stock in the companies that employed them (Tone 1997:243). As with other private social provisions, the main aims were to increase efficiency and reduce resistance by giving workers a greater stake in the firm. Between 1886 and 1889, a period of labor unrest, about forty companies launched profit-sharing plans for their employees (Jacoby 2004:36). Henry Ford's \$5-a-day introduced in 1914 is the most famous of these plans. However, like most other employers, he imposed heavy eligibility requirements on his employees. This had effects. At Ford, the turnover rate in 1913 was 370 percent, while absenteeism averaged 10.5 percent per day. After Ford nearly doubled the wages of workers employed at least six months, turnover and absenteeism declined to 40 percent and 4 percent, respectively (Lazonick 1983:122).

### **Research questions and hypotheses**

In this project, the source of welfare provisions is operationalized as redistribution from one of two arenas: the private sphere – a firm, or the public sphere – the state.<sup>2</sup> I draw on Esping-Anderson's concept of welfare regime in order to describe and classify different national (as an aggregate) and municipal approaches to social spending around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Esping-Anderson defines a welfare regime as an enduring configuration of institutions and policies that are closely interconnected, exhibiting shared aims and characteristics and evolving in tandem over long periods of time (1990). Ultimately, the US developed a welfare regime with three main features: a network of minimal direct social spending programs, a constellation of

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, that while America's welfare structure is linked more to employment than citizenship, its anchoring in the private sector is backed by government policy (Klein 2003).

indirect or “hidden” state interventions through tax breaks and regulations, and, most importantly for this project, the domination of private social protections in large firms (Hacker 2002:11).

This project is the first to highlight the critical role of firm policies, specifically welfare concessions, in American political development. The share of social welfare spending in the US is not very different from the corresponding proportion in even the most generous of European welfare states. What is most distinctive about American social welfare practice is not the level of spending but the source. These private social benefits are an integral part of America’s unique welfare regime, which has distinct implications for quality of life and for the boundaries of political change for industrial workers. By reorienting the analysis toward the causal implications of variations in welfare regimes, I will offer new insights into how working-class political and economic strategies were formed at the turn of the twentieth century, and why the US appears at one end of this spectrum.

A series of questions will guide the research. *Primarily, how do we account for the relative weakness of the industrial working-class’ support for working-class parties in the United States vis-à-vis other advanced capitalist countries? Specifically, why was the American Socialist Party never able to consolidate and expand a base of working-class electoral support?* I then ask two connected but analytically distinct questions concerning unevenness and timing.

(1) *Unevenness* – How do we account for the development of *some* working-class based politics in the US in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Why did *some* local industrial working-class populations vote for the American Socialist Party in the 1912 Presidential elections while the majority didn’t?

(2) *Timing* – What is unique about this period relative to others that would help us to understand the intensification of working-class politics in all advanced capitalist countries?

### Hypotheses concerning sources of social provisions

In accounting for the industrial working-class' hesitance to support working-class parties, I hypothesize that the critical and largely overlooked mechanism is the *source* of welfare provisions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. I suspect that private welfare provisions were much more than, "...a padded glove over an iron fist" for firms, simply used to break unions (Cohen 1990:160, 430). Instead, I hypothesize that they created unique choice sets and biased new strategies for American workers – opportunities and strategies that are wholly inconsistent with the development of working-class political organizations. Therefore, this project does not aim to give an explanation for the sufficient conditions of party formation, but rather, an explanation of sufficient conditions that will *hold back* party consolidation and expansion of working-class votes. I hypothesize:

- (1) Firm intervention into social policy in the US was sufficient to obstruct the consolidation and expansion of industrial working-class votes for the Socialist Party in national elections.
- (2) State intervention into social policy in non-American industrializing countries did not inhibit the political mobilization of workers support for working-class parties.
- (3) Private welfare measures were abandoned at different rates across firms (Moriguchi 2005), and it was precisely their disparate rate of adoption in the US that helps explain the uneven development of industrial working-class based politics at the municipal level.

I use three mechanisms to suggest *how* firm social provisions obstruct working-class support for working-class parties. First: distributional consequences of private versus public social provisions. According to Hacker, “As approaches become more private in structure and more voluntary in operation, they tend also to become less able and likely to redistribute income and risk down the ladder” (2002: 36). Private benefits are awarded through employment and are distributed in close connection with the firm’s profitability. Because these approaches are voluntary, subsidies will only go to workers whose employers have the means to undertake such activity. This leads to a trend in which better paid employees are more likely to be covered by job-related benefits. Therefore, privatized approaches are limited in their ability to alter the distribution of income and because their value often increases with tax rates and with the generosity of employers, these approaches may actually exacerbate inequalities and exposure to risk (Hacker 2002:49). Data suggests that during the period in which private social insurance schemes were being enacted, wage disparity among workers increased. Wage differentials in the US between skilled and less skilled workers widened in the 1860-1914 period. The wages of the most highly skilled workers increased an average of 74 percent between 1890 and 1914, while the less skilled workers wage only rose 31 percent (Dawson 1979:332). On the other hand, public based provisions, if universal, should not increase inequality levels. If means-tested, they should reduce them. Wider income disparity generated by private social benefits act to disincentivize the formation of class-based politics by widening inequality and exposure to risk between working people.

