

THE YANKS ARE STRIKING: KERN COUNTY, THE 1921 OIL STRIKE
AND THE DISCOURSE ON AMERICANISM

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of California Polytechnic State University,

San Luis Obispo

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in History

by

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June 2020

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ABSTRACT

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Americanism

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In the fall of 1921 oil workers of the San Joaquin Valley faced a post-war economic slump, wage cuts across the board and an increasingly hostile attitude of oil operators towards consultation with the federal government on labor relations. They voted to strike, and the next day eight thousand workers walked off the fields. Strikers crafted an image of “patriotic unionism,” underpinned by a faith in the federal government and the ideology of the American Legion. The strike did not end in gruesome class warfare like had been seen months earlier in the coal mines of West Virginia, but rather in ideological confusion and despair. The oil workers movement never fully embraced a class identity; instead it embraced the burgeoning conservative identity of Americanism. This effectively hobbled the growth of the movement. Upon the strike’s conclusion there was no mass pull to the left on the part of oil workers in the San Joaquin Valley, despite the fact that their movement’s design and identity had gotten them nowhere. On the contrary a portion of workers and supporters of the strike turned to the nativism of the Klan. Overall this project looks to complicate the narrative of “us vs. them” in labor history by analyzing workers’ identities, and also looks to contribute to the ever-evolving discourse on how historians should track American conservatism as a social force.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is not the paper I set out to write. It is the product of a reaction to the evidence. The process was arduous and all consuming, and I feel obliged to thank those individuals that got me through it one way or another. I want to acknowledge my undergraduate mentor Jeanne Hahn for evolving the way I approach history with her frequent challenges to “find the prime mover.” I want to thank my thesis panel for their encouragement. Sarah Bridger for provoking me to find ways my project could reach beyond itself. Elizabeth Sine for graciously supporting me in a moment of need, and Andrew Morris for guiding my graduate experience. I need to thank my colleagues in the graduate program, who are my friends and brilliant scholars in their own right. I thank my family for never suggesting I drop the seemingly archaic study of history, and last but not least, I need to thank my fiancée for putting up with all of this, she might as well have written it herself.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If you were to drive from California's Yosemite Valley to the Central Coast, you would most likely take State Route 41. It is an unusual stretch of highway, one that takes its motorists through a myriad of landscapes, from ponderosa pine to the coastal piers that protrude into the Pacific. As you leave the seemingly infinite flatness of the San Joaquin Valley headed southwest, the landscape changes into a rolling hill country and for a brief moment you pass into the northwestern tip of Kern County. This point demarcates the north door into an underground sea of oil that still flows today. This sea stretches from Devil's Den south, buttressing the hills all the way down to Maricopa.

Wallace Morgan prefaced his historical survey of the region by reminding us that Kern County should first and foremost be thought of as a place of immense pursuit. It offered cheap land and plenty of it, land ripe with resources only in need of toil. He stated, "Think of such manifest richness as this and understand what dreams the pioneers indulged in, what cupidity and greed of gain were fostered, what clashes of strong, aggressive, resourceful men the scramble to possess these bounties of nature brought about."¹ Of course, writing in 1914, Morgan was aware of the fact that these riches were not meant for all, they were "locked with locks that golden keys alone could open."² Similarly

¹ Wallace M. Morgan, *History of Kern County, California* (Madison: Historic Record Company, 1914), 1.

² Morgan, *History*, 2.

Upton Sinclair compared the oil game to heaven, “where many are called and few are chosen.”³

By 1914, the Kern County oil industry had more semblance of competition than prior to the breakup of Standard; however, giants still loomed large in the market, and they held the “golden keys.” Standard Oil of California, Union, California Petroleum Company, Associated and Pacific Oil Companies and others owned and operated the oil fields from Maricopa north to Coalinga. In September of 1921 the oil workers of western Kern County faced a post-war economic slump, wage cuts across the board and the increasingly hostile attitude of oil operators towards consultation with the federal government on labor relations. On September 10 the oil workers voted to strike.

1.1 The State of Labor in the Industry

They did so as members of the International Association of Oil Field, Gas Well and Refinery Workers of America, which was granted its union charter from the AFL in 1918. Prior to this oil workers’ unions were comparatively small and diffuse. They were products of the industry’s migratory nature as well as the iron grip of Standard Oil.⁴ Workers would frequently need to move from lease to lease due to market fluctuations, overproduction or the discovery of new fields.⁵

The “first major strike in oil” was in 1905 outside Beaumont, Texas. It managed to stave off a wage cut, but gained only minor temporary traction for

³ Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 73.

⁴ See Ida Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Company, 1904).

⁵ Nancy Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats and Proletarians: Work, Class, and Politics in the California Oil Industry, 1917-1925” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 65.

unionism in the region.⁶ There was another in 1916 in Bayonne, New Jersey, but it ended even worse with nine strikers shot dead and fifty more wounded.⁷

Similarly in California, oil strikes and union drives largely floundered right up till 1917.⁸ Harvey O'Connor noted that "when a man talked union he was turned right out of camp."⁹ This changed with the onset of a wartime economy.

By 1918 and under AFL recognition, Locals sprang up throughout Kern County, particularly down the "'Ridge' along the western border of the Valley."¹⁰

Locals also blossomed in Texas and Los Angeles. These were all capable of immense variation in terms of strategy as well as rank and file ideology.

Whereas the Texas Locals had struck during the war, along with other industries, and Long Beach Local 128 had grown a reputation for radicalist sympathies, the San Joaquin Valley locals were proud to have not struck during wartime and grew increasingly conservative and ingrown.¹¹ The relationship between the Los Angeles locals and those of the San Joaquin Valley will be fleshed out in later chapters, but it should be noted up front that when the Kern County oil workers went on strike in 1921, they did it alone.

⁶ Harvey O'Connor, *History of Oil Workers International Union-CIO* (Denver: Oil Workers International Union-CIO, 1950), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ O'Connor, *History*, 9.

¹⁰ These included: Coalinga-Avenal Local 2, Taft Local 6, Kern River Local 19, Lost Hills Local 1, Maricopa Local 18, Fellows Local 13 and McKittrick Local 24. See O'Connor, *History of Oil Workers*, 428-429.

¹¹ Long Beach Local 128 had strong affiliations with the Longshoremen's Union dating back to the 1916 San Pedro Bay strike. The unionism of this region was broad and encompassed the radicalism of the I.W.W. and the idea of cross-industry solidarity. See John Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers 1880-2010* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 79-90.

1.2 The Kern County Strike

Thousands of workers walked off the fields that fall quickly establishing a strike zone, and oil operators beheld the “specter of a workers’ state.”¹² Broadly speaking, the oil workers movement can be seen as one of the last major strikes of 1919-1922 “wave” before labor fell into the “lean years” of the decade.¹³ However, it contradicts neat categorization and placement alongside other moments of labor unrest. Quam-Wickham briefly concludes that the union and their 1921 strike had “developed a critique of oil’s political economy that involved issues far beyond traditional labor concerns.”¹⁴

They did this through abandoning material “shop floor” objectives such as reducing wage cuts, demanding union recognition and safer working conditions. Instead they called for federal government oversight akin to that which they had experienced through the war period. They articulated a deep faith in the government that would not be infused with labor demands until the development of the CIO in the 1930s. This faith arose out of WWI and the Wilsonian era, both of which had fundamentally altered the relationship between Americans and the federal government. The sentiment was that if the government had the power to

¹² Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 214.

¹³ The common reaction to labor disputes in the immediate postwar period is one of inevitable surrender. None of the strikes during this moment are thought to have had any chance of success. We should be aware of this pitfall. Not only can this thinking lead to automatically lumping all strikes of the era into one homogenous pool, but it can also neglect moments of potential success. David Montgomery articulates that by 1921, “A reformation of trade-union policies along the lines advocated by the AFL’s progressive wing might have minimized labor’s losses, and it would certainly have left the federation better prepared to take advantage of the resurgence of economic activity in 1923.” See two works by David Montgomery: *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 453; “Thinking about American Workers in the 1920s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 32 (1987), 8.

¹⁴ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 2.

engage in conscription and demand intense loyalty to the war effort then it should also have the ability to support Americans after the war's conclusion.¹⁵

The Wilson administration heavily supervised the oil industry's spheres of labor relations, public leases and pollution control.¹⁶ For oil workers these were the good old days now under threat. Strikers crafted an image of "patriotic unionism," underpinned by a faith in the federal government, but also by the conservatism of the American Legion. The adoption of this ideology was unquestionable and an integral part of the strike's design from the onset. Strikers adorned "badges of red, white and blue," enforced prohibition and gambling laws, disdained radicalism and immigration, and "pinned their faith to Uncle Sam's signature."¹⁷

The strike had a unique ability to reach beyond immediate economic conditions and garner local political support; in that sense it had features more akin to a social movement.¹⁸ The strike lasted six weeks and paralyzed the state oil industry, but ultimately ended in defeat for the oil workers who were left to either return to work in Kern County under worse conditions than had existed before or migrate south to the oil fields of Los Angeles.

¹⁵ Jennifer Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 7-8.

¹⁶ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 123.

¹⁷ *Fresno Cooperative Californian*, September 24, 1921.

¹⁸ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 16.

1.3 The Design of the Strike

Labor historians such as Lawrence Goodwyn often argue that we ought to be wary of fixating on the “condescension of the past.”¹⁹ We usually study strikes to see what went wrong. The bulk of the historiography on the 1921 Kern County Oil Strike falls into this tendency. The strike was seen as “ephemeral,” a “dismal failure,” and “wrought with saboteurs.”²⁰ These all have varying degrees of validity; however, the strike was most hobbled by its own internal principles, how the strikers defined themselves and their objectives. Without looking to condescend to the oil workers, it still remains important to properly contextualize their movement, and identify why the strike unfolded the way it did.

The fact that Legionnaires comprised a vast portion of the rank and file and were able to overwhelmingly dominate the discourse between strikers, operators and the government is crucial. However, this is not unique, the West Virginia Coal Wars months earlier also contained a significant number of veteran strikers. In many ways these two strikes offer an insightful comparative analysis. They were underlaid by the seismic shift in industry from coal to petroleum-based fuel, they arose out of the post-WWI economic downturn and they were both carried out with highly organized military tactics. These features appear to make the two strikes commensurable, however, the nature of the struggles that ensued were quite different.

¹⁹ Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), XIV.

²⁰ Whitney Thompson-Tozier, “Armed with Badges of Red, White & Blue: The 1921 California Oil Strike and the End of Union Bargaining in ‘The Lean Years’” (M.A. thesis, California State University, Fresno, 2013), 3-4.

The Coal Mine Strike of 1921 was characterized by WWI veterans on *both* sides of the conflict. Unlike the situation in Kern County, there existed a local social buffer between the strikers and the mine owners. This antagonistic middle class throughout Mingo County, West Virginia was composed of lawyers, clerks, physicians, clergymen, contractors, car salesmen, bookkeepers, insurance men, merchants and American Legionnaires.²¹ This material shoring up of two oppositional forces, along with a multitude of other factors like Appalachian company town life, led to an unprecedented level of violence and bloodshed throughout the Coal Mine War period.

Not but a month later, the Kern County Oil Strike would supposedly boast an inversion of that picture. Quam-Wickham noted that by late September newspapers were describing it as “the most moral and sober strike ever pulled.”²² This was a strike of immense peculiarity in terms of *who* the bulk of the workers were and what the nature of their ideology was. Unlike the Mingo County middle class that stood in fierce opposition to strikers, the Kern County Oil strike was able to placate the local population to a certain degree. The strike was so comprehensive that it managed to become an active economic and political force in the region. Local businesses and professionals that did not support the strike were boycotted and local political offices including the sheriff and district attorney were propped up by the union. Whitney Thompson-Tozier states, “The oil workers gave their strike legitimacy by arguing that their message was rooted in

²¹ Lon Savage, *Thunder In the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920-1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 188.

²² Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 238.

patriotism and that their goal was to secure American values in the workplace.”²³

The strike essentially flipped the rhetoric of the red scare on its head. Instead of labor being on the defensive against Americanism, strikers argued that oil producers in the region were attempting to reduce the conditions of “red blooded American workers” to the level of Russian serfdom and that the producers’ rejection of government intermediation was akin to the hostility of the Kaiser which they had vehemently fought against in the war.

1.4 Moving Beyond “Us vs. Them”

Two primary questions arise: did the unique conservatism of this strike and its components benefit or hobble the movement, and how “moral and sober” was the strike?²⁴

²³ Thompson-Tozier, “Armed,” 25.

²⁴ The term conservatism as a characterization for historical subjects can be problematic. It often holds a rather nebulous meaning, capable of implying free market ideology one moment then nationalism the next. The discourse of American conservatism will be fleshed out in chapter 4 and will primarily involve historians’ reactions to it as a social force. The working definition of the term for the purposes of this project is couched in the language and beliefs of the American Legion. Coming out of WWI Legionnaires adopted a vision of American nationalism that was influenced by Progressivism, the Preparedness Movement and wartime service. This nationalism is what came to be called Americanism as the post-war decade ensued. The Legion’s interpretation was conservative because essentially it did not believe in drastic political or social change. This version of conservatism believed that the American political system was inherently fair and equitable, and that it alone was capable of solving societal problems. So unlike later formulations of American conservatism in the post-war period that revolved around limited government and free market ideology, the Legion’s conservatism centered around a severe loyalty to the federal government. Christopher Nehls argues that this was a “wartime conception of loyalty,” meaning there was no room for other social identities outside that of an American citizen, and that the American public was in need of constant policing. Legionnaires sought to police political behavior by ensuring that various other social identities were discouraged and that no radical change took place to American institutions. Nehls argues that Legionnaires tended to “define democracy more as a process rather than a set of civil rights or the free debate of political ideas.” Therefore Legionnaires such as those that composed the Kern County Oil Workers Movement, did not see policing people as a violation of American rights, but rather a necessary measure to ensure the country’s social and political cohesion.

By 1919 American Legion members were articulating that the war had awoken veterans to a newly forged bond with the American government, one that led them to feel as though they were an integral part of the government itself, and no longer careless detached citizens. This newly crafted civic consciousness of the ex-servicemen was aiming to redefine American national identity.²⁵

Americanism, as it came to be called, was never a precise ideology and more frequently defined itself in contrast to what it was not. It stemmed from a belief that American democracy had crafted a “common status and identity for all citizens based on the equality of opportunity and freedoms they all shared.”²⁶ This implied that Americans had a responsibility to politically behave in such a way as to protect the institutions that granted those freedoms.

A critical component of this behavior was to reject the impulses of outside identities. Legionnaires denied the legitimacy of class or ethnic consciousness, preferring citizens instead think of themselves as “100-percent” Americans with single, nationally focused civic identities.”²⁷ Kern County oil workers attempted to balance their class identity with their sense of American nationalism, as if both were one in the same, that the well-being of American labor was inherent in American nationalism. They hitched their material class desires to ideological nationalism and got caught in between its larger transitioning in American politics.

²⁵ Christopher Courtney Nehls, “‘A Grand and Glorious Feeling:’ The American Legion and American Nationalism Between the World Wars” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2007), 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

Under a growing conservative retreat from progressive era policies, the oil workers' economic conditions grew worse through wage cuts and lack of federal mediation. They chose to strike, but did so without fully embracing their class identity. They distanced themselves from radical labor frameworks. They wavered on the issue of nationalization. They chose not to call for a larger statewide strike, chose not to strike the refining positions so as not to damage the "Great Pacific Fleet" and ultimately capitulated to every request from the Labor Department. Their faith in the federal government was misplaced by 1921, and effectively hobbled the growth of the movement beyond the local level. They were a labor movement out of place, relying solely on government action when the Harding administration's burgeoning atmosphere was one of "less government in business."

1.5 The Operations of Conservatism

Historians concerned with the 1921 strike have noted the workers' "patriotic unionism," but often found it a rather scrupulous component of the movement. The "moral and sober" question is pivotal because it deals with the fundamental characteristics of American conservatism that were being formulated at this moment by groups such as the American Legion. This type of conservatism was designed to underlay American nationalism. It was to be concerned with citizenry, anti-radicalism, stability of American institutions and disregard for other forms of social and political identification. Technically it was also supposed to be about law and order and the pro-Americanization of

immigrants. In reality it was *always* difficult for this brand of Americanism to uphold these values. These were the values in *principle*, hardly ever in practise.

Kern County oil strikers did not simply employ the rhetoric of the American Legion, but also its propensity for violence and racial outlook. The violence is aptly demonstrated in a number of altercations that strike “law and order committees” engaged in with potential scabs, bystanders, Wobblies and “wets,” and their stance on racial integration was staunchly hostile. Oil workers’ willingness to resort to vigilantism in order to police the civic behavior of the community, as well as their intent to shape the demographics of it, reflect their embrace of the identity of Americanism.

Upon the strike’s conclusion and despite the fact that their movement’s conservative design and identity had not led to any form of success, there was no mass pull to the left on the part of oil workers in the San Joaquin Valley. On the contrary a portion of workers and supporters of the strike turned to the nativism of the Klan. The organization saw a swift rise throughout Kern County in early 1922, and offered another version of Americanism: one that did not even vaguely believe in integration, had a wider array of scapegoats to choose from for society’s ills and had no qualms about engaging in lawlessness to enforce its perceived “moral code.”

1.6 A Conservative Strike

Despite all of this, the oil workers’ movement should still command a certain degree of respect. The economic conditions they were protesting were severe; twelve-hour days spent drenched in oil and beaten down upon by an

inescapable heat, all set to a hellish backdrop of “barren brown hills and valleys that exhale the ineffable perfume of sulpherated hydrogen.”²⁸ The oil workers were reacting against a grim lived reality, in the words of E.P. Thompson, “their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience.”²⁹

The strikers may have been acting upon conservative values, but they were acting none the less, and not as moral patriots or bigoted fanatics, astute laborers or blind sheep, family men or violent roughnecks, but as American laborers somehow exhibiting all of this against the backdrop of a strike, capitalism and a post-war society. The strike was neither moral nor sober, instead it was invariably tense, underpinned by the Legion’s racialized world view and penchant for vigilante violence. The strikers’ movement was built upon unstable ideological ground. Their dire economic situation led them to materially organize along class lines, in the form of a strike, but their class identity quickly took a backseat and proved secondary to conservative rhetoric and actions that placed staunch Americanism first. The oil workers’ movement and its fallout demonstrates that class formations could be severely complicated by identity as far back as the 1920s. It also demonstrates that American conservatism as an animating social force will not always operate according to “slow and steady” or “idealized” principles; a starker more grim variety can prove quickly adopted and implemented.

²⁸ Philip K. Carnine, "Coalinga and Fresno," *Fresno Labor News*, September 1, 1919.

²⁹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 3.

CHAPTER 2

THE BOOM & THE BACKGROUND

Kern County and the larger San Joaquin Valley acquired the discouraging title of “armpit of California” sometime over the past few decades, and to this day it can represent a regrettable corridor, one whose arid landscape fills motorists’ minds with images of backwardness.³⁰ However, in the 1910s, Kern County was an auspicious location for modern development. Wallace Morgan exclaimed in 1914, “There is always some big thing doing in Kern County!” The region’s most critical resource was its underground sea of oil. Morgan challenged his readers to “ask the first man you meet in the streets of Bakersfield what gave the town its great boost forward about the year 1900, and he is very likely to answer it was the discovery of the oil fields.”³¹ While it is true that the region was also ripe for agricultural development, these prospects by the late 19th century were marred by battles over water rights and a lack of cheap labor. Oil alone was Kern County’s medium for expressing its modernity.

The 1910s was not so much a moment of oil *discovery* in the region, but rather a moment of conjunction between existing oil fields, increased market opportunities and industrial technologies.³² Oil as a commodity could not simply be mined out of rock and sold later that day like the precious metals that filled the surrounding mountains of Kern County. Right up until the late 19th century, oil being procured in the region was crude and “asphalt-like.” This was until James

³⁰ Aaron Gilbreath, “Driving the San Joaquin Valley: An Afternoon with Starbucks Customers in the Armpit of California,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 23, 2015.

³¹ Morgan, *History*, 126.

³² *Ibid.*, 127.

and Jonathan Elwood tapped into an underground sea of oil at the Kern River Field in 1899, and the resulting boom funneled people into Kern from all over the country.³³

This was followed by the “age of the gushers” commencing in 1910 and most aptly exemplified by the Lakeview No. 1 well in western Kern County, which erupted like a volcano that spring and rampaged for eighteen months, ultimately flooding the surrounding countryside with an estimated nine million barrels of oil.³⁴ Oil workers were forced to paddle boats across a black sea in attempts to “sandbag” the ferocious gusher. One after another, wells erupted along the western hills of Kern County dissolving the imaginary boundary of its underground ocean of oil once thought to only inhabit the areas along the Kern River. Wallace concluded that “it fueled the promises of the wildest of wildcat oil promoters and there was a rush of tenderfeet into the oil game.”³⁵

This growth of Kern County and the booming of the oil fields occurred despite the fact that the gushers were driving the price of oil down to an almost flat line. The oil of the region proved too varied in quality, too large in quantity and too reliant upon infrastructure to make it to market in any immediate manner. After the initial boom of excitement waned through the 1910s, small scale oil producers withered under low prices and only the giants such as Union, Standard and the Associated Oil Company had enough capital to hold out through

³³ Morgan, *History*, 130.

³⁴ William Rintoul, *Oildorado: Boom Times on the Westside* (Santa Cruz: Valley Publishers, 1978), 4-5.

³⁵ Morgan, *History*, 144.

subprime market conditions.³⁶ Quickly these large oil companies and others formed an oligopoly and bought out remaining large tracts of land alongside the Southern Pacific Railroad holdings. Kern County's line between its capitalists and its laborers grew starker as the region flexed its modernity.

The oil boom drove ensuing advancements in regional agricultural, permanent city construction, civic standards and modern sensibilities.³⁷ In 1912 Western Kern County hosted the Washington's Birthday Road Race in which motorists ripped through the "vulcanized landscape" of the oil fields atop modified fifty-horsepower engines and visiting spectators commented on the region's "spirit of enthusiasm and boost that marks the strides of progress."³⁸ In 1913 the newly built C & C Theatre screened *Opportunity*, a film that depicted a young oil worker rising through the ranks of industry against the backdrop the westside oil fields, and Bakersfield residents filled the Popular Pastime Theatre in the Spring of 1914 to catch a glimpse of The Vitagraph Company's cinematic production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.³⁹

Contests of physical fitness and a growing desire for moments of leisure permeated the fields of Kern County. In the fall of 1913 Taft hosted a 20-round heavyweight boxing match between Sam Langford and Jack Lester during which an accident at the Kern Trading & Oil Company's No. 21 well caused thousands of barrels of flaming oil to shoot up into the air.⁴⁰ Local newspapers devoted

³⁶ Morgan, *History*, 147.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁸ Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37; "Uncle Tom's Cabin Produced by the Vitagraph Company," *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 5, 1914.

⁴⁰ Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 71.

entire sections of their print to covering local baseball leagues, boxing contests and road racing.⁴¹ Oil workers were keen to spend their wages on the latest spectacle during what little free time they had. Michael McGerr notes that progressivism applauded a “responsible use of leisure,” and sought a “middle ground between the idler and the man who works himself to death.”⁴²

Unfortunately oil workers of California obtained less leisure time than laborers in other industries right through the progressive era. Average manufacturing wages had increased through the 1910s and the total number of hours worked had slowly decreased, but conditions in the oil industry had stagnated. By 1914 the majority of manufacturing workers in California had earned the eight-hour day.⁴³ Meanwhile oil workers slogged through twelve-hour days drenched in the product of their labor. Industrial accidents such as Taft oil worker Ed Ernest catching his hand in a derrick catline that ripped off all his fingers were an everyday occurrence.⁴⁴ California oil workers grew increasingly aware of their economic precarity and exploitation as the 1910s wore on.

2.1 The “Tankies” Strike of 1914

On March 6, 1914, boilermakers of the Standard Oil lease in Wasco went on strike in response to company attempts at a stretch-out and began their march to the western oil fields in an attempt to stir up other “tankies” in

⁴¹ “Bakersfield Loses League Team to Modesto,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 2, 1914.

⁴² Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 251.

⁴³ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 121.

⁴⁴ “Ernest Loses Two Fingers of Right Hand,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 4, 1914.

solidarity.⁴⁵ In the beginning, local reaction to the strike was subdued, distracted by “General” Charles Kelly’s unemployed army and their march to Washington with plans to join Jacob Coxey’s movement.⁴⁶ Kelly’s “army” was primarily composed of I.W.W. members and was moving east through Sacramento when they were bogged down in Yolo County by a posse of local deputies and Southern Pacific goons. Five hours down the California Grapevine Kern County residents were anxious of such large-scale aggression. One editorial exclaimed that these “armies” were nothing but “deplorable bums” who should be forced to work, and that if communities continued to allow such behavior California would soon face a “vexatious question.”⁴⁷

Progressive Governor Hiram Johnson refused to aid the “army” in any way, but was hesitant to call out the state militia and instead believed that local authorities could handle the situation.⁴⁸ He was still wrangling with the fallout from the Wheatland Hop Riot several months before that had resulted in four deaths and the paranoia that Wobbly sabotage lurked behind every corner.⁴⁹ The “tankies” strike was successful in reaching Taft and calling out fellow workers from the fields, however their numbers only ever reached upwards of a hundred. *Solidarity* took responsibility for the strike’s organization that spring; however, local reports indicated that the oil workers shared few affiliations to any

⁴⁵ “Standard Workers Strike At Tank Farm Near Wasco,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 6, 1914.

⁴⁶ “Unemployed Start on Long Journey,” *Hanford Sentinel*, March 5, 1914.

⁴⁷ “The Way To Scatter It,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 6, 1914.

⁴⁸ “Governor Sharply Rebukes I.W.W. Leaders Who Ask Aid,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 7, 1914.

⁴⁹ Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 172.

organization, much less the I.W.W.⁵⁰ Dubofsky reminds us that the I.W.W. was always quick to claim credit for a strike and even quicker to stoke suspicions of how bad things could get.⁵¹

By March 27, the strike was still underway and oil workers were picketing the Standard Oil Camp driving away all potential scabs. Initial reports were favorable for the strikers, who claimed they were looking to operate peacefully and without disruption to the local communities of the west side fields.⁵² Some local newspapers changed their tune once violence broke out against strikebreakers in Taft, claiming that “city officials will take means to relieve the community of the menace of this turbulent army!”⁵³ Somewhere amongst all this excitement on the westside the 150 “tankies” on strike became an “army,” but local residents remained rather unalarmed by their activities. A *Bakersfield Californian* editorial praised the region’s “red-faced oil men” for their contributions, charity and “24-karat hearts of gold.”⁵⁴ It appeared so long as violence was not rampant, strong civic sentiments connected Kern County and its oil workers.

On April 7, the month-long strike had ended in rather anticlimactic fashion. Standard Oil workers would receive no end to the company stretch out and no increase in wages. Instead they wound up demanding and receiving the dismissal of the oil camp’s Chinese cooks, their immediate replacement with

⁵⁰ *Solidarity*, April 18, 1914; “Chinese Cooks Are Said To Be Cause of Boilermakers’ Strike At Camps of Standard Throughout Oil Field,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 9, 1914.

⁵¹ Dubofsky, *We Shall Be*, 171-173.

⁵² “Standard Tankies Are Picketing Camp,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 27, 1914.

⁵³ “Striking Tank Men Alleged to Have Attacked Men,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 30, 1914.

⁵⁴ “Red Faced Oil Men,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 1, 1914.

white cooks and a cut in the cost of board.⁵⁵ Local papers considered the entire event frivolous claiming that the oil workers might as well have not gone on strike at all given such meager change in outcome, one that could have been settled a month ago.⁵⁶ Standard Oil quickly shook off the temporary lull in production and soon after published a report on the state of industry in Kern County which detailed unprecedented figures closing in on 300,000 barrels a day.⁵⁷ Industry periodicals exclaimed, “California’s oil fields are a force to be reckoned with!”⁵⁸

2.2 Oil and the Progressive Era

Due to a plateau in constant capital and oil refining technologies by 1915, the oil oligopoly that had formed in Kern County was increasingly reliant upon sheer production to generate profits crippling the major companies’ capacity for labor concessions.⁵⁹ Kern County oil workers continually struggled to see a “square deal,” instead it was more of the same. On April 18, seven oil workers at the Kern Trading & Oil Company fell thirty five feet through the roof of a petroleum reservoir before the ensuing timber and heavy equipment came crashing down upon their bodies leaving nothing but a crude amalgam of “flesh, wood and steel.”⁶⁰ Not but three days later Kern County hosted its own “Homecoming Week,” furnished with the largest parade Bakersfield had ever

⁵⁵ “Tank Farm Strikers Are Returning To Work; Price of Board Reduced,” *Bakersfield Morning Echo*, April, 7, 1914.

⁵⁶ “Standard Strikers Were Offered Same Terms,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 8, 1914.

⁵⁷ “Two Hundred Eighty-Six Thousand, Five Hundred Barrels Daily In The Month of March,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 23, 1914.

⁵⁸ “State of The Industry in California,” *National Petroleum News Vol. XIII No. I*, August, 1916.

⁵⁹ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 119.

⁶⁰ “Seven Men Fall Thirty-Five Feet As Girder Gives Way,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 18, 1914.

seen, marching bands, motor races and rodeos.⁶¹ Local papers boasted of the county's "steady development and continued progress" and advertised its opportunities for the "the home seeker, the capitalist and the wage earner."⁶²

This type of irony was not lost on Hiram Johnson who on April 25, facing a crowd in Bakersfield, exclaimed to Kern County business owners, "We say to you, figure into your business the broken human being, and we will all pay for it, just exactly as we pay for your broken machinery!"⁶³ However, Johnson consistently failed to poll well in Kern County. Local editorials claimed the progressives were responsible for California's social upheavals of the past two years and that big money surrounded the Bull Moose.⁶⁴ In 1914 Kern County was a democratic stronghold and progressives held little political influence. In fact it was the only county in the state where Socialists out-registered Progressives.⁶⁵ This was all despite the fact that Johnson was the first governor to introduce an aggressive state regulatory apparatus in the face of capital.⁶⁶ However, it was an apparatus that was young and had the potential for both positive and negative impacts on oil workers. By 1914 progressivism's political economy appeared more interested in curtailing the "wickedly wasteful methods" by which oil was produced, and this often meant calls for scientific management

⁶¹ "Bakersfield Extends Hearty Greeting to Home Coming Guests," *Bakersfield Morning Echo*, April, 21, 1914.

⁶² "Welcome To Kern County," *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 4, 1914.

⁶³ "Big Crowd Greets Gov. Johnson and John M. Eshleman," *Bakersfield Morning Echo*, April, 28, 1914.

⁶⁴ "Ask The Colonel," *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 22, 1914.

⁶⁵ "Democracy Leads In Kern County By Over 1200," *The Bakersfield Californian*, March 30, 1914; 1912 U.S. Census, Kern County, California, U.S. Presidential elections.

⁶⁶ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 126-127.

which “could both defend and attack workers' status in industry.”⁶⁷ Oil workers living in company tents surrounded by western Kern County sagebrush were rightly skeptical and failed to fully embrace government intervention at this juncture. Hofstader’s image of the progressive “everywhere visibly, palpably, almost pathetically respectable” was not one likely to be encountered in the western oil fields.⁶⁸

California’s “age of gushers” may have coincided with the fervor of the progressive era, but the state’s oil oligopoly proved too strong and vertically integrated to be challenged in any meaningful way until 1917 with the onset of a wartime political economy when oil workers themselves would undergo a shift in the way they perceived government intervention in industry.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 116.

⁶⁸ Richard Hofstader, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York City: Random House, 1955), 131.

⁶⁹ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 120-122.

CHAPTER 3

“OVER THERE” & “OVER HERE”

Despite the fact that by 1917 Kern County and the rest of America sat at the edge of two decades rife with social and political upheaval, marked by mass immigration, unscrupulous concentration of wealth and ubiquitous labor unrest, Americans were not ignorant of the war in Europe. As Christopher Cappazola argues, prior to joining the fray, Americans’ “neutrality did not imply apathy.”⁷⁰ Instead, Americans developed an unprecedented fascination with world maps as they eagerly traced the events of war and pinpointed places such as Serriavo and Gallipoli.

Americans at this time, particularly within the western border states, were also highly aware of actions connected to the Mexican Revolution which they did not see as separate from the events of the war in Europe.⁷¹ Kern County newspapers touted front page headlines concerning the movements of Carranza, Huerta and Villa.⁷² Capozzola rightly contends that historians have not done enough to incorporate the Mexican Revolution into an American understanding of WWI, however this transnationalism can be stretched even further to also integrate Americans’ understanding of radicalism. Through various radical permutations Mexicans and Americans were in a constant binational flux with one another, spreading ideas and information, organizing strikes and forays into

⁷⁰ Christopher Capozzola, “Observation, Donation, Action: Americans Respond to War 1914-1915,” (Lecture, National World War I Museum and United States World War I Centennial Commission 2014 Symposium, Kansas City, November 7, 2014).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Before I Resign Half of Mexico Will Die With Me, Huerta,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, April 27, 1914.

social movements.⁷³ Kern County, a mere 250 miles from the border, was a geographical node for agricultural and industrial laborers, a region ripe for the intersection of radicals from both nations. Wobblies even boasted to have “expropriated” horses from Hearst Ranch to aid Mexican revolutionaries.⁷⁴ Ultimately Americans, including those of Kern County, felt increasingly connected to world events and were not taken by surprise when the vacuum-like presence of WWI began pulling their country into the conflict.