Second, private social provisions reward service, generating two nested incentives for the individual worker receiving the private benefit. Minimally, it creates sunken costs for workers

who would otherwise be willing to move from job to job. This serves to secure employee allegiance to particular firms. In more extreme cases, it disincentivizes unionization and independent political action by allowing the firm to only award those employees willing to reject such strategies for maximizing their income and benefits. The longevity of many welfare programs suggests that a significant number of employees participated in welfare work. In fact, workers felt justified in demanding welfare benefits. During the business recession of 1920-21 when some of these programs were terminated, employees resisted it (Tone 1997:211). On the other hand, state social provisions reduce the incentive to maintain a commitment to the firm by lowering the level of dependence of the employee on their employer. Additionally, they can serve to bolster unionism and independent political action because they provide resources that are of value in forming and building organizations (Esping-Anderson 1988:22).

Third, private social provisions incentivize working through the firm rather than the state. Private social benefits raise the costs of exits for workers and in turn lay the foundation for voice in dealing with shop floor and economic grievances (Hirschman 1970). Specifically, they isolate employee grievances at the level of the firm or plant. If an employee wants to negotiate the conditions of their benefits, the individual firm is the natural object of contestation. On the other hand, public social benefits constitute the state as the key arena for employee voice over the conditions of their benefits. In many cases in Europe, the actual implementation of welfare provisions required the incorporation of unionized labor into the state apparatus to serve an advisory and administrative role. Here, labor's voice is pulled into the sphere of the state as well. In the US, on the other hand, company unions were the vehicle for workers to voice their concerns after World War I. These were not simply unresponsive tools of management. At

Bethlehem Steel, for instance, of the 2,316 cases brought by the company union over a five year period in the 1920s, 65 percent were settled in favor of employees (Fairris 1997:36).

### Hypotheses concerning timing of party formation

I periodize my explanation in the initial decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, on the issue of timing, many other scholars put more emphasis on other periods. Some focus is on the 1880s (Fink 1983; Voss 1993), some on the 1890s (Archer 2007), and still others on the 1930s (Brody 1983). Each of these periods offers much insight into the debate about the formation of class-based politics in the US. However, I suspect that the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is an especially critical conjuncture for four reasons. First, working-class parties had existed long before this period in most advanced capitalist countries, but the initial decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw most of them able to consolidate and expand their base of industrial working-class votes, and in turn emerge on a national scale. Second, this was the period in which independent working-class politics in the US seemed to have the greatest potential as is partially evidenced by the Socialist Party's success in select working-class communities that voted for their Presidential candidate. Third, this was the period in which welfare regimes in the US and other advanced capitalist contexts begin to fully diverge. And finally, by the end of the first decades of the new century, independent working-class politics in the US declined with great rapidity and never fully recovered. I hypothesize:

The *potential* for industrial working-class support for working-class parties across all industrializing contexts was driven by two interconnected economic and social factors:

- (a) Industrialization of key economic sectors that were previously under the control of skilled artisans and craftsmen resulted in intense deskilling and

restructuring after 1870; the workers in these firms became the main supporters of working-class parties in all advanced capitalist countries.

(b) Economic dislocation, a series of crises in the late 1800s, drove people to seek alternative strategies for securing their economic livelihood in labor militancy and political action.

### **State of the literature**

My hypothesis that the adoption of social provisions by firms served a critical role in the making of working-class abstention from left politics is left wholly untested in the vast interdisciplinary literature on the subject. I believe this lacuna is largely a result of the methodology employed by the main interlocutors. Scholars have assessed the US vis-à-vis other countries by an almost exclusive use of cross-national comparisons or national histories. To the extent that much of the literature attempts to explain national differences, scholars often overlook the remarkable diversity within each country. In some countries larger sections of the industrial working-class supported working-class parties than others, and nowhere was support completely absent, not even in the US (Sassoon 1996). But because most researchers leave absent an analysis of internal variation, explanations tend toward overarching claims about the US that cannot account for support in *some* municipalities. Since firm policies varied greatly across locales and welfare policies were adopted mainly by large firms, it is very difficult to use them to account for national trends without also utilizing municipal level comparisons. In addition to leaving local variation unexplained, many of the positions lack comparative support. The main positions in the literature can be broken down into five types: institutionalist, repressionist, cultural, tactical, and economic.

Institutionalists are dominant in the American exceptionalism debate. They view state structures and state policies as independent and determinative forces on party formation and success. In turn, many argue that the American political system, unlike those in Europe, erected insurmountable barriers to working-class party success. For instance, some posit that because America secured suffrage prior to its industrialization, there was less incentive for unions and unionized industrial workers to become political, in turn blocking the formation of a working-class party (Bridges 1986; Commons 1926:5; Lipset 1983; Marks 1989; Perlman 1928; Steinmo 1994). Yet, this cannot account for Australia and Switzerland, whose early and widespread suffrage did not lead to workers primarily identifying with non-working class parties as they did in the US.