Woodrow Wilson initially urged Americans to be “impartial in thought as well as in action.”⁷⁵ A tall order for Wilson himself whose 1916 campaign slogan read “he kept us out of the war,” but who privately mused that “the German philosophy was essentially selfish and lacking in spirituality,” and that “England is fighting our fight.”⁷⁶ He was not alone through the neutrality period. Americans as a whole were grappling with the “German mind,” particularly the higher criticism of German theology that perceived scripture as mere metaphor, which was hostile and barbaric enough before being amalgamated with German U-boat activities.⁷⁷

These activities had briefly subsided after the initial shock of the *Lusitania* in 1915, but were resumed by early 1917 when Germany took the gamble to

⁷³ Devra Anne Weber, “Wobblies of the Partido Liberal Mexicano: Reenvisioning Internationalist and Transnational Movements through Mexican Lenses,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 85 No. 2 (May 2016), 1.

⁷⁴ Mark Leier, *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden, Revolutionary, Mystic, Labour Spy* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2013), 22.

⁷⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (New York: Vintage Books, 1948), 338.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁷⁷ Capozzola, “Observation,” 9:00.

mount one final offensive.⁷⁸ With Russia rumbling in internal revolution and French morale dwindling, Germany reignited submarine belligerence seeking to “knock Britain out by starvation before the United States could bring her force to bear; a gamble that almost succeeded in the summer of 1917.”⁷⁹

Wilson sat on the eve of approaching Congress for a declaration of war acutely aware of what it implied. Frank Cobb of the New York *World* visited him that night where Wilson argued, “lead this people into war and they’ll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance.”⁸⁰ The atmosphere in America that spring was increasingly tense. Anti-war sentiments from the socialist and populist wings withered under shouts of treason. David Kennedy notes, “There seemed indeed to be something inexorable in the air, some sucking wind from across the Atlantic, drawing the United States into the vortex of the gruesome conflict.”⁸¹ America’s door into a world of fear and hysteria was creaking open.

3.1 Preparedness and Perceived Dissent

First progressivism itself needed to abandon its apprehensions and bend its principles to accommodate war. Thoughtful men and women had to subvert the American isolationist claim or the “ancient rule” by arguing that they were not going to fight Europeans, but rather what Europe meant to the American mind. The war was recast from calamity to crusade. A crusade against Old World barbarism, essentially coercive and therefore fundamentally un-American. As

⁷⁸ Christopher Capozzola, “Uncle Sam Wants You,” interview with Greg Peterson, Robert H. Jackson Center, February 22, 2018, audio, 13:00.

⁷⁹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 348.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁸¹ David Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 23.

Kennedy states, “America was going to war against the past.”⁸² Intellectuals of the progressive movement like John Dewey argued that Germany must be crushed so that “social possibilities” can arise and progressive ideals can truly flourish.⁸³ Americans’ accommodation of war enabled them to extract the possibilities of pushing liberalism, education and progress to utopian levels. They began to believe that “war was the forge in whose fires they might shape a new ethos of social duty and civic responsibility.”⁸⁴

Of course, right beneath the surface of progressivism’s ideals was a growing sense of American nationalism and the heightened awareness of “others” that fell outside its perceived parameters. If the old world was barbaric, among its worst inhabitants were the savage Huns. Wilson aided in painting this portrait when in 1915 he warned of disloyalty from the “millions of men and women of German birth and native sympathy who live among us,” to which the crowd rumbled in applause.⁸⁵ Anti-German sentiment rapidly grew ferocious, it came to sanction state restrictions on teaching the German language, if not attempts to fully outlaw it, as well as massive restrictions on the German press.⁸⁶ It initiated dozens of “patriotic organizations” often filled with nativists not only looking to spread the gospel of 100% Americanism, but dole out vigilante punishment to “hyphenated” Americans.

⁸² Kennedy, *Over Here*, 42.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁶ Duncan Moench, “Anti-German Hysteria and the Making of the ‘Liberal Society,’” *American Political Thought*, Vol. 7 (Winter 2018), 86.

Capozzola argues that Americans in this period walked a fine line between vigilance and vigilantism.⁸⁷ On the one hand vigilant American citizens were organizing themselves into civic groups such as the YMCA and the Salvation Army, and were acting upon “long standing traditions equating citizenship with obligation.”⁸⁸ On the other hand vigilante groups engaged in physical violence and murder by reorienting “the place of law in the system of political obligation.”⁸⁹ The growing nationalist sentiment may have stood on a shared ideological ground of citizenship, civic duty and Americanism, but within those categories Americans brought their own definitions and prescriptions to bear.

The “war for the American mind” also possessed “top down” components. In 1917 Wilson appointed former muckraker George Creel to head the Committee on Public Information which also came to walk a fine line, one between an appeal to America’s tradition of consensus and crude propaganda. As America’s involvement in the war increased, so did the institution’s calls for “accelerated Americanization.” Kennedy notes, “the overbearing concern for ‘correct’ opinion, for expression, for language itself and the creation of an enormous propaganda apparatus to nurture the desired state of mind and excoriate all dissenters” was strikingly Orwellian.⁹⁰

However, 100% Americanism was never *solely* looking to confront German people themselves, it was also compelled to eradicate the political *impulses* of German thought. An early formation of American national

⁸⁷ Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 118.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁰ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 62.

“character” began formulating itself. Duncan Moench argues that, “it joined notions of Anglo ethnicity with concepts of liberal political thought and excluded Americans of German origin and the ‘deviant’ nonliberal thought their communities were seen as favoring.”⁹¹ These “deviant” forms of political thought were never well articulated. As with much of the Americanism that developed during this period, it often defined itself by what it was not.⁹²

Writing for the *Nation*, Fredrick Lewis Allen argued, “The only way to fight Prussianism is with Prussian tools. The danger is lest we forget the lesson of Prussianism: that the bad brother of discipline is tyranny.”⁹³ 100% Americanism was a frequently confused ideology, but it approximated danger as being somewhere in between the German state, barbaric German culture and Germans themselves.⁹⁴ One *Bakersfield Californian* editorial in 1917 read,

Germany is an idea. The modern German has been so insistently and methodically taught that he is a superman, chosen by God to impose his will on the heart, he never doubts it. The German Socialist is no exception. There is only one way to reach the modern German. Beat him over the head! He understands nothing else. The world must go on beating him over the head until he says ‘enough’ otherwise the world can never live with him.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Moench, “Anti-German,” 87.

⁹² Moench attempts to demonstrate that Americanism’s roots stretch back to the Know-Nothing culture of the mid-19th century. He argues that Protestant Americans were always concerned by the immigration of Catholics from Ireland and Germany. They believed Catholics were inherently incapable of adapting to Protestant American life based on “participatory politics of the country’s republican, self-governing municipalities” because they were accustomed to looking for “external” guidance from the Catholic church. In other words they were prone to authoritarianism. The original formulation of this analysis was done by Louis Hartz in *The Liberal Tradition of America*. Moench is interested in revamping the Harztian framework to accommodate political as well as ethnic exclusionary tendencies within the American liberal tradition.

⁹³ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 43.

⁹⁴ Capozzola, *Uncle Sam*, 182.

⁹⁵ “Is The Kaiser A Tool,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, August 8, 1917.

Moench points out that the “deviant” political traditions of Germans or other perceived enemies could be any “socialist, anarchist, or social democratic political thought outside the Anglo-American liberal norm.”⁹⁶ The American Socialist Party had grown at a steady pace through the 1910s and by 1917 it stood tall as the largest bastion of organized anti-war sentiment in the country. Prior to the violent reflex action of Wilson’s America, the Socialist Party’s presence held a comfortable ubiquity. It had gained 6 percent of the presidential vote in 1912, won hundreds of political appointments across the country and distributed some of the most commonly read and vibrant press of the era.⁹⁷ The Party’s presence in Kern County was just as strong, where socialists out registered progressives by the thousands, town libraries of the west side were filled with Socialist literature and mass meetings were held on a monthly basis.⁹⁸

In early 1917 Samuel Gompers and the AFL struggled to reflect a unified opinion of the rank and file regarding the war.⁹⁹ The Socialist Party seemed poised to gain ground among American workers wary of belligerence. It took a joint effort between Gompers and the Wilson administration to entice workers with the opportunities of wartime mobilization and at the same time denounce opposition to the war.¹⁰⁰ The Espionage Act, imposed that June, proved to be an unscrupulous tool for stamping out American socialist sentiment and other labor

⁹⁶ Moench, “Anti-German,” 87.

⁹⁷ Paul Heideman, “The Rise and Fall of the Socialist Party of America,” *Jacobin*, February 20, 2017.

⁹⁸ Rintoul, *Oildorado*, 2.

⁹⁹ David Montgomery reminds us that the majority of AFL workers up to this point were German and Irish, and that in all likelihood Germans were apprehensive to fight their cousins just as the Irish were apprehensive about supporting the British while their mother country still raged for independence.

¹⁰⁰ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 28-29.

radicalism such as the I.W.W. It enabled decimation of the radical labor press and the ability to throw “persons obstructing military operations during wartime” into twenty-year prison sentences.¹⁰¹ Radical labor organizations in America were perceived as engaged in both.

Kern County editorials warned of the “misguided efforts” of the People’s Council of America and other anti-war contingents while boosting that, “the steady unswerving spirit and clear discerning mind of the American people will be untroubled by the machinations of the enemy and his allies in the United states.”¹⁰² The preparedness movement sought the formation of a deep social compact between Americans and the state propped up by “loyalty,” “pep” and “the spirit of service.” These notions were not only intended to compel Americans to dutifully accept the war, but also to conceive of their role as altruistic and oblige them to “serve a sphere wider than their own.”¹⁰³ One Kern County editorial exclaimed “idleness ought not be tolerated...men ought to find some useful occupation now, in time of need, and if they do not then Uncle Sam should find it for them!”¹⁰⁴

Nothing revealed the seismic shifts in American society at this moment like conscription. It established a deep social contract between soldiers and the federal government based on accepting the legitimate authority of the state and its ability to profoundly affect soldiers' lives.¹⁰⁵ Kennedy states, “the central problem of the age was somehow to substitute an ethos of cooperative

¹⁰¹ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 26.

¹⁰² “To Misguide The Unwary,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 3, 1917.

¹⁰³ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 154.

¹⁰⁴ “No Idleness Now,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, May 1, 1917.

¹⁰⁵ Keene, *Doughboys*, 4.

nationalism for the obsolescent credo of narrow self-interest.”¹⁰⁶ This passage of American society from scattered individualism to collective nationalism was best described by Herbert Croly who saw it as an application of “Hamiltonian means to Jeffersonian ends.” Americans were increasingly called upon to define themselves as part of a larger whole through action. Capozzola states, “When Uncle Sam jabbed his finger at the American public he pointed out their rights...who was or was not an American...but mostly he pointed at people because he wanted them to do something.”¹⁰⁷ The people of Kern County proved eager to oblige him.

State newspapers boasted headlines such as “Kern far exceeds draft quota” and “Kern after draft record!” all commending Kern County’s rather high enlistment and draft numbers.¹⁰⁸ Americans’ sense of duty, sacrifice and obligation were felt as strongly in Kern County as anywhere else. City and county authorities rounded up “slackers and evaders” by the truck-load dumping them out in the desert or throwing them jail for “disloyalty.”¹⁰⁹ Capozzola states that in the mind of the dutiful American, “slackers were not just bad citizens, but inadequate men.”¹¹⁰ Kern County residents boasted that even if victory of the war “over there” remains uncertain, the “war at home” against slackers, socialists and all other varieties of “inadequate men” will be decisively won.¹¹¹ Everyday

¹⁰⁶ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 153-154.

¹⁰⁷ Capozzola, *Uncle Sam*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ “Kern Far Exceeds Gross Draft Quota,” *Sacramento Union*, August 27, 1917; “Kern After Draft Record,” *Santa Barbara Morning Press* August 26, 1917.

¹⁰⁹ “Evaders Are To Be Nosed Out of Kern,” *Santa Barbara Morning Press*, August 7, 1917; “Drafted, Refuses To Join Army,” *Mariposa Gazette*, September, 15, 1917.

¹¹⁰ Capozzola, *Uncle Sam*, 31.

¹¹¹ “The War At Home,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 4, 1917.

Americans from the bottom up were converging with the Wilson-Creel propaganda from the top, meeting in the middle and crafting an atmosphere where it was “dangerous to be disrespectful.”¹¹²

3.2 A New Kind of Capitalism

America’s political economy was rapidly shifting under Wilson who increasingly believed that American ideals of individualism, opportunity and competition *required* the state to act.¹¹³ David Montgomery argues, “mobilization of the economy for war production locked the administrative structures of business and government tightly together, while full employment augmented workers’ ability to win strikes and improve their terms of employment.”¹¹⁴ Labor unions quickly held the upper hand against employers who were forced to concede to state-coordinated planning and management. A shrill nightmare in the mind of a Gilded Age capitalist; prices and production levels were set, labor disputes were mediated through the National War Labor Board and industries crucial to the war effort were either nationalized or threatened by nationalization.

Labor rank and file had finally gotten a taste of power and were eager to flex their abilities through the war period. Despite the three-pronged calls from business, government and the AFL to be patriotic and halt wartime striking, large-

¹¹² “Disrespect Dangerous,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 4, 1917.

¹¹³ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 335-336. Wilson evolved on the issue of the role of the state right through the progressive era. Early on he sought middle ground between plutocracy and the masses. He was seen as a safer, more sober political option in 1912 compared to Roosevelt or Bryan, even though by the end of his second term he privately mused that “government will have to take over all the great natural resources, the water power, the coal mines, the oil fields...if I should say that outside people will call me a socialist.”

¹¹⁴ David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

scale strikes boomed between 1916 and 1918.¹¹⁵ Workers' material conditions had improved immensely, but their *ideas* concerning the workplace had also begun to flourish as they experimented with increasingly democratic forms of shop-floor production and sought to challenge the scientific management of the age.¹¹⁶

3.3 Kern County Oil Workers Unionize

Kern County oil workers began their campaigns for unionization in the spring of 1917 and a year later were granted union charters, through the AFL, for locals throughout the Kern County oil fields under the recognition International Association of Oil Field, Gas Well and Refinery Workers of America.¹¹⁷ However, unlike the unions in the timber or copper industry that hamstrung wartime production with massive strikes, the Oil Workers Union was conceived as an organization that sought only to operate "along the most conservative and best proven lines of labor unionism."¹¹⁸ It sought the "bread and butter" basics of shorter days, better wages and improved working conditions.

No matter how conservative and patriotic the Oil Workers Union set out to be, oil operators took every chance they got to slander, harass or threaten them after their AFL charter was approved and thousands of Kern County workers had joined. Oil operators roped popular news outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times* into portraying the Oil Workers Union as wrought with Wobbly influence and in

¹¹⁵ Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014), 103.

¹¹⁶ Montgomery, *The Fall*, 6-7.

¹¹⁷ *Kern County Union Labor Journal*, September 22, 1917.

¹¹⁸ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 159.

league with agents of the Kaiser.¹¹⁹ The union struggled to maintain solidarity under the conservative ideology that sought “industrial peace” and claimed to have no desire to disadvantage the oil operators. Oil workers still slogged through the twelve-hour day at low wages, while unions in most other industries had already won the eight-hour day. A strong contingent of the rank and file within the Oil Workers Union wanted to strike.

Walter Yarrow joined the Oil Workers Union in 1917 becoming their official spokesperson and chief strategist. He was a Scottish immigrant and self-proclaimed “oil geologist” who had been living in the Devil’s Den region of Kern County for several years prior to the war.¹²⁰ His interest in the Oil Workers Union appears to have been genuine as he frequently lectured throughout Kern County on the principles of cooperative social movements. Industry periodicals argued that Yarrow was the single man responsible for the California oil industry unionizing movement, highly educated and a “socialist of extremely radical tendency.”¹²¹ However, by 1917 he joined the Oil Workers Union under the premise that it could achieve its goals through conservative union practises and that Wilsonian America was all that was needed to better the lives of oil workers.

Yarrow placated rank and file desires to strike in 1917 and incessantly worked toward federal mediation. He exuded an unshakable faith in the government stating, “Our men will not quit work and they will bring to justice any member or nonmember who shall interfere with the greatest oil output in this

¹¹⁹ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 170.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 173.

¹²¹ Arthur Richard Hinton, “Oil and Labor Unionism,” *Petroleum Age*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (New York, 1918), 283.

national crisis...we will appeal our cause to those in charge of the nation's affairs and this stand of the 10,000 oil workers now members of the union will mark a new era in industrial movements."¹²² By winter the strategy had paid off despite fierce resistance from oil operators. Federal mediators resorted to threatening nationalization of the oil industry before operators caved under the premise that it was a wartime stipulation and the "American thing to do."¹²³ Kern County oil workers had finally secured the chance to indulge in the conditions of a wartime political economy.

3.4 Oil Workers and the Implosion of Progressivism

Kern County oil workers had won and their conservative ideology worked to craft a political atmosphere in the region that locked together unionism and strong civic nationalism. Between 1918 and 1921 the union flexed its political power to great success and elected pro-union officials to the offices of sheriff, state assembly and district attorney.¹²⁴ On the state and local level the oil workers vote grew to be courted due to their strong union solidarity.