Still, other institutionalists look to America's plurality electoral system (Lijphart 1994; Lipset 1963; Marks 1989; Mazmanian 1974; Rosenstone et al 1984; Schattschneider 1942). According to this position, a simple-majority ballot system favors a two party system because it marginalizes third party challengers by making individual votes for them, which together do not cross a high threshold, largely wasted (Duverger 1954). Yet again, Sweden and Denmark had plurality systems until 1907 and 1915 respectively, while Germany had a single-member district system until 1914. And furthermore, Britain and Canada continue to have such systems. Others give America's federalist structure causal primacy (Hattam 1993; Lowi 1984:37-38; Oestreicher 1988:1270-2; Perlman 1928:286, Steinmo 1994:120-1). In federalist systems, divisions in political authority provide "veto points" where organized groups can prevent far-reaching social programs (Immergut 1992). According to this approach, the diffusion of authority in American political institutions makes it incredibly difficult for challenging groups to capture government authority, and in turn places real limits on sweeping political changes. But, again, federalist

systems in Australia, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland did not inhibit the industrial working-class' support of working-class parties. And, municipal comparisons in the US suggest that its effects can be positive since it gave Socialists greater opportunity to get elected locally (Lipset and Marks 1999:83).

Repressionists argue that in America, there was much more repression of working-class movements than elsewhere, which made potential working-class political activists skeptical about the effectiveness of building parties. Some of these scholars focus on the wave of judicial hostility – increasingly hostile labor laws and labor injunctions - beginning in the 1890s (Forbath 1991:3, Hattam 1993:8-9; Tomlins 1985). Others emphasize the demobilizing role of employer repression (Jacoby 1991; Kimeldorf 1988; Voss 1993). And still, others focus on the repressive role of police and military forces (Archer 2007:112-42; Green 1978; Kolko 1976; Mann 1993; Sexton 1991). Yet, research on the impacts of repression is highly uneven. Repression has been viewed as a key element in the politicization of marginalized groups (Goodwin 2001:27). And, many argue that American working-people experienced a relatively low level of repression, which undermined the *need* to establish a working-class party (Geary 1981; Hartz 1955; Lipset 1985; Marks 1989:12-5).

Culturalists, on the other hand, argue from a large range of different vantage points. But, what unites their claims is the notion that unique systems of self-understanding in the US, either by the entire population or critical sections of it, precluded the support of working-class parties. A dominant position here is that since the US lacked a feudal past, the liberal tradition that emerged undermined the class-based grievances found elsewhere that gave working people a reason to support working-class parties (Hartz 1955; Lipset 1963; Lipset 1996; Sombart 1976). Yet, scholars have undermined this claim by pointing to the very diverse cultural traditions in the

US (Smith 1993). Furthermore, this position has not stood up to comparative scrutiny. Liberal values were also quite prevalent in Australia, yet there the working-class was mobilized behind independent political action (Archer 2007:175). In fact, as a causal mechanism, liberalism did not even work *against* the formation of a working-class party. There, labor leaders used liberal values and rhetoric as a justification for the formation of a party.

Other culturalists point to racial heterogeneity and subsequent racist ideologies of industrial workers in the US as the main barrier to worker radicalism. According to Mink (1986) the so-called “new immigrants” coming to the US from Southern and Eastern Europe between 1870 and 1920, weakened the older religious antagonisms between Protestants and Catholics and strengthened antagonisms between “natives” and “immigrants.” The craft union racism that emerged on the part of better paid and more skilled workers, acted as a hindrance to class solidarity and class-based politics (ibid:68). Similar arguments have been made concerning white worker racism toward free Blacks (Davis 1986:26). On the basis of such divisions, Katznelson claims that the class consciousness of the workplace was secondary to ethnicity as a basis for organization and political activity (1982). While Archer (2007) finds that new immigration and a history of intense racism did not inhibit working-class party success in Australia, a deeper analysis into its effects in the US must make municipal comparisons. Such comparison would have to identify why it is that in the US in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in some localities workers were able to organize *across* ethnic and racial lines while in others they did not (Gerteis 2007).

Another set of explanations suggest that the tactical decisions of both influential labor leaders and the leaders of the Socialist Party can explain the failure of working-class politics. Labor leaders in the American Federation of Labor (AFL) are attributed with two tactical

decisions that caused the labor movement to remain outside of the political arena. According to Gary Marks, the US was unique in the fact that its labor movement was dominated by closed craft unions and was “late,” relative to European countries, in shifting toward an open form of industrial unionism (1989:233; Archer 2007; Pelling 1992). Since craft unions see their power emanating from their ability to restrict the labor supply across a relatively small and occupationally defined membership, they will in turn view political activity as having only marginal value. Additionally, Archer argues that labor political activity had the potential to ignite internal dissension within the labor movement due to ethno-religious sectarianism. Using this as cause, he says that the AFL leaders’ decision at their 1894 convention to oppose the formation of a labor party was the decisive element in the making of working-class party failure (2007:15). But, both analyses tend to obscure the extent to which craft unionists at the local and state level did become active in working-class politics (Wrigley 1982). One must ask the question, why did *these* particular workers become political activists? Again, in order to assess these claims we are required to do municipal comparisons as well as national ones.