Through this period Yarrow was also making the Oil Workers Union presence felt on the national level. He met with Labor Secretary Daniels in spring of 1918 and argued, in a rather indirect manner, that the federal government ought to have faith in the relationship between itself and California oil workers, and that such workers were up to the task of operating government leases without the meddling presence of the oil companies.¹²⁵ Yarrow never

¹²² "California Oil Workers Will Strike," *Santa Barbara Morning Press*, August 26, 1917.

¹²³ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 179.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 193-195.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

used the word “nationalization” at this meeting, instead he argued that, “Union men are immediately available for your service, ready and eager to perform their patriotic duty.”¹²⁶ Despite Yarrow’s tenderfeet at this moment, nationalization of the industry was on the minds of many in Kern County as was the formation of a labor party. Montgomery reminds us that labor’s demands and ideas grew exponentially through the war period, but by 1921 had become too intoxicating for the AFL to recognize and too threatening for business and the state to indulge.¹²⁷

The red scare leading up to 1921 provided ample opportunity for American conservatism, embodied by veterans’ organizations, the federal government and of course business, to equivocate that the entire labor movement paralleled Bolshevism.¹²⁸ This was demonstrated throughout 1919 by an immense wave of hysteria and violence that swept across the country. What was once a rhetoric of fear grounded in German aggression was quickly becoming one anchored to the Bolshevik Revolution. Strikes from Boston to Seattle were portrayed and handled as acts of *political sedition* as opposed to ones for economic demands.¹²⁹ Race riots broke out from Chicago to Bisbee fueled by fear of Bolshevik attempts to subsume and weaponize black Americans.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 196.

¹²⁷ Montgomery, *The Fall*, 6.

¹²⁸ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 291.

¹²⁹ Regin Schmidt, *Red Scare: FBI and the Origins of Anti-communism in the United States, 1919-1943* (Copenhagen: University of Tusculanum Press, 2000), 26.

¹³⁰ Steven Fraser, “1919: The Year the World Was on Fire,” *Jacobin* (New York: January 13, 2019), 10.

Robert Murray argues, “In 1919 America’s soul was in danger...primarily because it was deserting its most honored principles of freedom.”¹³¹ There was a growing sentiment that the war effort, conjoined with all its anti-liberal instruments, had drained America of its capacity to act in accordance with progressive idealism. Murray continues, “it was a spiritual fatigue, involving a lack of moral stamina, of faith in the principles of democracy, of wisdom and of effective leadership.”¹³² Progressivism was imploding by 1919, it had forced Americans to bend their values in acceptance of a war that had led to military belligerence, restrictions on free speech, unfathomable death tolls, social revolutions and famine.¹³³ In 1920, a retrospective George Creel stated, “I am not sure that if the war had to come, it did not come at the right time for the preservation and reinterpretation of American ideals.”¹³⁴ Unions and labor at large, integral components of Progressivism’s social utopia, were quickly being hung out to dry.

The election of 1920 ushered in a Republican cohort that had been waiting in the wings of American politics, strategically watching as Wilsonianism grew unwieldy. In 1917, Republicans such as Henry Cabot Lodge were able to posture with an aggressive attitude towards scattered Democrats and pacifist progressive Republicans, all while supporting Americanism and the war effort. The war itself had become a political opportunity. Kennedy states, “Lodge lost

¹³¹ Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria 1919-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955), 11.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³³ Rebecca Onion, “A Post–World War I ‘Hunger Map of Europe,’ Aimed at the Hearts of American Kids,” *Slate* (New York: July 31, 2014), 2.

¹³⁴ George Creel, *How We Advertised America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1920), 105.

no chance to use war issues both to discipline his own party and to needle the democrats.”¹³⁵ The Republican position was designed to have a “clean record of anti-hun imperialistic patriotism” coupled with criticism of Wilson’s autocratic and overreaching state.¹³⁶ Republicans were no fans of radicalism, as Coolidge demonstrated in Boston, but their position favored the idea of preserving American liberties from a bloated and belligerent federal government.

Harding’s vague “return to normalcy” campaign offered more critiques of progressivism than ideas for a future America. However, the underlying tectonic shift was clearly one that pointed backwards. A plunge back into scattered individualism increasingly supplemented by the comforts and spectacles of a modern era.¹³⁷ Walter Lippmann articulated that American society had turned out *not* to be composed of rational actors like the ideals of progressivism had suggested, but rather a society of simpletons “whose lives are a morass of entanglements and whose vitality is exhausted.”¹³⁸ The vibrancy of democracy contained within the ethos of the progressive era had increasingly become an obscure memory, and strides made by the American working class were soon to be backpedaled into a state of amnesia. When Harding exclaimed, “The group must not endanger the individual,” he not only had the government in mind, but organized labor.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 19.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹³⁷ David Montgomery famously argued that “Modern America was created over its workers’ protests.” Workers may have influenced it every step of the way, but the decade’s ultimate values were ones unrepresentative of labor’s struggle.

¹³⁸ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 48.

¹³⁹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 311.

1920s America has long been shrouded in images of glitz, ranging from jazz and flapper girls to automobiles and athletic superstars. Popular historical programs play no small part in generating the consensus that the decade was either “roaring,” “booming” or “burgeoning.”¹⁴⁰ However, for American workers the glitz was firmly underlaid by economic precarity. Mass migration from rural communities to urban centers created a seemingly abundant labor pool for employers to pick from and put constant downward pressure on wages. Immigration restriction after 1924 meant less upward mobility for American workers, and mechanization on the shop floor was pursued with unprecedented vigor. What Irving Bernstein called “the march of the machines” implied that labor in the 1920s had become highly vulnerable to seasonal work, lay-offs and displacement.¹⁴¹ These conditions were all prefigured by the post-war slump and vigorous open-shop movement that marked the decade’s inception.

The post-war economic slump did not rock the oil industry as violently as it did other sectors, however its presence was still felt. The California State Mining Bureau noted that production by 1921 was at an unprecedented high, but consumption was dragging behind under post-war conditions. Millions of barrels were going unused sitting in storage containers due to “overproduction, general industrial depression and sympathetic adjustment to slumps in eastern oil fields.”¹⁴² However, these conditions in the industry should not be confused for

¹⁴⁰ “1920-1929: Boom to Bust,” *The Century: America’s Time*, American Broadcasting Company, April, 1999.

¹⁴¹ Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1960), 53-60.

¹⁴² R.E. Collum, “Petroleum and Gas in California in 1921,” California State Mining Bureau Preliminary Report, January 1922.

causality. Oil operators in the San Joaquin Valley were eager to pursue a return to pre-war labor conditions regardless of the market atmosphere.

Oil operators were among the first giants of industry to extract themselves from the political economic relationship of wartime America. In September 1921 they announced a \$1-a-day wage cut across the board and threatened a return to the twelve-hour day.¹⁴³ Oil operators declared that federal mediation had been a grave blunder, and that such conditions would not be allowed to persist in peacetime. They claimed that actions taken by the federal government had been fundamentally hostile to the notion of economic liberty, and furthermore had made oil workers apathetic, knowing the government would secure their employment no matter what.¹⁴⁴

The Oil Workers Union deliberated the first two weeks of September before voting to strike on September 12. The volcano, rife with workers resentment and angst, had finally erupted. While local newspapers cried, "Oil Industry Paralyzed!" union officials stressed the critical nature of labor relations in the oil fields, and argued that "oil workers have gone on strike because they could see no other course to take."¹⁴⁵ With wage cuts, threats to return the twelve-hour day, blatant disregard for federal mediation and the discharge of any worker involved in union activity, it was as if the oil operators had taken upon themselves a crusade, the objective of which was clearly to decimate the industrial power labor had struggled to gain.

¹⁴³ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 217.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁴⁵ "Oil Industry Paralyzed," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 12, 1921.

CHAPTER 4

HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE OIL FIELDS

In a way, the first work to examine conditions in the California oil fields was Upton Sinclair's 1927 *Oil!* He painted lush descriptions of spewing oil rigs from which streams would, "hit the ground, bounce up, and explode...and every jet that struck the ground turned into a volcano, and rose again, higher than before; the whole mass, boiling and bursting, became a river of fire, a lava flood that went streaming down the valley."¹⁴⁶ Sinclair wore his sympathies on his sleeve, and saw the relationship between oil workers and operators as one defined by stark class conflict. Oil operators' "frail human nature was subjected to a strain greater than it was made for; the fires of greed had been lighted in their hearts, and fanned to a white heat that melted every principle and every law."¹⁴⁷ Despite Sinclair's work, labor relations in the California oil fields remained a relatively neglected field for historians right through the 20th century.

Gerald Nash, Herbert Gutman and Patricia Limerick all recognized that labor relations in the oil industry had largely been neglected right through the 1980s despite the work of "new labor historians."¹⁴⁸ Case studies of textile mills, steel factories and coal mines were favored over the oil fields of California.¹⁴⁹ Popular historical programs have overwhelmingly focused on Standard Oil and

¹⁴⁶ Sinclair, *Oil!*, 132.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 1.

¹⁴⁹ Peter Rachleff, "Two Decades of the 'New' Labor History," *American Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1989): 185.

the Rockefellers, shrouding our understanding of the industry in hazy images of crude oil rigs stacked upon each other and scattered throughout Appalachia.¹⁵⁰

Harvey O'Connor, the radical journalist who had covered the Seattle General Strike of 1919, also looked at the 1921 California Oil Workers' Strike. He took note of the strike's resourcefulness and solidarity throughout Kern, Fresno and Santa Barbara counties.¹⁵¹ O'Connor primarily argues that the strike was an inevitable loss "against the stone wall of Standard Oil and the other majors," and that the valorous effort was out of touch with the new atmosphere of Harding's America.¹⁵² However, he says nothing of the strike's conservative design, and instead contends that the oil workers nakedly embraced union loyalty above all else.¹⁵³

Nancy Quam-Wickham was the first to describe the conservative culture of the oil workers and indicate that they were attempting to articulate a political economic identity that reached beyond the crude racism of Asian exclusion.¹⁵⁴ Make no mistake, the oil workers never lost that aspect of their identity; they merely tried to supplement it with a hybrid of American nationalism and labor unionism. Quam-Wickham ultimately argues that the Oil Workers Strike was "ephemeral," cut off from the powerful nodes of labor activism in Los Angeles and therefore drained of resources.¹⁵⁵ However, she is also the only one in the

¹⁵⁰ "The Rockefellers," *American Experience*, PBS, October 16, 2000.

¹⁵¹ O'Connor, *History of Oil Workers*, 25-26.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 220.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 244.

historiography to subtly suggest that the oil worker's conservatism hobbled the strike's alternatives.¹⁵⁶

Whitney Thompson-Tozier contrarily argued in her 2013 thesis that the strike was in fact amply supplied with resources coming from oil workers in solidarity and merchants in both Kern and Santa Barbara counties.¹⁵⁷ She argues that if it were not for these resources, local support and the patriotic unionism that oil workers espoused the 1921 strike would have ended much sooner.¹⁵⁸ For Thompson-Tozier the striker's identity did nothing but grant them opportunities and support, it truly was the "most moral and sober strike ever pulled."¹⁵⁹

No historian that has looked at this strike has neglected the political atmosphere in which the strikers found themselves. Harding's "return to normalcy" was clearly a euphemism for returning labor back to a Gilded Age state of frailty. Particularly in the wake of the West Virginia Coal Wars, it is easy to dismiss the California Oil Workers' Strike of 1921 as merely another labor defeat in a long line of suppression. However, this thinking tells us nothing about the ways in which a strike can be designed and much less about the ways in which labor intersects with the broader discourse of identity. The old "us" vs. "them" in labor history is precisely what is out of date in a modern age where organized labor is just as weak as it was in the 1920s (if not weaker) and workers tenaciously cling to various identities outside of class. The 1921 California Oil

¹⁵⁶ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 248.

¹⁵⁷ Thompson-Tozier, "Armed," 33.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁵⁹ *Kern County Union Labor Journal*, September 23, 1921.

Workers' Strike is much more than a heroic class struggle between good and evil, us and them; it is about workers attempting to balance class and national identities amidst conflict, the implications behind both and the ideological crisis that can ensue when material conditions deteriorate beyond recognition.

4.1 The Conservative Design

Kern County oil workers built their movement upon conservative values from the onset. Ex-servicemen oil workers filled the ranks of "Law and Order Committees," that claimed not to be picketing but rather keeping the peace and protecting private property.¹⁶⁰ On the local level committees worked quickly to dispel any connection between a labor strike and anarchy. They maneuvered in unison with local law enforcement, "closed all illicit refreshment establishments and other questionable amusement resorts operating in the fields" and moved to "keep physical violence and loud talk off the streets."¹⁶¹ Early on the movement sought to embed their cause within the daily and moral operations of the region.

The vast popular perception of oil workers depicted them as loners and violent roughnecks, later extensions of the frontier myth and the cowboy ethos.¹⁶² However, this was hardly the case in Kern County, where over 80% of residents including oil workers lived with their families.¹⁶³ Two days into the strike, thousands of oil workers and their families paraded down the streets of Taft, furnished with American flags, union badges and a strong sense of their

¹⁶⁰ "8,000 Men Strike in Kern and Coalinga Districts," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 12, 1921.

¹⁶¹ "Effective Efforts by Order Body," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 14, 1921.

¹⁶² David Igler, *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁶³ 1920 U.S. Census, Kern County, California.

movement's righteousness.¹⁶⁴ The early days of the strike were imbued with a pervasive festival atmosphere, as union leadership diligently worked to craft its political face.

Demonstrating that the strike was composed of families lent the movement a large degree of local support. Certain businesses donated funds to the Oil Workers Relief Fund and others lowered prices in solidarity. Local papers claimed the early days of the strike found merchants with "business as usual."¹⁶⁵

Women's roles in the strike are nearly impossible to ignore. They boycotted unsupportive merchants, reinforced picket lines, established child care services, catered massive union meetings, distributed strike information and visited the homes of potential scabs in attempts to dissuade them.¹⁶⁶ Women were also formed into auxiliary units of the "Law and Order Committees," patrolling oil fields and engaging in road blocks. Local papers published the first pictures of the strike on September 23, and featured a picture of three women on patrol, dressed in uniform and adorning their union badges, as the caption read, "Who wouldn't stop?"¹⁶⁷

By this time oil operators had consolidated themselves within the California Oil Producers' Association and were vigorously opposed to the strike and all its demands, which by this point had been whittled down to government

¹⁶⁴ "Effective Efforts by Order Body," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 14, 1921.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Taft *Daily Midway Driller*, September 14, 1921.

¹⁶⁷ "Women Patrols Help Oil Strikers Keep Tabs on Automobiles in Fields," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 23, 1921. The historiography of women's activism during strikes and other labor protests is incredibly rich. More often than not women were the most radical participants in labor disputes because they were oppressed twice over. See Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Women's Wage: Historical Meanings and Social Consequences* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990).

mediation. Union officials stated, “We have accepted a dollar a day reduction. We have accepted the open shop. All we ask is that oil operators sign an agreement with the federal government.”¹⁶⁸ Strikers saw the rejection of this last demand as a “violation of patriotism,” and they were willing to stake their movement on it. The strike’s conservative design was embodied by demographics, insistence on “law and order” and strong linkages to the local community, but perhaps most strongly by the rhetoric the oil workers chose to wrap themselves in.

The overwhelming majority of oil workers that were funneled into the “Law and Order Committees” were also members of the American Legion. Vice President of the Oil Workers Union, R.H. Fraser, boasted “there never was a more peaceful strike conducted anywhere,” and praised the Legionnaire’s conduct.¹⁶⁹ The presence of thousands of American Legion members allowed the union to tap into and legitimize the language of Americanism. They successfully depicted the oil operators as undemocratic and “defiant of law and order government,” and reignited the old Wilsonian dialogue of loyalty.¹⁷⁰ Strikers saw the rejection of federal mediation as a disloyal act of aggression on the part of oil operators, who they blatantly called “the real conspirators against the American Government.”¹⁷¹

The union sent telegram after telegram to Secretary of Labor James Davis exclaiming that, “An un-American condition exists in the California oil fields, part

¹⁶⁸ “Operators Issue Statement on Strike, Union Men Reply,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 19, 1921.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 229.

¹⁷¹ *Kern County Union Labor Journal*, September 16, 1921.

of the USA, because we citizens of America dare to request that the signature of our government be placed on an agreement.”¹⁷² More dramatically, Legionnaires also began paralleling their current conditions to what they saw during wartime. One telegram to the Labor Department declared, “We feel as though under the yoke of a thousand czars!”¹⁷³ Their conception of European evil, one that reinforced their patriotism and shaped their language throughout the strike was always somewhat vague. To them the Oil Producers Association represented some amalgam of the Kaiser and Prussianism as well as the Russian Czar and serfdom.

The rhetoric was effective, it gave the oil workers’ movement the moral high ground and baffled the oil operators who struggled to hurl similar accusations back at the strikers.¹⁷⁴ As the rhetoric of the Legion increasingly dominated the strike, the language of class began to fall by the wayside. In another telegram to the Labor Department on October 5 oil workers argued,

Allow us the privilege of presenting the case of the workmen in the oil industry not as employee to employer, but as one good citizen to another. For we are Americans. Not men unable to speak the language of the county, not men fooled into the folly of sovietism, bolshevism, I.W.W.ism, or some other ism by foreign agitators from some crowded corner of Europe. With few exceptions we are the men whose fathers...made America.¹⁷⁵

The conservative design of the oil workers’ strike was deeply rooted in the Americanism of the Wilsonian period. Kern County oil workers were proud that

¹⁷² “Oil Workers Ask For U.S. Action In Strike,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October, 3, 1921.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 230.

¹⁷⁵ “Ex-Servicemen Send Reply to Whittier Message On Situation,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 5, 1921.

they did not strike during the war as many other unions had and saw themselves as defenders of American institutions and ideals.¹⁷⁶ They claimed, “Because of our service we have an abiding faith in the power and strength of our government in its ability to deal impartially and justly.”¹⁷⁷ By October it became clear that the oil workers' movement was fully hitching its identity to the conservative dialogue of Americanism and civic engagement. They had moved away from the language of class conflict and instead they had embraced a dialogue that sought to place operators, producers and community members on the same playing field, where class distinctions and identity evaporated in the face of American civic identity and appropriate behavior.

4.2 Historiography on the Legion

Historical research into the American Legion was rather slim right into the 1990s and often held a congratulatory tone.¹⁷⁸ It lacked any critical analysis of how the Legion attempted to craft a sense of American nationalism beginning in the 1920s. In this vein, Christopher Nehls's more recent work on the Legion is exceptionally revealing. He contends that studying the American Legion is a way of injecting “social and cultural components into the broader intellectual search for the political and civic meaning of American national identity.”¹⁷⁹ This intellectual endeavor can frequently feel precarious, however, neglecting it entirely closes us off from potential tools that could help elucidate the broader ways in which labor and identity intersect.

¹⁷⁶ “Ex-Servicemen Send Reply to Whittier Message On Situation,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 5, 1921.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 3.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

In the 1950s and 1960s there were “consensus” attempts at intellectual history that sought to explain why America’s national identity looked the way it did. Perhaps the most famous was Louis Hartz and his work *The Liberal Tradition in America*. He argued that Americans were inherently “Lockean” or “born equal,” that they did not have a feudal past, with all its notions of hierarchical power, and therefore democratic capitalism was more or less a foregone conclusion.¹⁸⁰ Americans were simply built for it.

Richard Hofstadter had similarly argued years prior that Americans seemed eerily content with their “rudderless and demoralized state of liberalism.”¹⁸¹ One that included an unfortunate tradition of private property defense, economic individualism and competition. He argued that even our frequent and blaring pronouncements for democracy had usually been for a “democracy in cupidity rather than a democracy of fraternity.”¹⁸² Hofstadter and Hartz were both labeled “consensus” historians despite the fact that they were both disgruntled by what that consensus was; that Americans were a group of people complacently looking backwards and rejecting social change.

Critiques of the American nationalist discourse pivoted by the 1990s to reflect a more “bottom up” approach, and looked to account for how the factors of race, gender and ethnicity shaped American nationalism.¹⁸³ Nehls argues that the American Legion engaged the discourse on a civic level, and developed

¹⁸⁰ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1955), 11-12.

¹⁸¹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, xxxvi.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 120-121.

programs such as “youth sports, Get-Out-the-Vote drives and Boys and Girls State, all concentrated on teaching Americans to respect the process of American democracy as a way to ensure the survival of the nation’s exceptional and defining institutions.”¹⁸⁴ Of course, the Legion also preached and heavily enforced the anti-radicalism of the Wilsonian era. The American Legion may not have always known exactly what it was, but it certainly knew what it was not, and that was radical.

The Legion’s conservatism is critical to understanding its relationship with labor. Nehls argues that it

sprung from the narrowly-defined set of civic behaviors it expected from all citizens. It demanded that citizens behave with disinterest in civic and political life, acting for what was in the best interest of the nation first rather than of particular class, ethnic, or racial affiliations. In fact, Legionnaires denied the legitimacy of class or ethnic consciousness, preferring citizens instead think of themselves as “100-percent” Americans with single, nationally focused civic identities.¹⁸⁵

Furthermore, Nehls argues that this conservative “colorblind” and “classless” notion of citizenship is one that predates Cold War interpretations and ripples right through the 21st century.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” ii.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸⁶ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” iii. Nehls is building upon the work of Gary Gerstle. Gerstle contends that Americanism has always been an incredibly amorphous political language, one that has been utilized to promote policies for the enhancement of class, but also the suppression of class. Gerstle’s framework for defining Americanism is complex, and utilizes “overlapping dimensions” of discourse including: nationalist, democratic, progressive and traditionalist. Any single dimension can be relied upon more heavily than others at any given political moment, making American nationalism difficult to pinpoint. However, Gerstle concedes that the American political left is inherently limited in the success it can have seizing the discourse of Americanism. See Gary Gerstle, *Working Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 8-13.

The American nationalism espoused by the Legion was an overwhelmingly conservative force. Nehls places his analysis of the American Legion alongside other scholarship of the 1990s and 2000s that seeks to understand American conservatism as more than a panic-stricken state of mind.¹⁸⁷ Instead this scholarship sought to take conservatism quite seriously. Alan Brinkley saw that global cosmopolitanism of the late 20th century not only failed to eliminate, but “in many ways increased, the cultural chasms separating different groups of Americans from each other.”¹⁸⁸ This interpretation implied that conservative Americans had to be accepted as “rational, stable and intelligent people” who simply rejected the ideas and values of global secular liberalism.¹⁸⁹

Nehls’s work on the American Legion fits snugly into this perspective. He argues that Legionnaires’ conservatism may have led them to violent extremes when it came to policing labor radicalism, but they did not do this out of fear of losing social status.¹⁹⁰ Instead, the American Legion’s “reaction to radicalism and immigration in the interwar period related directly to its concern about the decline of American democratic exceptionalism, not of themselves.”¹⁹¹ Nehls recognizes the Legion’s racial and violent tendencies, however he maintains that

¹⁸⁷ Early attempts to analyze American conservatism essentially never took it seriously. They saw it as some sort of archaic, feverish and reactionary social force capable of gripping people during moments of social anxiety, but essentially far removed from everyday politics and American life. See, for instance, Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 23.

¹⁸⁸ Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (April 1994), 428.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 428-430.

¹⁹⁰ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 9.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

these were not displays of a “nativist streak,” but rather genuine expressions of national identity.¹⁹²

Thompson-Tozier places the behavior of Legionnaires in Kern County alongside this sentiment. She argues that, “This strike, made up in a large part by WWI veterans was a continuation of their fight for the American dream.”¹⁹³ In her analysis the Americanism invoked by strikers holds a rather virtuous position. The problem with this is that it obfuscates the drop off between what the strikers’ rhetoric was and how their principles held up on the ground. Most recently historians have begun grappling with the possibility that conservative social forces, such as the Americanism displayed by Kern County strikers, should not be left unchallenged as merely “genuine expressions” in need of an empathetic lens.

4.3 The Pivoting Nature of American Conservatism

The modern discourse on American nationalism and conservatism has once again thrown historians into a state of bewilderment. At a recent meeting facilitated by the American Historical Association, historians eagerly convened to discuss what the 2016 election of Donald Trump meant with regards to our understanding of American conservatism. There was a shared sense of disarray. Twenty years ago historians had figured out how to talk about conservatism as a “politically robust and complicated phenomenon” that moved through American

¹⁹² Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 8-9.

¹⁹³ Thompson-Tozier, “Armed,” 34.

history with a “slow and steady hand,” similar to the wandering drawl of William Buckley.¹⁹⁴

In attendance was Seth Cotlar, history professor at Willamette University, who stated, “The last 200-plus years of American history have been like a series of West Wing episodes and then [last] November, someone sat on the remote and now we’re watching a marathon of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.”¹⁹⁵ Questions floated around the meeting such as, how can one “understand empathically” an American conservatism that blatantly crosses the line into white nationalism? The old notion of “colorblind conservatism” seemed violently drawn into question.

Another professor, Joshua Lynn, argued that our previous understanding of American conservatism was perhaps never as solid as we thought it was. He stated, “The definition of conservatism and the designation of who is conservative have always been contested...Adding the debate over Trump’s conservatism to the mix does not destabilize American conservatism as a historical category. Because it has never been a stable category.”¹⁹⁶ If the meeting generated a consensus at all, it was that many traditional definitions of conservatism have officially proven themselves inept.

Rick Perlstein observed that, “If Hofstadter was overly dismissive of how conservatives understood themselves, the new breed of historians at times proved too credulous.”¹⁹⁷ Whether or not *all* of the old characterizations of

¹⁹⁴ Colleen Flaherty, “Teaching Conservatism in the Age of Trump,” *Inside Higher Ed* (January 2018): 1-2.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹⁷ Rick Perlstein, “I Thought I Understood the American Right. Trump Proved Me Wrong,” *The New York Times Magazine* (April 2017): 2.

American conservatism must be thrown out is still unsettled. Kim Phillips-Fein argued in 2011 that, “Historians who write about the right should find ways to do so with a sense of the dignity of their subjects, but they should not hesitate to keep an eye out for the bizarre, the unusual, or the unsettling.”¹⁹⁸ What has become clear is that the old descriptions of American conservatism, if not thrown out, must be heavily supplemented by factors such as a propensity for violence, superstition and racism.¹⁹⁹

4.4 Where the Strike Stands

In 1921 the oil workers of the San Joaquin Valley demonstrated a few things. First that the discourse of “us vs. them” in labor disputes could be severely complicated by workers’ identities.²⁰⁰ The oil workers’ movement grew from a conservative mindset, one fostered by the Wilsonian era, anti-radicalism and the Americanism of the Legion. Through action and rhetoric they hitched

¹⁹⁸ Kim Phillips-Fein, “Conservatism: A State of the Field,” *Journal of American History*, Volume 98, Issue 3, (December 2011): 273.

¹⁹⁹ The most recent foray into the discourse on conservatism is Corey Robin’s *The Reactionary Mind*. He argues that conservatism should first and foremost be thought of as the reaction “against the agency of the subordinate classes.” In this sense, Kern County oil strikers are conservative agents of the state, engaged in a strike, but unwilling to allow for mass democratic growth that could potentially disrupt the social order. However, Robin’s analysis also leaves room for the “conservative radical.” In this sense, conservatives may engage in social upheaval, but it is because they wish to reinstate an older form of conservative power. With a bit of stretching, Kern County oil workers and Legionnaires in general could fit into this framework, because they are willing to completely support a strong federal government essentially enforced by a police state. This is largely theoretical, but it meshes well with Robin’s analysis of the conservative mind’s ability to reach back for power structures akin to the ancien regime. See Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁰⁰ The broad sweeping history of labor in America is often boiled down to the story of “us vs. them” or capital vs. labor. Historians have demonstrated that this clear distinction became muddled by the 1970s when the strength of labor unions began to decay and workers adopted positions and identities outside of their class. However, the Kern County case signals that we should be aware of the intersection between labor and non-class identity through the early 20th century as opposed to merely the end of it. For the broad strokes of the discourse on “us vs. them,” see Jefferson Cowie, “Blue-collar Nationalism in an Age of Decline: The Search for Citizenship” (The Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University, June 12, 2018).

their material class desires to ideological nationalism and got caught in between its larger transitioning in American politics. Oil workers chose to strike, but did so without fully embracing their class identity, and this proved detrimental to the growth of their movement.²⁰¹ Secondly, once their movement became fused with the identity of Americanism, it proved difficult for oil workers to maintain the “idealism” that identity called for. The movement that was supposed to be “moral and sober” frequently proved to be the opposite, and upon the strike’s conclusion many disillusioned oil workers and supporters that had once embraced the Legion’s Americanism fell into the nativism of the Klan. To study the California Oil Strike of 1921 is to explore the unusual. The case complicates our understanding of when and how labor intersects with identity, and it also provides an opportunity to reassess our conception of how American conservatism has historically operated.

²⁰¹ A new collection of essays, compiled by Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Shermer, shows how American conservatism and labor unionism were always antithetical to one another. They argue that labor movements stood for ideas and impulses that conservatism found anathema. The Kern County case demonstrates that labor disputes were not always as clear cut, that there could be a “conservative strike.” However, the case also demonstrates that the ideas and impulses of labor unionism were not those that dominated the movement. See Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth Tandy Shermer *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3-5.

CHAPTER 5

LIMITS TO GROWTH & CONSERVATIVE OPERATIONS

Officially the American Legion post in Kern County never actually endorsed the 1921 strike. John R. Quinn, commander of the California department of the Legion, publicly announced, “The American Legion is strictly neutral in all labor controversies,” and that men on either side of the conflict were acting “as individuals and not members of this organization.”²⁰² However, on the ground relations were much more homogenous. Legionnaires looked out for one another with a strict sense of patriotism, and Legion halls were “thrown open to members of the strike’s law and order committees,” where cots, coffee and sandwiches were served up.²⁰³

Legionnaires in Kern county were always quick to identify as American citizens before union men, and the Oil Workers Union and local labor press always sought to court them, not the other way around. Even prior to the strike the Union Labor Journal of Bakersfield wrote, “Labor men will be making a great mistake if they fail to take their proper places in the American Legion. The mistake will be more disastrous to themselves than to any one else. If labor men would have the American Legion reflect in any degree the ideals of labor they must see to it that labor’s opinion is represented in the Legion.”²⁰⁴ The early relationship between labor and the Legion was not as bitterly antagonistic as it would later be, but it was far from warm. By 1920 large unions such as the

²⁰² “Operators Promise Statement Monday,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 17, 1921.

²⁰³ “Organized Labor Aiding Strikers,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 15, 1921; *Taft Daily Midway Driller*, September 14, 1921.

²⁰⁴ “Labor and the Legion,” *Colusa Herald*, January 1, 1920.

United Mine Workers were already distancing themselves from the Legion, ordering rank and file to resign from the organization and beware of Legion strike breaking.²⁰⁵

The conservative Oil Workers Union attempted to placate the Legion and ignore the notion that union men and Legionnaires were fundamentally different. The Kern County Labor Council claimed, “the interests of the great majority of the members of the American Legion are known to be identical with the aims and aspirations of organized labor.”²⁰⁶ When the union voted to strike it was understood that the nature of the strike would heavily reflect the character of the thousands of Legionnaires present in the oil fields. Local papers exclaimed, “Bakersfield labor backs American Legion!”²⁰⁷ If the relationship did not look hostile, it certainly looked lopsided.

The Legion’s sense of nationalism was dominant and unwavering. Walter Yarrow’s first telegram to the Labor Department resisted calling out the government, and instead merely alluded to a “lack of decisiveness.”²⁰⁸ The union failed to extend the strike to thousands of oil men working in refinery and pipeline positions due to “patriotic motives.”²⁰⁹ Strikers wished no harm to befall the “Great Pacific Fleet,” and “wanted to give the government the opportunity to show it is interested in some phases of our economic welfare.”²¹⁰ The movement

²⁰⁵ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 115.

²⁰⁶ “The Labor Council Commends Aims of the American Legion,” *Colusa Herald*, January 10, 1920.

²⁰⁷ “Bakersfield Labor Backs American Legion,” *Press Democrat*, February 19, 1921.

²⁰⁸ “Yarrow Fears Trouble in Fields,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 13, 1921.

²⁰⁹ “Yarrows Telegram,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 13, 1921.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

consolidated its patriotic image, and clearly articulated that its desires laid in the hands of the federal government.

Newspapers set the stage for grim class warfare, despite the fact that none would be found. The Riverside Daily Press exclaimed, “War Looms Up in Kern as Hundreds of Strikers in Oil Fields Act as Self Constituted Police.”²¹¹ Another cried, “Civil War Threatens State as Labor Army Closes its Highways!”²¹² Others warned of “another West Virginia” if immediate actions were not taken to resolve the labor dispute.²¹³ However, unlike in Mingo County West Virginia, where Legionnaires proudly guarded the Dh-4B planes that bombed striking coal miners and where they joined other “better people” in patriotic chants for law and order, the Legionnaires in Kern County claimed they *were* the “law and order,” distanced themselves from the language of class and placed faith in the government above faith in their union.²¹⁴

The oil workers movement also detached itself from any sort of radical labor element. I.W.W. organizers were on the scene consulting with union leadership the day the strike broke out.²¹⁵ However, their presence increasingly dwindled as the strike progressed and their relationship with Legionnaires grew tense. Oil workers began kicking Wobblies out of the strike zone only four days

²¹¹ “War Looms Up in Kern,” *The Riverside Daily Press*, September 20, 1921.

²¹² “Civil War Threatens State,” *San Pedro News Pilot*, September 20 1921.

²¹³ “Yarrow Fears Trouble in Fields,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 13, 1921.