Still, others argue that the basic failure of the American Socialist Party to win industrial working-class votes lies in the policies of the party itself. Here, scholars point to its penchant for sectarianism and its heavy concern with ideology (Bell 1974). According to this view, the party’s radical pole was disconnected from the pragmatic politics necessary to win electoral support (Howe 1985; Miller 1973:324-39; Weinstein 1967). Yet, historians have not reached a consensus on this issue. Kipnis (1952) blames the right-wing of the Party for the 1912 split, which led to an exodus of the party’s left-wing. He argues that this was the decisive blow to the American Socialist Party, afterward moving to the right and ultimately losing touch with its industrial working-class base. However, this approach to working-class party formation cannot account for

localized trends in working-class political behavior, which varied not in direct relation to internal party politics. Why was the party successful in winning votes in some municipal contexts and not in others? This suggests that the quality of political leadership in particular historical and local contexts is *at least* constrained by those contexts.

Finally, economic arguments share a common failing with the rest of the literature in that they make broad claims that cannot account for internal variation. A frequently cited explanation rests on the claim that American workers simply had fewer economic grievances than their counterparts. The first to argue this position was Marx, who suggested that America's underpopulated settler society produced a unique class system that contained higher levels of social mobility incompatible with the development of working-class political consciousness (see also Thernstrom 1974). He claimed that, "in the United States [...] though classes already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in a constant state of flux" (1963:25). Thernstrom also cites American occupational mobility as a main factor inhibiting working-class party success, but adds geographic mobility as an additional constraint (1974:512).

Additionally, Sombart gathered evidence to show that the prosperous living conditions in America were much higher than in Germany (1976 [1906]). He concludes that such prosperity made workers quite content with their living conditions, claiming that, "all Socialist utopias come to nothing on roast beef and apple pie" (ibid:106). This thesis, however, has come under recent criticism, despite scholarly consensus that American workers were more prosperous than those in Germany (Shergold 1982). Some point to its weak comparative legitimacy vis-à-vis countries other than Germany (Archer 2007). Others demonstrate that a surge in Socialist Party votes in both Europe and America corresponded with an increase in working-class income and

living standards (Sturmthal 1973; Fetscher 1973). And critically, from my perspective, it is unable to account for internal variation within the US context. It does not explain why the best paid and most skilled industrial workers became the backbone of the American socialist movement in many municipalities (Wrigley 1982). As I have demonstrated, the state of the literature on working-class party politics in the US demands both national and municipal comparisons – my research design aims to do just this.

### **Research design**

In order to understand why class-based politics thrived in some municipalities but were aborted in most, this project employs a comparative historical methodology. According to this approach, theory building and concept formation only near generalization when two or more units are juxtaposed. On the one hand, my methodology utilizes a Millian comparative strategy to analyze cases that are similar in relevant ways but differ in outcomes in a way that requires explanation (Mill 1971:211-19). This allows me to justify case selection by including both “positive” cases of working class party electoral success in industrial working-class communities alongside “negative” cases in which working-class parties are largely left unsupported by working-class voters. This methodology is standard in the fields of comparative sociology and politics (Ertman 1997; Goodwin 2001; Mahoney 2001; Moore 1966; Orloff 1993; Skocpol 1979).

On the other hand, I alter this methodology in two fundamental ways. First, the Millian methodology does not demand explicit specification of the mechanisms at work and in turn may lead to fallacious generalizations based on observed correlations (Riley 2005:290). It also fails to recognize that an outcome may come about through different causal pathways (Liebersohn 1994; Steinmetz 1998:173). The method is prone to these errors because it only demands identification

of the antecedent conditions common to the phenomena being explained, without requiring an explanation of *how* they cause their outcome (Burawoy 1989:771).

I bridge this methodological limitation by developing a historically conditional methodology (Paige 1999). Such an approach will specify a set of historical conditions in which private welfare policies will hold back working-class party consolidation and expansion of industrial workers' votes (ibid:784). My approach will compare a particular combination of structural causes and events, in a particular historical conjuncture, in order to test if firm-based social provisions were a crucial mechanism in the making of working-class abstention from radical politics. Employing an "eventful analysis" of firms will test if the events caused by firms (adoption of social provisions) at particular junctures can redefine historically constituted structural constraints and workers' incentives and, in turn, transform electoral outcomes for political parties (Sewell 2005). However, my research results will be comparable, generalizable, and falsifiable, because my claims will be able to be tested against other cases in similarly historically situated conditions.