²¹⁴ Union sentiment in Mingo County was particularly strong. One coal miner quipped, “if I wouldn’t be a union man I’d go home and ask my wife to chain me in the yard with the dog.” This type of priority for one’s union would have been much more complicated for Kern County strikers. See Lon Savage, *Thunder In the Mountains: The West Virginia Mine War, 1920-1921* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), 142-143; or more recently Robert Shogan, *The Battle of Blair Mountain: The Story of America’s Largest Labor Uprising* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

²¹⁵ “I.W.W.’s Enter Oil Fields of County,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 12, 1921.

after its inception, making it clear they had no interest in allowing any radical features to influence the design of their movement.²¹⁶

Oil workers fervently preferred their “badges of red, white and blue,” to the “red cards” of the I.W.W. Wobblie organizers struggled to grasp what they saw as the movement’s bullheadedness and blatant disregard for rigorous class consciousness. George P. West covered the strike for *The Nation* and noted, “A handful of stormy petrels of the I.W.W. who rode the rods into Bakersfield were arrested, disarmed and taken before the strikers central committee questioned and deported. The union officers quoted them as saying, “Yes we’re I.W.W.’s, the tough kind at that, and we can accomplish more in ten minutes here with a match than you can in ten years with your tactics.”²¹⁷ The deportations of I.W.W.’s from Kern County became a prominent and consistent feature of the strike.

Vice President of the Oil Workers Union, Harry Baker, was particularly compelled to maintain the strike’s utmost conservative image. He frequently and publicly rattled off the numbers of Wobblies kicked out of the strike zone and rebuked their strike tactics and calls for “crippling industry.”²¹⁸ Baker was a staunch supporter of the “American Plan” or open shop platform. In a confusing interview with local newspapers, he rambled on about how union men “laboring under the open shop plan are members because they highly estimate the value of unionized organization,” and that those in favor of the closed shop were not

²¹⁶ “Strikers Patrols Quit Stopping Cars,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 16, 1921.

²¹⁷ George P. West, “A 100-Per-Cent American Strike,” *The Nation*, October 19, 1921.

²¹⁸ “Union Oil Men Back at Bakersfield,” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1921.

“strongly imbued with the union idea.”²¹⁹ Far from being a Wobbly strategy, even talk of the closed shop was off the table, as the Oil Workers Union further honed their conservatism.

Another way in which the strike’s conservative design hobbled its ability to grow beyond the local level was its refusal to call a statewide strike. Early on Yarrow threatened, “if the operators continue their attempts to bring in strike breakers and gunmen we will be forced to call out the rest of the workers in the state.”²²⁰ Union leadership knew exactly what this action would imply. Claiming, “If we call a statewide strike, tying up all oil fields, pipelines and refineries, the federal government undoubtedly will take action in one manner or another.”²²¹ Their goal was to provoke positive federal action on their behalf without appearing too aggressive. This proved to be a tall order for a movement based around conservative unionism.

Despite this, statewide *support* for the general strike was strong.²²² Workers in the oil fields of Contra Costa, Whittier, Ventura, Santa Paula and Fullerton sat on the edge of the union decision fully prepared to join Kern County

²¹⁹ “Accept Open Shop,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 22, 1921. The “American Plan” was an artifact of the Wilsonian period, but would come to dominate the labor atmosphere through the 1920s. Baker arguing that those in favor of the closed shop principle are “not imbued” with passionate labor unionism is the opposite of what would typically be argued, he was clearly acting to distance the image of the movement from anything that even remotely resembled labor radicalism. The more common sentiment with regards to open shop policy was, “In reality the open shop means only the open door through which the union man goes out and the non-union man comes in to take his place.” See H.E. Hoagland, “Closed Shop Versus Open Shop,” *The American Economic Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (December, 1918), 755.

²²⁰ “Statewide Oil Workers’ Strike Looms,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 21, 1921.

²²¹ “Union Oil Workers Will Decide Tomorrow on Proposed Strike,” *The Riverside Daily Press*, September 22, 1921.

²²² “Governor’s Secretary Here to Meet County Officials,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 22, 1921.

workers in solidarity.²²³ Oil unions of the Los Angeles region had been financially donating to the San Joaquin Valley strike since its inception.²²⁴ Oil workers and merchants in Santa Maria were, “practically 100 per cent in support of the strikers of the valley.”²²⁵ The general strike loomed large in the minds of both workers and operators. The Kern County movement was poised to over double in size and incorporate a much broader scope of union ideas.

Once again however the conservative principles of the Oil Workers Union in Kern County proved too strong. The potential growth of a broad-based unionism fell second to the notion of unionism centered around absolute faith in the government and the identity of Americanism. Union leadership met on September 23 and voted not to call a statewide strike. Yarrow left the meeting declaring, “I will recommend to the district council that they defer calling the general strike in compliance with the request of the government, as it is our constant desire to recognize the United States authorities in all dealings in this matter. We are prepared to fight this battle to the last trench and we believe that we have the government on our side in this controversy.”²²⁶ It was the last time a general strike would be proposed and from this moment on the Kern County strike grew increasingly insular, its workers patriotically clinging to their identities and a staunch belief in their government.

²²³ “Governor’s Secretary Here to Meet County Officials,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 22, 1921.

²²⁴ Thompson-Tozier, “Armed,” 6.

²²⁵ “In Coast Fields,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 22, 1921; “Santa Maria Credit Men Discuss the Oil Strike Situation,” *The Morning Press*, September 23, 1921.

²²⁶ “Defer General Oil Strike at U.S. Request,” *Los Angeles Herald*, September 23, 1921.

The closest Kern County oil workers came to approaching radicalism was on the issue of nationalization, but even here their conservatism caused them to waver and never fully articulate rank and file desires. Several oil fields in western Kern County had been government leases since the war, but were now operated by the region's large oil companies. Once the strike shut down production on these leases, rumors circulated the fields that the government was going to swoop in and take control of daily operations.²²⁷ Oil workers were ecstatic, exclaiming, "We would be glad to work for the government!"²²⁸ This was a stance that Legionnaires engaged in the strike could easily find agreeable. For these strikers there was little distinction between working an oil lease for the federal government and serving in the U.S. military.²²⁹

Operators immediately jumped on the issue to remind everyone involved in the oil workers movement that this was the era "less government in business," and that there was nothing patriotic about peace time nationalization of industry.²³⁰ Al Weil, attorney to the Oil Producers Association, declared that government intervention in the oil industry had led to a "slackness," and made workers lazy and ignorant of how American capitalism worked.²³¹ M.H. Whittier, president of the Association, cried, "striking oil workers in Fresno and Kern

²²⁷ "Government Will Act To Prevent Loss On Holdings Worked by Leasing Companies," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 15, 1921.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ "Veterans increasingly perceived the answer to their financial and personal problems in the decisive exercise of state power." See Jennifer Keene, *Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 6.

²³⁰ "Operators Issue Statement on Strike," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 19, 1921.

²³¹ "Strike Settlement Plea Unsuccessful," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 28, 1921.

County have transformed this district into a little Russia!”²³² Oil operators were able to keep their attacks cloaked in the vague language of the red scare, while at the same time not appearing grossly anti-American themselves.

What made it worse for oil workers was that they were never able to articulate that nationalization of industry was what they wanted. Early on R.H. Frazer argued that, “on the question of nationalization the oil workers have not made this an issue,” only to vaguely add that, “they believe that in the not far distant future petroleum and other natural resources will be operated...for the benefit of the entire citizenship of the nation.”²³³ Weeks into the strike Yarrow reiterated that, “workers have no desire to nationalize the industry.”²³⁴ However, when Legionnaires spoke on the issue themselves they failed to argue it was necessary, but also failed to dispel it out right. In a telegram to the Labor Department Legionnaires in the oil fields argued, “we believe that bringing government ownership to industry will necessitate a change in the attitude of the people of the nation toward that issue. If these things are done it will be long after the oil wells in California now producing, cease to produce.”²³⁵ The oil workers continued to appear confused about how much to demand from their situation.

The identity of Americanism that workers rooted themselves in did not allow for “ideal” citizens to make political economic demands on their government. Instead Legionnaires like those that filled the ranks of the oil

²³² “Scant Possibility of Statewide Strike,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 23, 1921.

²³³ “Operators Issue Statement on Strike; Union Men Reply,” *The Bakersfield Californian* September 19, 1921.

²³⁴ “Government Control Of Oil Fields, Claim,” *The Bakersfield Californian* September 27, 1921.

²³⁵ “Women Tour Oil Fields of County,” *The Bakersfield Californian* October 5, 1921.

workers movement, “denied the legitimacy of race, ethnicity, and particularly class as the primary reference point for one’s political obligation.”²³⁶ To them if nationalization of industry was going to come about at all, it was going to come about through a consensus reached after the cultivation of American nationalism. This inherently vague articulation was demonstrated throughout the strike, and it offered little internal understanding of the issue within the movement, much less outside the Kern County region.

The Kern County oil workers had obliged the federal government in every manner possible right up to the end of the strike on November 2, the moment they abandoned their movement proved no different. One week prior President Harding had delivered perhaps the most talked about speech of his presidency.²³⁷ He rambled about “the color line” in America, rivetingly calling for “political equality” between blacks and whites, while at the same time arguing that both were fundamentally different and would never amalgamate.²³⁸ The audience sat particularly flummoxed.

However, Harding did end the speech on familiar refrain, one that the Republican regime of the 1920s was in absolute agreement on; that civil disobedience of any kind would not be tolerated. Newspapers of the Kern County region heard this above all else. Harding exclaimed, “We are unshaken by the world cataclysm, we hold our foundations to be eternally right...The nation will tolerate the threat of no minority which challenges the supremacy of the law

²³⁶ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 99.

²³⁷ Greg Bailey, “This Presidential Speech on Race Shocked the Nation...in 1921,” *Narratively* (October, 2016).

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

or endangers our common welfare.”²³⁹ The oil workers of Kern County had crafted a movement based on conservatism and the identity of Americanism, and by late October 1921 still clung to the belief that they were acting in accordance with national civic values and that the federal government would vindicate them. Surely the president was not talking about them.

The Oil Workers Union had been anxiously awaiting a response from the Labor Department for months, and on October 30 they got one. Secretary of Labor James Davis telegraphed the union requesting an end to the strike for “the resumption of production in this great basic industry which is so vital to the nation.”²⁴⁰ Members of the union met and concluded that, “in the face of the government’s request they could not do otherwise than vote to return to work.”²⁴¹ The oil workers movement had come to a rather anticlimactic and ideologically dazed conclusion.

R.H. Frazer confirmed that they had ended the strike due to the government’s request, but that the union was still as strong as ever.²⁴² Whitney Thompson-Tozier argues that, “If the government had not halted the strike, the oil workers had enough community support, resources, and drive to continue the strike longer.”²⁴³ However, after the decision to end the strike, the ensuing months saw no revitalization or redesign of the oil workers movement, no rebirth of unionism and certainly no pull to the left.

²³⁹ “Government Will Not Tolerate Defiance of Its Authority,” *The Riverside Daily Press*, October 26, 1921.

²⁴⁰ “Oil Strike Ends; Men to Go Back to Fields on Thursday,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, November 1, 1921.

²⁴¹ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 248.

²⁴² “Oil Strike Ends,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, November 1, 1921.

²⁴³ Thompson-Tozier, “Armed,” 6-7.

Quam-Wickham notes the sense of betrayal that was felt throughout the oil fields.²⁴⁴ The movement had “pinned its faith to Uncle Sam’s signature” only to be left out to dry. George West had greatly admired the oil workers’ insurgence, but early on questioned their methods, claiming,

If Americanism means anything the oil workers will be vindicated in everything they have done and will go back to work with renewed enthusiasm for their constructive work in real economic and political democracy. If Americanism doesn’t mean anything then Yarrow has taken the most effective means of demonstrating it and 8,000 oil workers and as many more as can put two and two together will have had a liberal education in the structure and function and animus of the established order.²⁴⁵

The conservative design and Americanism of the oil workers movement had gotten them nowhere in the context of the 1921 strike. These elements had worked to constrict the movement’s growth, muddle its desires and provide the workers with no alternative option but to concede and ponder the fallout.

The discourse surrounding American nationalism had officially shifted from the Wilson variety to that of Harding, where there was no room for strikes regardless of how patriotic they claimed to be and where business was given free reign. This was all coupled with a reinstatement of American isolationism. Harding stated, “I think it’s an inspiration to patriotic devotion to safeguard America first, to stabilize America first, to prosper America first, to think of America first, to exalt America first, to live for and revere America first.”²⁴⁶ The language is not far off from that which the Kern County oil workers had attempted to utilize. David Montgomery once noted, “A movement that agrees to side with

²⁴⁴ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 248.

²⁴⁵ West, “A 100% American Strike,” 2.

²⁴⁶ Warren Harding, “Americanism” (speech, New York City, January 20, 1920), University of Virginia Miller Center.

the patriotic cause of its government, can not only *not* be attacked but actually *encouraged* in its growth...but then the question is can you break with that? Can you go back out on your own?"²⁴⁷ Despite the fact that the oil workers movement had clung to American nationalism throughout the 1921 strike, the move never encouraged its growth, and ultimately demonstrated that it could *not* break from that identity and redesign itself along any other lines of labor unionism.

One local editorial prefigured the political economic mood that would dominate the remainder of the decade stating,

The strike really is an aftermath of the war. The result of government interference in business. It is another Wilson administration legacy. The workmen hoped to force the oil companies to make their wage agreements through the government, as they were persuaded from Washington to do during the war. The employers refused. Both sides are beginning to appreciate the wisdom of President Harding's policy, of less government in business. The road to normalcy is long and rough, but we're making progress.²⁴⁸

Kern County oil workers knew that Harding was speaking to them when on December 6 1921 he exclaimed that, "It is not desirable that labor shall be permitted to exact unfair terms of employment or subject the public to actual distresses in order to enforce its terms."²⁴⁹ The Kern County Oil Strike of 1921 demonstrated to be a stunningly conservative movement, one that often looked to be more rooted in Americanism than any middle-of-the-road or radical unionism. What had been the public distresses of the "most moral and sober strike ever pulled?"

²⁴⁷ David Montgomery, "Labor Struggles, Past, Present, Future," *Brecht Forum*, New York, December 6, 1997.

²⁴⁸ "Good Morning," *Morning Press*, September 25, 1921.

²⁴⁹ Warren Harding, "State of the Union Address," December 6, 1921.

5.1 How “Moral and Sober” Could it Have Possibly Been?

Recent work on the strike has recognized its unusual patriotic fervor, but has overwhelmingly perceived it as something rather incorruptible.²⁵⁰ This glosses over the fact that an entire seismic discourse, concerning what American nationalism should look like and how it should operate, was being formulated in this period beginning with the “preparedness movement” and ending in the 1920s with the “return to normalcy.” The type of nationalism that the American Legion was helping to create after WWI was based upon an interpretation and protection of citizenship that was ideologically disconnected from forms of social identification such as class, race and ethnicity. It insisted that Americans engage in a “narrowly-defined set of civic behaviors” based in anti-radicalism and indifference to civic and political life.²⁵¹

Nehls argues that the American Legion was based upon fundamental idealism.²⁵² The organization’s members believed that rejecting class, racial and ethnic identities would create a more homogenous nation, and that suppressing radicalism would preserve American democratic institutions that allowed for political and economic equality. The idealism of the Legion demanded that American citizens adopt a new civic identity, while upholding a commitment to law and order.

²⁵⁰ Thompson-Tozier argues that, “This strike, made up in large part by WWI veterans, was a continuation of their fight for the American dream.” See Thompson-Tozier, “Armed,” 34.

²⁵¹ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 5.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 309.

Nehls's primary contention is that, "Only by taking the way the Legion constructed its nationalistic vision seriously and understanding its unique historical context can the full depth of the Legion's conservative impact on American political culture in the 20th century come more clearly into view."²⁵³ This sentiment was the dominant historiographical stance through the 1990s and 2000s. Accusations that American conservatism and its practitioners were nothing more than crazed, racist and conspiracy-minded were replaced with empathetic analyses that sought to depict American conservatives as rational actors.

However, recent historians have found this framework complicated by forces within the broad sweep of American conservatism that defy fitting neatly into the characterizations of "rational," "colorblind" or in the words of Lisa McGirr, "thoroughly modern."²⁵⁴ Rick Perlstein recently argued, "Future historians won't find all that much of a foundation for Trumpism in the grim essays of William F. Buckley, the scrupulous constitutionalist principles of Barry Goldwater or the bright-eyed optimism of Ronald Reagan. They'll need instead to study conservative history's political surrealists and intellectual embarrassments, its con artists and tribunes of white rage."²⁵⁵ He concluded with a tepid call to arms, stating that if historians are going to attempt to craft new histories of American Conservatism, that "the first step may be to risk being impolite."²⁵⁶ Perhaps another way of grappling with the history of American Conservatism, while

²⁵³ Nehls, "A Grand and Glorious," 308.

²⁵⁴ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8.

²⁵⁵ Perlstein, "I Thought," 6.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

inescapably situated in a modern context, is to recognize that it is broad enough to encapsulate contradictory ideas, and that above all sometimes the operations of this social force *can* simply be strange, crazed or alarming.

The Kern County Oil Workers Movement of 1921 must be placed in this larger context. Nehls himself contends that the idealism of the American Legion is impossible to situate disconnected from its racial conceptions, proclivity for violence and its capacity for irrationality and conspiracy building.²⁵⁷ The perception that the Kern County strike was entirely “moral and sober” neglects the fact on the ground the situation was quite tense, that Legionnaire strikers were blatantly racist and were regularly engaged in violence against members of the community throughout the strike zone.²⁵⁸

The analysis sits on a knife's edge. One moment the strike fails because it is too conservative, and the next it defies being characterized as peaceful. The fine point is that the movement was conservative in terms of its design and identity; the strikers may not have been “moral and sober,” but that does not mean that they were not conservative. Typically the relationship between labor disputes and lawlessness is conjoined by some form of labor radicalism that either looks to engage in sabotage or violent self-defense, but in Kern County radicalism was disdained. When oil workers broke down and engaged in violence it was not for the sake of labor radicalism, crippling of industry, destruction of private property or dishing blows to outfits of “law and order.”

²⁵⁷ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 308.

²⁵⁸ The violence is difficult to analyze because of its opaque ideological underpinning. Historically one might sympathize more with violence enacted in self-defense against strike breakers, however it is far from clear that these were the only acts of violence committed by oil strikers.

When they engaged in violence it was frantic, ideologically scattered and often aimed at people supposedly breaking with “law and order” and the moral idealism of the American Legion. Upon the strike’s conclusion oil workers stuck it out in Kern County under worse conditions or were seen “leaving Kern’s westside fields, carrying nothing but their ‘blanket rolls’ and trekking southward to the oil fields of the Los Angeles basin.”²⁵⁹ However, another contingent of oil workers as well as local people that had supported the strike, grew disillusioned by the demonstration of Americanism the Legion had shown and instead turned to the newly rising Klan of the San Joaquin Valley.

5.2 The Oil Workers and Race

Nehls has argued that, “the Legion’s approach towards racial difference was more complicated than simple nativism. Immigrants and other racial minorities had to fit into the Legion’s broader nationalizing agenda.”²⁶⁰ The idealism of the Legion had to leave open the possibility that racial or ethnic identifications could be overcome in order to establish a more perfect American citizenry. However, this was never a real possibility with the Legion in Kern County or for the oil workers movement.²⁶¹ Quam-Wickham notes that early on one of the principle identities oil workers rallied around prior to unionization in 1917 was Asian exclusion.²⁶² This dimension of the Kern County oil worker never left.

²⁵⁹ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 250.

²⁶⁰ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 183.

²⁶¹ For a deconstruction of the myth that America has always welcomed all immigrants, see Kunal M. Parker, *Making Foreigners: Immigration and Citizenship Law in America, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁶² Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 220.

In 1920 the population of Kern County was 97% white and 86% native born.²⁶³ This made it the fourth largest county in the state to boast high demographic marks for Americanism, and the bulk of these pockets ran along the entirety of the western oil fields.²⁶⁴ Compared to low-paying factory jobs on either coastline that siphoned off massive working immigrant populations right up to 1924, work in the oil fields attracted white native-born workers seeking opportunity to move into the skilled trades. Quam-Wickham and Thompson-Tozier note the large degree of improvisation that took place on the job and allowed for a more fluid degree of upward mobility in the trade.²⁶⁵

Despite Nehls's contention that, "the Legion remained committed to the fundamentally Progressive idea that outsiders could become American," the moral idealism of Legion rhetoric failed to ever take root in Kern County.²⁶⁶ This is most aptly demonstrated by the 1921 proposal for a Japanese agriculture colony. Supporters of the proposal were few, and argued that the Japanese appeared "highly successful" in the cultivation of grapes, melons and other fruits throughout the surrounding counties of Fresno and Ventura.²⁶⁷ They even contended that, "their presence in the community is necessary for adequate growth and prosperity."²⁶⁸ However, reactions against the proposal were

²⁶³ 1920 U.S. Census, Kern County, California.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. Changing the data visualization for the white native-born population of Kern County reveals deep pockets of over 10,000 people residing in the westside oil towns from Devil's Den south through McKitterick and into Taft.

²⁶⁵ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 71; Thompson-Tozier, "Armed," 17.

²⁶⁶ Nehls, "A Grand and Glorious," 183.

²⁶⁷ "Debate Project for Jap Colony," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 29, 1921.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

overwhelming and constituted a strong local alliance predicated upon local Anglo identity.

David Roediger reminds us that workers operating under hegemony are still historical actors “who make choices and create their own cultural forms.”²⁶⁹ Oil workers of Kern County were not victims of an imposed top down racism, but rather part of a white coalition between themselves and other community members. Similar to how oil workers conceived of their strike in terms of Americanism, so too did they utilize this identity and ideology in their efforts to preserve the region’s whiteness. Legionnaires considered rejection of the Japanese as “their duty as loyal Americans.”²⁷⁰

Alexander Saxton argues that, “Once California had filled, pushed and pulled the cart of Chinese exclusion to its legislative destination, no sleight of hand was needed to turn attention to the Japanese.”²⁷¹ Kern County workers had effectively kept Asians out of oil jobs right from the industry’s inception, and as the 1914 “tankies” strike reveals, “the pleasures of whiteness could function as a wage for white workers.”²⁷² The fact that oil workers were still finding time to vote for immigrant bans and voice racist opinions despite being in the midst of a massive labor dispute is salient.²⁷³ The 1921 proposal for a Japanese agriculture

²⁶⁹ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991), 9.

²⁷⁰ “Board Moves to Stop Invasion,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 21, 1921.

²⁷¹ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), xiii.

²⁷² Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 13. The “tankies” strike of 1914 in the Kern County oil fields is discussed earlier on page 15.

²⁷³ Roediger and Elizabeth Esch argue that the pitting of one race against the other was always central to American capitalist operations, but that “the perils faced by black and Asian workers carried more dire consequences.” Kern County oil workers perceived themselves to be the ideal

colony demonstrates that oil workers and members of the community were unwilling to abandon their white native-born identity by welcoming in outsiders, and that their form of conservative unionism was going to run parallel to these interests.²⁷⁴

A prime example of such a Kern County resident was Thomas W. McManus, a Legionnaire and Chairman of the National Committee on Oriental Immigration. McManus lived in the Bakersfield region, worked as a real estate subdivider and was sympathetic to the oil workers movement; believing that the identity behind Americanism possessed a strong underlying social glue for Kern county residents including oil strikers.²⁷⁵ He exclaimed, "It is better for us to make less money, but to keep our American and white population."²⁷⁶ He continued, "Without exception every community in California that has suffered from the blight of the presence of this unassimilable Asiatic race...let us maintain the barrier against the influx of Oriental typhoon!" McManus reflected a popular sentiment in Kern County and the Legion's ineptitude when it came to engaging their own ideals surrounding overcoming racial and ethnic identity.

The oil workers movement was in resounding agreement with McManus and condemned "the importation of Japanese labor...or any other alien

"white citizen-worker." See David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

²⁷⁴ The way whiteness operated in Kern County as early as 1921 has an unfortunate foreshadowing quality. The white majority in Kern County did not shrink in any significant way until the 1990s. Congruently this is when racial violence began escalating and drawing statewide attention. See Shawn Schwaller, "Greetings From Bakersfield: Law Enforcement Corruption, White Supremacy, and Latinx Lives in California's Deep Red South," *Boom California*, October 16, 2018; Michael Eissinger, "Kern County: California's Deep South," University of California Riverside, March 2011.

²⁷⁵ "Debate Project for Jap Colony," *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 29, 1921.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

population.”²⁷⁷ A unanimous county vote shot down the colony proposition and preserved the region's racial makeup.²⁷⁸ Union members, Legionnaires and numerous other county officials were all in agreement that, “Kern County was the only fertile district in California not yet overrun by the orientals” and they intended to keep it that way.²⁷⁹

Historiographically we must come to terms with the fact that the American conservatism the Kern County oil workers movement embodied was never one that engaged in a pro-Americanization agenda. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of strikers were Legionnaires, whose organizational rhetoric included the ability to recognize “the potential for individuals to transcend their race and become American in full,” this was never seen in the Kern County oil fields.²⁸⁰ This was merely one component of their identity, but it should work to throw into question how empathetic historians of American conservatism can be when there exists a blatant racial dimension to the nation building agenda of this time period.²⁸¹

5.3 A Propensity for Violence

The most “moral and sober strike ever pulled” was frequently violent. The movement’s “law and order committees” were allegedly designed to enforce

²⁷⁷ “Unanimous Vote for Resolution,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 5, 1921.

²⁷⁸ This action also paralleled the oil workers' disdain for Wobblies, who they saw as blatantly radical in their tactics, but also their inclusionary practices. See Jennifer Jung Hee Choi, “The Rhetoric of Inclusion: The I.W.W. and Asian Workers,” San Francisco State University, 1999.

²⁷⁹ “Unanimous Vote for Resolution,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 5, 1921.

²⁸⁰ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 184.

²⁸¹ The common conservative sentiment was that “penetration is being carried on by alien races...not adaptable to American ideals, socially or politically.” See for instance, *Japanese Immigration: Hearing before the Committee of Military Affairs*, 77 Cong. 2 (1921) (statement of Thomas W. McManus, Chairman of the National Committee on Oriental Immigration, American Legion).

prohibition and gambling laws, ensure private property was protected and apprehend both strike breakers and radical agitators. They were composed almost entirely of Legionnaires due to their military training and exclaimed that they were “pledged to patriotic maintenance of Law and Order in all oil field localities.”²⁸² Committee bylaws such as “no heated arguments,” “do not exceed the speed limit” and “do not carry firearms” were broken on an almost nightly basis as Legionnaires held conservative American patriotism in one hand and violent impulses in the other.²⁸³

The patriotic rhetoric of the oil workers movement was not far off from what high ranking Legion officials were calling for, but struggling to maintain. American Legion National Commander Franklin D’Olier reminded members in 1919 that,

We must always clearly bear in mind that any disposition on the part of individual members of the Legion or of local posts to take law into their own hands, to regulate by force or demonstration of forceful intent what is contrary to our interpretation of one hundred percent Americanism, or to act as self-constituted vigilance committees in disregard of lawful and properly constituted authority, is not only subversive of the principles and ideals of The American Legion but will weaken and tend to destroy our influence for good in this country.²⁸⁴

Once again the idealism of the Legion was to be challenged. It insisted on lawful civic participation, and as Nehls has contended it was fully capable of this. However, Legionnaires including the oil strikers of Kern County also proved that idealistic conservatism amidst deteriorating economic conditions bred an atmosphere where violence was increasingly looked to as an answer.

²⁸² “How the Patrols Work,” *The Sacramento Bee*, September 22, 1921.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 113.

The roadblock system of the strike zone was as extensive as it was vigilant. Every highway leading into the westside fields was equipped with a roadblock and guard outfit from the “law and order committees.” Even on rural highways such as State Route 58 and 166, motorists traveling into Kern County were stopped in the dead of night, interrogated and forced to “explain their presence to the satisfaction of the striker guard.”²⁸⁵ After night fall, on the highways and in the oil fields, tensions between strikers and whomever they encountered grew high.

Upon the strike’s inception sheriff D.B. Newell and local constables worked to deputize strikers throughout Kern County; a testament to the local political clout of the oil workers union and the advances they had made through the war period.²⁸⁶ The early success of the strike should not be understated.²⁸⁷ “Law and Order Committees” were particularly adept at intercepting strike breakers and effectively crafted what oil producers saw as a corrupt fiefdom or “little Russia.”²⁸⁸

However, the strikers also attempted to heavily control what was said about their movement in the press. They wrapped their image around the identity of conservative Americanism and did everything they could to preserve it. Upon entering the strike zone members of the press would be intercepted and then brought to the “central strike committee” where they were questioned in

²⁸⁵ “Women Patrols Keep Order in State’s Oil Strike Area,” *San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram*, September 23, 1921.

²⁸⁶ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 233-234.

²⁸⁷ Thompson-Tozier’s work is almost entirely devoted to the “organizing tactics within the strike zone.” Primarily the military training of the ex-servicemen and how they utilized “sentry duty,” “telegraphs,” “light signals,” roadblocks and motorized units to maintain law and order.

²⁸⁸ “Workers Ask Strike End,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 23, 1921.

regards to their intentions and credentials.²⁸⁹ It was not uncommon for those that “failed to win favor with the committee” to be escorted out of the strike zone.²⁹⁰ Activities of the “Law and Order Committees” never completely sat right with local press and their relationship grew tense over the course of the strike.

Violence was encouraged as the strike wore on and only worked to fuel a sense of frenzy. Union leadership offered strikers advice for how to handle potential saboteurs exclaiming, “The best way to answer him is to hit him between the eyes, quickly, so that lie and the companies for whom he is working cannot bring discredit upon you and your organization!”²⁹¹ Strikers hung effigies from bridges leading into the strike zone all adorned with placards warning agitators of the consequences for disrupting law and order.²⁹² Despite the rage oil workers felt towards saboteurs and strike breakers, Quam-Wickham notes that oil operators halted all attempts to bring in such forces after the September 14 train incident.²⁹³ Ensuing violence throughout the strike zone was directed against those perceived to have violated the movement’s conception of law and order, one that paralleled the Legion’s moral idealism.

On the evening of September 18 George M. Wilkins, a Kern County real estate agent, was traveling back from a camping trip in the Yosemite Valley with

²⁸⁹ “War Looms in Kern County,” *Riverside Daily Press*, September 20, 1921.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

²⁹¹ “‘Hit ‘em Between the Eyes,’ Say the Strikers, When Spies of Company Advocate Violence,” *Organized Labor*, Vol. 22, No. 41 (October 8, 1921).

²⁹² “Hanging Effigy Warns the Strike Breakers to Keep Out of Oil Fields,” *Stockton Independent*, October 3, 1921.

²⁹³ On the night of September 13 a train entered the strike zone from San Francisco carrying “121 armed men sent to protect private property.” Oil strikers spotted the train early, sent guard units to intercept it, disarmed the passengers and finally sent it into Bakersfield before returning to San Francisco. It was deemed an early victory for the oil workers movement. See Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 237; “Strikers Bar Oil Guards,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 14, 1921.

his wife and their nine-year-old son when they were stopped by strikers near the McKittrick oil fields. They had begun to slow down as they approached the roadblock when shots rang out striking the vehicle. Wilkins drove forward before being stopped by the gunmen who then proceeded to interrogate the family, claiming that they were looking for contraband and sought to search the vehicle. After a heated debate between Wilkins and the leader of the “committee,” Wilkins began to pull forward and depart the roadblock, as he did a “fusillade” of bullets came raining down upon the vehicle narrowly missing his son and wife. They managed to evade the barrage and continue on into Bakersfield, their car riddled with bullets.²⁹⁴

Despite similar accounts mounting, Sheriff Newell continued to reiterate that, “the whole situation is being handled by deputy constables forming the law and order committees...and that he has no control over the constables or their deputies.”²⁹⁵ Kern County residents unaffiliated with the strike did not hesitate to leave town while the time was ripe. Local reports indicated massive “outbound traffic from the strike districts” with automobiles “carrying large amounts of baggage” as well as “family chickens and pets.”²⁹⁶ Harry J. Baker, director of the strike in the Kern River district, attempted to console residents of the oil communities stating that violence “was not sanctioned by the organization and instead was the work of a few impulsive men.”²⁹⁷ District Attorney J.R. Dorsey, who had been put in office with heavy oil worker support two years prior, toured

²⁹⁴ “Band Fires on Autoist as He Fails to Stop Car,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 19, 1921.

²⁹⁵ “Operators to Meet Kern Sheriff,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 20, 1921.

²⁹⁶ “Report Exodus,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 20, 1921.

²⁹⁷ “Patrols Restricted,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 16, 1921.

the oil fields on September 21 also in an attempt to alleviate public distress.²⁹⁸ He concluded that “the reports of lawlessness...have been exaggerated” and instead “the record for law and order is excellent.”²⁹⁹ Roadblocks as well as violence on the highways and in the oil fields persisted despite the consolations.

Independent oil workers and foremen at operational derricks, disassociated with the Oil Producers Association, often working small leases in western Kern, did not fare well under strike conditions. Members of the strike’s “law and order committees” visited one such operator the night of September 21, stopped his wife and their nine year old daughter near Pentland Junction in Maricopa and shot up their vehicle after another heated debate on the highway.³⁰⁰ In another instance two oil workers on the Pacific Oil Company lease in Coalinga were severely beaten, one of them crippled, with “claw hammers” by Kern County oil strikers, simply for working a lease unaffected by the strike.³⁰¹ Local reports indicated that Coalinga, the south-western tip of Fresno County, was “being overrun by strange strikers from the Taft-Bakersfield fields.”³⁰² Oil strikers could hardly leave that region alone. They returned days later with another “fusillade,” firing round after round at the Pacific Oil derricks where workmen toiled through the night.³⁰³ Violence in the Coalinga district continued to be particularly bad throughout the remainder of the strike in large

²⁹⁸ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 195.

²⁹⁹ “Preservation of Peace Paramount Says District Attorney J.R. Dorsey,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 22, 1921.

³⁰⁰ “Operators Report Alleged Intimidation,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 22, 1921.