Second, comparative historical research in sociology, political science, and history typically compares single units of analysis, most often, the nation-state (Fredrickson 1995). While this approach is adequate for many research questions, it is unable to address why on a national level, working-class parties were never successful in the US like they were elsewhere, while in some municipal contexts they were. In order to overcome this methodological limitation, I simultaneously compare distinct units of analysis in order to test the same causal mechanism at different levels of scale. I do this by first comparing three national units and then compare American municipal units, at two levels of depth.

My national comparisons will consist of America – the “negative” case, and Britain and Germany – two “positive” cases, between the years 1870 and 1929, thus holding the international context constant. These countries are similar in relevant ways. In the 1890s, they were the three most industrialized countries in the world (Archer 2007:31). All three had militant labor movements that grappled with the question of class politics (Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Marks 1989). And social provisions, whether private or public, were enacted largely as a defense against industrial working-class mobilization (Brandes 1970:147; Flora and Alber 1981:58). However, my “positive” cases also contain important dissimilarities as well. I justify my selection of Germany and Britain because they stand at two ends of the state-interventionist pole in Europe and Australasia. The former intervened via state-social provisions much earlier than most, while the latter did much later. But, even the British state became more intensely involved in industrial relations and enacted more public social provisions than was the case in the US.

Unlike the US, both Germany and Britain developed popular and enduring working-class parties that were successful at national level in winning a significant percentage of working-class votes. By 1914, Germany possessed the largest socialist party in the world, and more workers there voted socialist than in any other country. On the eve of World War I, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) could count over one-million individual fee-paying members and had successfully mobilized more than four million voters in the Reichstag elections of 1912 (Geary 1989:101; Schorske 1955). Yet, as early as 1871, Social Democrats won 124,000 votes and two Reichstag seats. Less than twenty years later in 1890, the party polled nearly 1.5 million votes and won 35 seats (Nolan 1986:385). By the mid-1890s, the SPD had built a mass party by recruiting primarily from the skilled workers and journeymen undergoing rapid deskilling in previous

decades (Nolan 1986:352; Geary 1992:108-9). After all, the first sections of the German labor force to participate in militant labor activity were very well paid (Geary 1992:107).

In Britain, working-class politics were successful much later. The Labour Representation Committee, precursor to the Labour Party, was established in 1900. It was established for the purpose of nominating and supporting parliamentary candidates from the ranks of the labor movement (Gordon 1992:44). With the support of unions, the LRC entered into a tacit alliance with the Liberal Party (Lib-Lab), which lasted until 1914 (Skocpol 1992:222). But, independently they were able to secure thirty parliamentary seats by the election of 1906, and further raised this to forty-two by the end of 1910 (Gordon 1992:44). Quickly, the party became well supported by industrial working-class voters. For example, by 1906 they had increased their trade union membership to over one million – up from 353,700 in 1901 (Pelling 1954:244-5).

Through my national comparison I hope to identify several key processes in order to test my hypotheses at the national level:

- (1) What was the general response by states and firms to the sharp increase in industrial working-class strikes in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? If they were repressive, how were they repressive? If they gave concessions, which was the primary *source of concessions*?
- (2) What were the trends in inequality and labor turnover between the years 1870 and 1929? Were workers more or less attached to firms?
- (3) What sectors of society gave the most votes to working-class parties? What kinds of firms did they work for? Were these sectors the ones most intensely affected by deskilling and economic crises?

In order to explain why the Socialist Party had *some* success in winning the support of industrial workers in the US, the second step in my research will lower the scale of the unit of analysis in order to compare American municipalities – particularly steel towns. The first dimension of this comparison will consist of an analysis of 30 steel towns in Pennsylvania. Using primary data, which includes state records and business records, I will randomly sample 30 steel towns containing steel works that employ more than 500 people from the population of steel towns in Pennsylvania. I will then identify if the main steel works in each town did or did not provide welfare benefits to their employees. The benefits I will identify are housing, sickness insurance, pensions, profit sharing schemes and stock ownership plans, employee representation plans, visiting nurse services, and recreational facilities. After identifying the programs adopted, I will test, using multiple regression analysis, whether the adoption of these policies correlates with the percentage of town vote for the Socialist Party in the 1912 Presidential election. A preliminary sampling of Pennsylvania steel town votes in Appendix I suggests that there was considerable voting differentials between industrial municipalities.

Next, in order to test my causal mechanisms I will execute an in depth comparison of two American municipalities, New Castle and Bethlehem, both in Pennsylvania, between 1870 and 1929. These cities were similar in remarkable ways. First, both were steel towns. New Castle was home to the American Sheet and Tin Plate Company, which was a subsidiary of the U.S. Steel Corporation – the largest steel conglomerate in the world by the early 1900s. Bethlehem, on the other hand, was home to Bethlehem Steel, which by 1915 was second only to the U.S. Steel (Brody 1960:25). Second, both cities had histories of intense labor conflict and labor defeat. In New Castle, a fourteen month strike erupted at the tin plant in 1910, but was eventually crushed through police repression (Brody 1960:73). In Bethlehem, on the other hand, a large

strike erupted in the winter of 1910 at the steel plant and it too was crushed even more violently (ibid:115). Yet a key difference remains.