³⁰¹ “Oil Strikers Assail Workers Is Claim,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 1, 1921.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ “Report Four Bullets Miss Workerby Narrow Margin in Fusillade,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 7, 1921; “Oil Workers’ Strike,” *Organized Labor* (October 22, 1921).

part because Fresno County sheriff W.F. Jones had not been propped up by the union and was therefore more willing to clash with “law and order committees” when they enacted violence against workmen and county residents.³⁰⁴

“Law and order committee” violence always took a scattergun approach. Any oilmen not in line with the strike were susceptible to vigilante violence, even though the overwhelming majority of them were neither scabs nor strike breakers. The heated altercations on the highways often revolved around whether or not people being stopped in the strike zone were saboteurs, bootleggers or agitators, but often violence was enacted against those that did not fit into any of these categories and simply had refused to recognize the authority of the “law and order committees.”

Enough of these accounts finally made their way back to District Attorney Dorsey, who then exclaimed that, “shootings on the highways must stop!”³⁰⁵ Union officials also joined in condemning the violence, and both articulated that the “law and order committees” were not acting in accordance with their own principles of patriotism.³⁰⁶ When Martin Madsen of the governor’s office met with “law and order committee” members in the fields they responded by arguing that “the law was read to use” and that any American citizen could stop a vehicle on public highways provided they maintain “law and order.”³⁰⁷ Legionnaires that

³⁰⁴ “Disturbances Reported at Coalinga: Taft Workers Hold Big Parade,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 11, 1921; “Sheriff Jones Arrests Five Strikers,” *Los Angeles Herald*, October 11, 1921.

³⁰⁵ “Prosecutor Issues Edict Against Use of Firearms on Kern County Highways,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 24, 1921.

³⁰⁶ “Gathering Data,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, September 23, 1921.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

comprised these committees were clearly improvising what their Americanism meant.³⁰⁸

By mid-October the strike was over a month old and Kern County residents had grown weary. One editorial fondly reflected on the war-period when capital and labor were forced into industrial harmony and “there was a daily manifestation of patriotism of the highest order.”³⁰⁹ Oil strikers were attempting to rally their movement around such patriotism, but it proved to be a difficult maneuver.

Out of sheer desperation, “law and order committees” took to intimidating local news outlets such as the *Shafter Progress* just outside Bakersfield. Local editor H.M. Calkins had been reporting on the increasing violence throughout the strike zone when “committee members” visited him to decry that “through the articles in question he was injuring their cause.”³¹⁰ Calkins replied that, “he did not represent either side in the oil strike controversy, but as long as lawlessness was practiced here he would give the same publicity.”³¹¹ Calkins’s skepticism of the strikers’ “moral and sober” cause was not isolated. As the strike drew to a close and Yarrow asked for merchant endorsements within his final barrage of telegrams to Labor Secretary Davis, Kern County merchants officially declared

³⁰⁸ Nehls reminds us that “Legionnaires saw such confrontations as opportunities to mark clearly for their communities the boundaries of “un-American” conduct in political life and to make abstract ideas concrete. They became a kind of nationalist theater in which enlightened citizens within communities challenged those who violated the principles and ideals that defined the nation. These moments also became opportunities to clarify what an abstract concept like Americanism was by demonstrating what it was clearly not.”

³⁰⁹ “The Strike Situation,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 11, 1921.

³¹⁰ “Score of Men Call on Editor,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 11, 1921.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

themselves non-aligned despite having aided the movement in the early weeks.³¹²

The Americanism of the oil workers movement had limited their growth at the same time it had failed to garner the full embrace of the Kern County community. The violence surrounding the 1921 oil strike is not difficult to uncover, but its ideological underpinning is difficult to diagnose. It best resembled the violence the American Legion would become known for as the decade ensued, directed towards those that broke with the perceived conduct of “proper citizenship.” Nehls states, “Vigilantism, therefore, was part of the conversation the Legion had both within its own bounds and with society at large about the nature of American nationalism and good citizenship.”³¹³ As we have seen, the conservative design of the oil workers movement hobbled its options, and as the identity of Americanism, that the majority of strikers embraced over class, failed to pay the same dividends it had during the Wilsonian era, vigilantism was adopted as an anecdote for deteriorating economic conditions. When the strike concluded on November 3 and strikers were “hamstrung by their frequent pronouncements of patriotism, duty, and deference,” there was no mass pull to the left, instead a portion of oil workers and former strike supporters turned to the conservative nativism of the Klan.³¹⁴ An organization that would not offer ailing workers class consolation, but would at least offer infinite scapegoating and a deeper perpetuation of lawlessness.

³¹² “Operators Say Jobs to be Fewer Than if Walk-out Had Not Been Called,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, October 11, 1921.

³¹³ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 96.

³¹⁴ Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 248.

5.4 More American-than-thou

The second iteration of the Klan in 1920s America was the closest the organization came to mainstream. Recent historiography has shown that contrary to the popular perception of the Klan, as overtly southern and anti-black, the Klan of the 1920s was strikingly wide-spread on the national level and primarily animated by what members saw as violations of Americanism.³¹⁵ The nebulous nature of these transgressions aided the second Klan's growth. In post-war America, acts that deviated from the nation's perceived "moral code" could be easily found, ranging from radicalism and drinking to immigrants and promiscuity. The Klan sought to reestablish an "idealized American identity," one that had been menaced by the social turbulence of the war period.

The Klan's presence in the San Joaquin Valley during this period has been widely studied.³¹⁶ However, not enough has been done to provoke the idea of a rich historical overlap between the 1921 oil strike and the rise of the Klan in Kern County.³¹⁷ It remains difficult to escape the feeling that such an overlap exists, particularly when it comes to the larger discourse surrounding Americanism, what it should look like and how it should operate. The oil workers

³¹⁵ This does not imply that the second iteration of the Klan was not racist, it clearly was. However, there is debate among historians as to whether or not the 1920s Klan should be characterized most saliently by bigotry and violence or populism. Either way the second iteration of the Klan had the capacity to exhibit all of these factors. See Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Thomas R. Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Maryland: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 227.

³¹⁶ Scholarship on the subject is vast, however the most recent study out of Cal State Bakersfield is welcomingly succinct. See, Alicia E. Rodriguez, "No Ku Klux Klan for Kern' The Rise and Fall of the 1920s KKK in Kern County, California," *Southern California Quarterly*, Vol. 99 No. 1 (Spring 2017).

³¹⁷ This last segment of the project is not intended to flesh out the intricacies of such an overlap, but rather posit it as a line of historical inquiry.

movement had embraced the identity of Americanism, and in many ways had placed it above their conception of class and labor unionism. When this maneuvering finally led to the movement's capitulation, the fallout left oil workers and supportive community members to ponder what Americanism meant and what it was good for.

The fallout from the strike was severe. Union secretary E.B. Daniel wired Labor Secretary Davis and decried the treatment of oil workers returning back to work. He stated, "approximately 70% of the strikers have been re-employed, but the remaining 30% are being badgered and in many instances blacklisted openly, and even a large percentage of those working are continually being intimidated by petty officialdom!"³¹⁸ The strike had been called off for "industrial peace," but little peace would be found in the western oil fields for the ensuing months.

After the strike the majority of oil workers migrated south to the oil fields of Los Angeles where the communities of La Brea and Signal Hill had begun dominating the industry's output.³¹⁹ However, another contingent stayed in Kern, joined the ranks of the Klan and by February 1922 were actively doubling down on the vigilantism that had marked the strike period. Through winter and spring the westside oil districts were beset with "hooded terror" ranging from beatings to tar and featherings, as Klan members publicly announced, "we demand that the town of Taft and the county of Kern be made clean, and that happiness and welfare be safeguarded."³²⁰ When W.E.B. Dubois spoke of the 1920s Klan in America he argued, "total depravity, human hate and shaden-fruede do not fully

³¹⁸ "Conditions Rest on Men Say Operators," *The Bakersfield Californian*, December 9, 1921.

³¹⁹ Quam-Wickham, "Petroleocrats," 248-250.

³²⁰ "District Attorney Informed of One Attack," *The Bakersfield Californian*, February 21, 1922.

explain the mob spirit in this land. Before the wide eyes of the mob is ever the shape of fear.”³²¹ The Kern Klan was afraid the social fabric of the community was ripping, and they sought to articulate what their “ideal” form of American citizenship should look like and how its citizens should behave.

Quam-Wickham’s small segment on the Klan requires greater unpacking. She argues that, “Night riders targeted local merchants and residents who had supported the strike, as well as oil workers who had been blacklisted for their strike activities.”³²² However, she also concedes that a significant portion of oil strikers were the ones turning to the Klan.³²³ It appears that the Klan’s “cleaning” up of Kern was primarily an in-house procedure. The majority of their violence was directed towards individuals, former strikers or otherwise, that had been actively violating the “moral” dimension of Americanism exhibited during the strike. Eli Andrews was targeted for “bootlegging and peddling drugs” during the strike.³²⁴ Dr. Dwight Mason was targeted for alleged adultery.³²⁵ Druggist George Bowman of Taft was severely beaten and “dragged through an oil sump” for allegedly selling alcohol prescriptions to oil workers during the strike.³²⁶ George Pettye was beaten for alleged adultery, while others were dropped out in the middle of the desert and told to “seek employment.”³²⁷

³²¹ W.E.B. DuBois, “The Shape of Fear,” *North American Review* (June, 1926), 4-5.

³²² Quam-Wickham, “Petroleocrats,” 250.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Rodriguez, “No Ku Klux,” 16.

³²⁵ Ibid., 35.

³²⁶ “Residents Of Taft Are Warned To Get Out,” *Hanford Sentinel*, March 6, 1922.

³²⁷ Rodriguez, “No Ku Klux,” 23.

A *Hanford Sentinel* editorial stated,

It is not entirely a far-fetched theory that the loose action of Kern county officials during the oil strikes, when they permitted misuse of authority by those not intended to serve as peace officers, has in a measure influenced the present unlawful situation in the Kern town. When the agents of justice fail to do their full duty, the fabric of common sense law is torn.³²⁸

In both cases the “misuse of authority” was taken up in the name of Americanism and the perceived need to police the Kern County region on the principles of “proper citizenship.”

Nehls argues that both the American Legion and the Ku Klux Klan offered competing visions of Americanism through the 1920s.³²⁹ Given that both organizations were prone to vigilantism and racist thought, the key difference was an ideological one. *In theory* the Legion believed in “tolerance,” and “the premise that it was most desirable to link individuals within American society.”³³⁰ While the Klan obviously believed in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race, but also the “Protestant values of thrift, self-denial, sobriety, and strong work ethic.”³³¹

Between 1921 and 1922, these competing visions of Americanism took hold in Kern County, and contextualizing them against the 1921 strike is critical. The oil workers movement was completely consumed by the Americanism of the Legion, yet it failed to grow beyond the local level and clearly failed to obtain the goals of the strike. It is important to note that there was no large-scale fall from grace for former striking Legionnaires and supportive community members.

³²⁸ “Troubles of Taft,” *Hanford Sentinel*, March 7, 1922.

³²⁹ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” 210.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

During the fallout from the strike, it was not as if every single oil worker disavowed the Americanism of the Legion for that of the Klan. However, there was a portion that did.³³²

When interviewed after the strike Walter Yarrow exclaimed there had been “a lack of solidarity among oil workers.”³³³ Yet, internal rifts within the oil worker’s movement were never between conservatism and radicalism or class and Americanism, as we have seen, progressive unionism much less radicalism, were never seriously or effectively considered when it came to the strike’s design or methods. Discussions in Kern revolved around Americanism, and the fallout from the strike demonstrated that at least some in the region were willing to adopt a starker interpretation.

Kern County Legion posts struggled to rally Legionnaires after the strike as they faced the threat of the Klan’s Americanism. Legion leaders encouraged members in “waking up the ‘buddies’ and impressing them with the necessity of keeping their charters alive.”³³⁴ Leaders could hardly ignore the “lack of energy” felt throughout the posts, but were still determined to make their presence the dominant authority on the local level.³³⁵ Right into summer news headlines exclaimed, “Americanism is the Topic in Taft!”³³⁶

³³² In May 1922 *The Bakersfield Californian* published the names of all known Kern County Klan members after having obtained the list upon a law enforcement raid of the Klan’s Los Angeles headquarters. The list had almost 400 hundred names as well as occupations, and the majority were oil workers.

³³³ “Yarrow Resigns Post in Oil Workers Union Held Since Its Organization,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, January 9, 1922.

³³⁴ “County Council of Legion Meets,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, January 10, 1922.

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ “Americanism is the Topic in Taft,” *The Bakersfield Californian*, July 8, 1922.

The sentiment of those Legionnaires that were willing to abandon their Americanism for that of the Klan was best articulated by Taft City Marshall Roscoe Steele. When asked about his affiliation with the Klan he argued,

Yes, I was formerly a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and I joined the Klan in Santa Barbara and was obligated as were several others. I went into it with my eyes open, and am not trying to pass the buck along. I am glad to see that some of the boys are interested enough in me as to want to know my stand in the matter, so in justice to them I will attempt to give my opinion. There is absolutely nothing in the obligation of the Ku Klux Klan that is un-American, in fact it tends to make a man a better American and if the American Legion had a little more Klannish spirit and less selfishness it would be 100 percent American as is the Ku Klux Klan.³³⁷

The competing visions of Americanism that were present in Kern County at this time should demonstrate something about how we conceive of American conservatism as a social force. Nehls argues that the Legion represented a precursor to “class and colorblind interpretation of citizenship that would be vital to American conservatism through the rest of the 20th century.”³³⁸ In large part, this was the case in Kern County. However, while Alicia Rodriguez shows that the Kern Klan essentially folded in on itself amid strong local pushback, she also challenges us to understand that affiliation with the Klan never negatively impacted members' lives. Kern County members went on to hold prominent positions in other organizations, lead financially successful lives and were easily subsumed back into their communities.³³⁹ Rick Perlstein reminds us that “In fact, the ‘far right’ was never that far from the American mainstream.”³⁴⁰ The Kern County case should demonstrate that when conservatism is the dominant driving

³³⁷ “Roscoe Steele Prefers K.K.K.,” *Morning Press*, July 1, 1922.

³³⁸ Nehls, “A Grand and Glorious,” iii.

³³⁹ Rodriguez, “No Ku Klux,” 29-30.

³⁴⁰ Perlstein, “I Thought,” 4.

social force of a movement, it should not be assumed that it will automatically operate with the “slow and steady” momentum historians once ascribed to it.

5.5 Conclusion

The Kern County Oil Strike of 1921 and its fallout manage both bewilderment and rapture. The entire situation did not occur in a vacuum, it sat at the volatile crossroads of a postwar post-Red Scare America, saturated with WWI veterans returning from “over there,” Wobblies, Prohibition, shifting permutations of capitalism and a particularly conservative Harding administration and rising Republican regime. The case study grew beyond the strike itself and became much more about how these elements bounced off one another and shaped the ensuing decade.

Kern County oil workers were no different from other union men in that the war-period had been good to them. American capitalism had undergone drastic changes almost overnight with the onset of American involvement in WWI, and by 1921 these changes were being undone at a similar pace before Harding and the Republican retreat from strong state intervention in labor relations. The “great strike wave” of 1919-1922 was labor’s response.

The oil workers’ movement had unique flair. Strikers crafted an image of “patriotic unionism,” underpinned by a faith in the federal government, but also by the conservatism of the American Legion. Thousands of Legionnaires filled the ranks of the strike, adorned “badges of red, white and blue,” enforced prohibition and gambling laws, disdained radicalism and immigration, and “pinned their faith to Uncle Sam’s signature.” The strike lasted six weeks and paralyzed the state

oil industry. It did not end in gruesome class warfare like had been seen mere months earlier in the coal mines of West Virginia, but rather in ideological confusion and despair. The oil workers' movement never fully embraced a class identity, instead it embraced the burgeoning conservative identity of Americanism. This effectively hobbled the growth of the movement in several ways, and ultimately left it with a lack of alternatives besides capitulation. Upon the strike's conclusion and despite the fact that their movement's conservative design and identity had not led to any form of success, there was no mass pull to the left on the part of oil workers in the San Joaquin Valley. On the contrary a portion of workers and supporters of the strike turned to the nativism of the Klan.

This analysis first looks to contextualize the Kern County Oil Strike and its surrounding events, and then looks to place it alongside larger historical discourses. It sits most broadly and comfortably at the intersection between labor or class and identity, but it should also provoke a current dialogue regarding American conservatism. Questions that plague the case of the Kern County Oil Workers should be ones that echo through today. Why would a worker choose to identify with a category outside of class, particularly during a moment of labor unrest? Is a balance possible between a worker's material class conditions and their patriotic nationalism? Why is American nationalism an overwhelmingly conservative force? What is the nature of the relationship between American conservatism and labor, and what does this imply about the conservative worker? Is patriotic nationalism a stable vehicle for making class gains, and if so can a movement that adopts this strategy ever break with that

identity? These questions should ring out for historians looking to make sense of the most recent talk of nationalism despite obviously living in global world, and they should draw attention to the mindset of workers, already living in a de-industrialized country, that now hear the cry for the nation and appear willing to answer it, once again in spite of their material class interests.

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