In Bethlehem, the industrial working-class population remained relatively conservative and continued to vote along ethnic lines – primarily for the Democratic Party. However, in New Castle, in 1911, the working population of the city elected a Socialist, William V. Tyner, to the mayor's seat (Katlinick 1982:174). Just a year later in the 1912 Presidential election, while Bethlehem workers continued to vote Democrat, a large percentage of industrial working-class voters in New Castle voted for Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist Party candidate.<sup>3</sup> This voting trend is made apparent with voting data from precincts near the mills where working-class families clustered (Nash 1982:118). Again, this leaves something to be explained. Why is it that two similar populations with ostensibly similar histories of conflict would diverge so sharply in voting preferences?

In analyzing political practices and party formation in these two cities, I will ask similar questions at the municipal scale that I did on the national scale. Specifically, I will identify:

- (1) What were the particular responses by local elites to the sharp increase in labor militancy around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in these two cities? If they were repressive, how were they repressive? If they gave concessions, what was the primary *source* of these concessions? Was it local state redistribution or firm policies?
- (2) What were the trends in inequality and labor turnover between the years 1870 and 1929 in these cities? How were employees represented in the steel mills?

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<sup>3</sup> 33 percent of the town voted for Debs. When excluding votes for the Progressive Party, the Socialists won 52 percent of the vote (See Nash 1982:116).

(3) What wards and precincts gave the most votes to the Socialist Party in the 1912 national election in the two cities? Were these sectors the ones most intensely affected by deskilling and economic crises?

## **Documentation**

Through both primary and secondary archival sources, this project will describe the variation in sources of social provision between the US and Europe around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But, more importantly, it will also analyze the effects of firm policy in the US through an extensive examination of the available records produced by the collective actors welfare capitalism directly affected – workers, firms, and the US state. This intention, my related hypotheses and the research design determines the sources I will examine (see Appendix II for an itemized list of archival sources). Testing whether firm policies were a critical mechanism in the shaping of American political development requires a six-part data collection strategy.

*Secondary Literature* – These documents, including articles and manuscripts, will be on the labor movement, firm behavior, economic development, and working-class party history in America, Britain, and Germany. Analyses of the secondary literature will reveal the broad national level trends between the national units being compared.

*US Government Reports on Welfare Capitalism* – Content analysis of US Government reports, both at the federal and Pennsylvania state levels will provide insight into the efficacy, scope, and depth of the welfare capitalist movement.

*Meeting Records and Public Documents of the US Steel Industry with Special Focus on Firms in New Castle and Bethlehem* – Content analysis of personal records, meeting proceedings, trade journal articles and pamphlets associated with the steel industry, with

a special focus on Bethlehem Steel and US Steel (and their predecessors) will provide an inside look at internal deliberation and public positions concerning welfare capitalist policies in the two American municipalities I compare.

*Meeting Records and Public Documents from Organizations Involved in Welfare Capitalism* – Content analysis of personal records, meeting proceedings, journal articles and pamphlets from employer’s associations and private organizations that were involved in the welfare capitalism debate will provide an inside look at the movement’s key actors, internal conflicts, and public positions.

*Journals from New Castle and Bethlehem* – These documents will in part reveal the historical development of working-class politics in New Castle and Bethlehem. The newspapers I will most heavily rely on for New Castle are the *New Castle News* and *Free Press*. In Bethlehem, I will rely on *Daily Times*, *Bethlehem Globe*, and *Bethlehem Star*.

*Meeting Records and Public Documents from Labor Organizations with Special Focus on Organizations in New Castle and Bethlehem* - Content analysis of personal records, meeting proceedings, journal articles and pamphlets from the American Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, and the union local and Socialist Party branches in New Castle and Bethlehem will provide an inside look at welfare policies and class politics from the perspective of workers and their organizations.

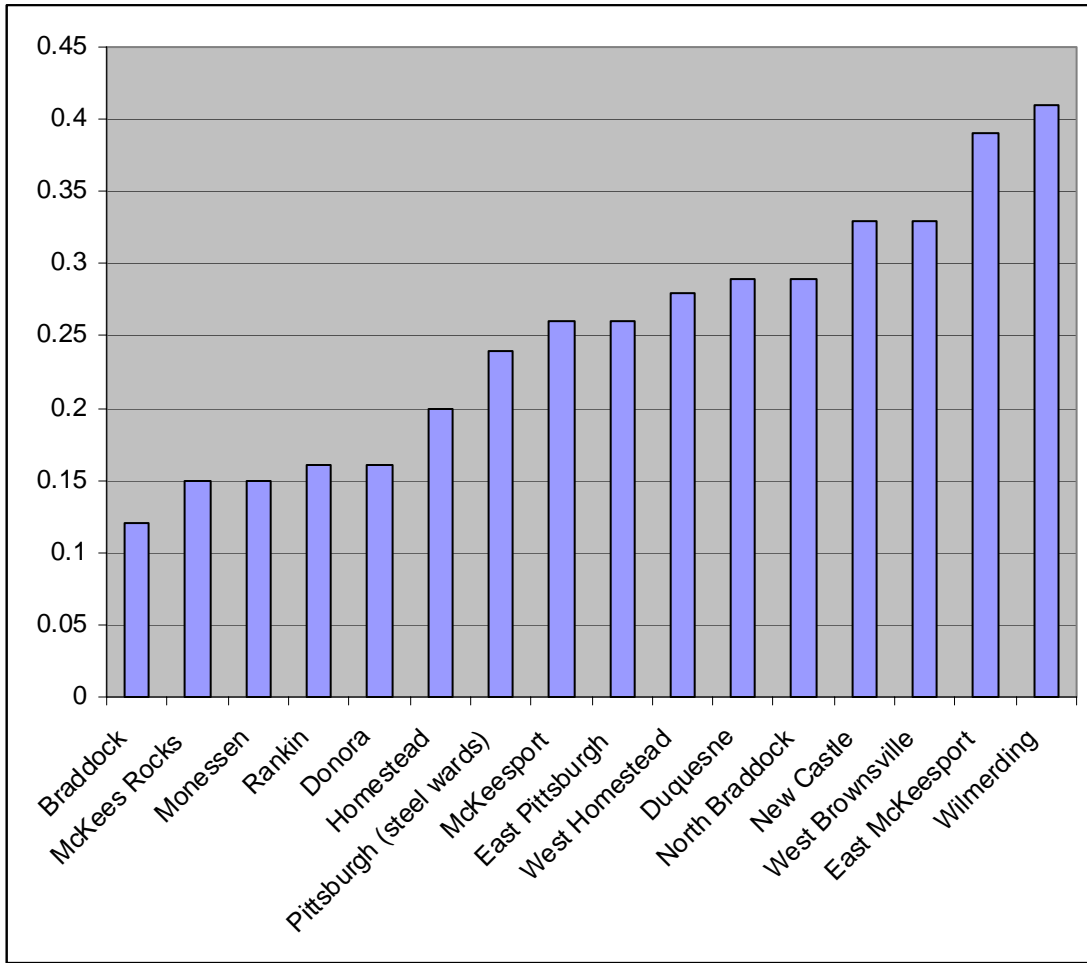
## **Contributions of the project**

This project will make two empirical contributions. First, the project’s analysis of firm policies and behavior in the US vis-à-vis its European counterparts will be the first of its kind. None of the welfare capitalist literature on the US has been put into comparative perspective (Berkowitz and McQuaid 1992; Brandes 1970; Nelson 1995; Jacoby 2004; et al). This will offer fertile empirical ground for future studies of economic and political development in America and Europe. Second, this project offers an alternative interpretation and account of industrial

working-class politics in the US. By looking to the crucial role that firm social provisions played in both national and municipal politics in the US, it addresses a gap in past literature. Not simply that the past literature on American exceptionalism has ignored the welfare capitalist movement in the US, but more specifically that in doing so it has been unable to explain some internal variation. Thus existing literature does not adequately explain variation in workers political preferences in the US. I do this through a unique methodological design, first comparing national trends then municipal contexts.

Examining the effects of different sources of social redistribution may yield several new theoretical insights. Building on recent literature (Hacker 2002), this project will articulate how private social provisions unequally distribute risks and income, garner employee allegiance to particular firms, and incentivize working through the firm for economic interests rather than the state. In doing so, it offers new insights into America and Europe at critical junctures in their histories. However, it also lays a theoretical groundwork for subsequent explanations for the more general weakness of class-based politics throughout America's history since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So, while this project offers a historically conditional theory of the failures and successes of the American Socialist Party in industrial working-class communities, in the end it aims to provide theoretical concepts useful for the study of present controversies concerning working-class political behavior and business unionism.

**Appendix I: Percentage of Socialist Vote in Select PA Steel Towns, 1912 Presidential Election**



Adapted from Smull's Legislative Handbook (Harrisburgh: State Printers, 1917)

## Appendix II: Itemized list of archives and research sources

- I. ***New York Public Library*** (New York, NY)
  - a. Monthly Bulletin of the American Iron & Steel Institute that contains extensive information on welfare capitalism in the steel industry.
  - b. National Civic Federation Collection. (inc. Gertrude Beeks' papers)
  - c. United States Steel Corporation Collection - "Addresses and Statements by Elbert H. Gary" compiled and bound by the New York Public Library 1927.
  - d. *Iron Age* (trade publication).
- II. ***Hagley Museum and Library*** (Wilmington, DE)
  - a. Bethlehem Steel Collection (1850-1960).
  - b. Charles Schwab Papers.
  - c. Records of the American Iron and Steel Institute.
  - d. Records on the Special Conference Committee.
  - e. National Association of Manufacturers (1900-1970).
  - f. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Records.
  - g. Records of the National Industrial Conference Board (1916-1960)
- III. ***USX (U.S. Steel Corporation) Corporate Archives*** (Slippery Rock, PA)
  - a. Internal records on welfare capitalist policies in the steel industry
- IV. ***Baker Library Archives of the Harvard Graduate School of Business*** (Boston, MA)
  - a. Boston Chamber of Commerce Papers. Case 48, Folder 332-19, Baker Library Archives of the Harvard Graduate School of Business (a survey of welfare work companies)
- V. ***Cornell University – Keel Center for Labor-Management Archives*** (Ithaca, NY)
  - a. American Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers proceedings available on microfilm.
  - b. American Association of Labor Legislation
- VI. ***The Lawrence Country Historical Society*** (New Castle, PA)
  - a. New Castle newspapers from the gilded age and progressive era.
- VII. ***The New Castle Public Library*** (New Castle, PA)
  - a. Microfilm of most of the towns historic newspapers.
- VIII. ***Bethlehem Area Public Library*** (Bethlehem, PA)
  - a. Full run of main local newspapers beginning in 1867 and 1895.
  - b. City records beginning in 1867.
- IX. ***Historic Bethlehem*** (Bethlehem, PA)
  - a. A local-history library.
- X. ***Pennsylvania State University, Historical Collections and Labor Archives***
  - a. Andrew Carnegie papers
  - b. Charles Schwab papers
  - c. William B. Dickson papers
- XI. ***Library of Congress, Manuscript Division*** (Washington, D.C.)
  - a. Andrew Carnegie Papers
- XII. ***Pennsylvania Historical Society***
  - a. Historic maps to identify wards that were adjacent to steel mills.

## Government Reports

- I. ***U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.***
  - a. 1887. *The Inspection of Factories and Workshops in the United States*, Bulletin No. 12. (the bureau's recommendations on labor legislation)
  - b. 1904. *Labor Legislation in the United States*, Bulletin No. 54.
  - c. 1904. *The Working of the United States Bureau of Labor*, Bulletin No. 9.
  - d. 1913. *Employers' Welfare Work*. (a national survey on welfare work companies)
  - e. 1917. *Proceedings of the Employment Managers' Conference, Philadelphia, April 2 and 3*, Bulletin No. 227.
  - f. 1918. *Comparison of Workmen's Compensation Laws of the United States*.
  - g. 1918. *The Safety Movement in the Iron and Steel Industry, 1907-1917*, Bulletin No. 234.
  - h. 1919. *Welfare Work for Employees in Industrial Establishments in the United States*, Bulletin No. 250.
  - i. 1928. *Health and Recreation Activities in Industrial Establishments in the United States*. Bulletin No. 458.
  - j. 1967. *Growth of Labor Law in the United States*.
- II. ***National Industrial Conference Board***
  - a. 1929. *Industrial Relations in Small Plants*.
  - b. 1934. *Recent Developments in Industrial Group Insurance*.
  - c. 1936. *What Employers Are Doing for Employees*.
- III. ***U.S. Bureau of the Census.***
  - a. 1894. *Report of the Population of the United States at the Eleventh Census: 1890*.
  - b. 1924. *The Integration of Industrial Operations*.
  - c. *Historical, Demographic, Economic and Social Data: United States 1790-1960* (ICPSR 0003)
  - d. *U.S. Historical Election Returns 1788-1984* (ICPSR 0001)
  - e. 1975. *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*.
- IV. ***Bureau of Safety, Sanitation and Welfare Bulletin***
  - a. Eleven special issues were published on welfare capitalism between 1910 and 1926.
- V. ***United States Committee on Education and Labor.***
  - a. 1885. *Report upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital*.
- VI. ***Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry***
  - a. *Production, Immigration, Unemployment* (Harrisburgh. 1914)
  - b. *Report on Productive Industries in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for 1916-1919*. (Harrisburgh. 1920)
  - c. *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor and Industry: Statistics of Production, Wages, Employees 1915* (Harrisburgh. 1916)
- VII. ***Pennsylvania, Department of Internal Affairs, Bureau of Industrial Statistics.***
  - a. "Alleviation of Distress among Workingmen," *Fifteenth Annual Report*, 1887. in *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs*, vol. 15, pt. 3. 1888.
- VIII. ***Pennsylvania Bureau of Industrial Statistics.***
  - a. 1895. *Annual Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs*.

**Articles from the following journals/newspapers:**

*Iron City Trades Journal*

*National Labor Tribune*

*Iron Age*

*Monthly Bulletin of the American Iron & Steel Institute*

*Iron Trade Review*

*National Labor Tribune*

*New York World*

*Scranton Times*

*Survey*

*Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers*

*Amalgamated Journal*

*Free Press*

*New Castle News*

*Daily Times*

*Bethlehem Globe*

*Bethlehem Star*

*Bethlehem Review*

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