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The Rise and Fall of Biracial Unionism in New Orleans

By

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New Orleans had the “most thoroughly organized” labor unions in the South and one of the strongest showings of biracial cross-trade unionism in the postbellum era, which grew outside the context of larger biracial organizations like the Knights of Labor. (Arnesen, 1994. 90. Bennets; 1972; 336-338) However, just months after reaching its “zenith” in what was called “one of the most important events in early Southern labor history” in the form of a general strike of 43 unions counting 27,000 members, or little over a third of the New Orleanian workforce it collapsed almost entirely and would not reemerge in the city for over a decade. (Rosenberg, 1988 36-38; Blassingame, 1973. 235; Marshall, 1967. 62; Daily-Picayune Feb 25, 1893). Despite its importance, however, it has remained a relatively understudied case. To fully understand what accounts for the breakdown of biracial cross-trade unions in New Orleans, we must understand the material and cultural circumstances, both particular and general, that were found in the city. One cannot disconnect cross-trade biracialism in New Orleans from its origins in the trade-specific racial antagonisms of the 1860s and 1870s. (Marx, 1978. 154)

When looking closely at New Orleans, we uncover how new material conditions came up against cultural understandings produced by old material conditions. Initially, white workers expressed “revulsion” to working with black people and attempted to exclude them from the labor force. (Arnesen, 1994. 20-21; Bennets, 1972. 166; Blassingame, 1973. 64) The individuals in unions used their “toolkit” of knowledge to respond to immediate material needs. In the process of doing this, they began legitimating new strategies of action. These both diverged from and were tethered to preexisting understandings that emerged from the primordial soup of a history mired in chattel slavery, aristocratic planters, a commitment to self-made ideation, and semi-paternalistic relationships with merchants. (McLaughlin-Stonham, 2020. 80-87; Merrit, 2017. 62-69; Guess, 2008; Swidler, 1986; Billings, 1979. 127-129 Blassingame, 1973. 64, 66)

Emancipation drastically altered the New Orleanian labor market with a huge increase in the number of black workers in the city, from, 24,074 in 1860 to 50,495 (Blassingame, 1973. 220) From the 1860s into the 1870s it became clear that neither exclusion nor segregation of black workers would produce positive gains for white workers who then began experimenting with biracialism in the late 1870s and early 1880s which resulted in the first positive gains for unions in years. (Arnesen, 1994. 20, 57, 65-69; Bennets, 1972. 153, 166, 284) Biracialism was first institutionalized in the Cotton Men's Executive Council (CMEC), then spread to the Central Trade and Labor Committee (CTLA) and the Amalgamated Council (AC) throughout the 1880s and into the 1890s. (Arnesen, 1994. 63; Bennetts, 1972. 317, 399)

While biracialism became wildly adopted, there were also points of contention. The most salient of which resulted from the two strategies of action that produced gains and thus experienced positive feedback in the 1880s. One was antagonistic and pro-strike, while the other was more cooperative and preferred arbitration to the cost and risk of striking. (Pierson, 2002. 31; Arnesen, 1994. 59; Bennetts, 1972. 316, 326.) Further, within both groups, there was contention surrounding the legitimacy of sympathy strikes; essentially, strikes that were carried out to support unions not directly affiliated with them. (Arnesen, 1994; 116; Cook, 1983) The preponderance of black workers across trades meant that there was a necessity and interest convergence to organize with them; white workers "got something" out of it. Therefore, both groups adopted a biracial approach. (Figures 1, 2; Bell, 1980) While biracialism was not a salient question, contestation over the correct strategy of action was. (Arnesen, 1994. 106-111)

The 1892 general strike represented the antagonistic camp going all in to legitimate their form of unionism. They successfully brought in organizations that had adopted a cooperative strategy and antagonistic unions that were more skeptical of sympathy strikes. When the strike failed, the antagonistic unions faced backlash both internally among unions and externally from the state and merchants. (Cook, 1983; Bennetts, 1972. 416; Daily-Picayune. Nov 5th, 13, 1892; Daily-Picayune, Jan 19, 25, 1893) This led to a reduction in the number of unions, the number of union-affiliated individuals in general and of those who were employed, an inability to carry out effective strikes, a retreat from cross-trade unionism, and the strengthening of the merchants' position. (Rosenberg, 1988. 30; Bennets; 1972. 432-433; Marshall, 1967. 63-64) The depression

of 1893 further exacerbated the situation for unionists in the city as the amount of available work decreased, and the amount of available labor increased through unemployment and immigrants from harder-hit regions seeking work. (Arnesen, 1994. 120; Bennets, 1972. 451-52) In this context, arbitration was more difficult, as it hinged on a substantial enough counterbalance bundled with the legitimate risk of strike for failure to arbitrate to bring merchants to the table in the first place. Thus, despite the two strategies contending with one another for dominance, there was a reciprocal exchange between the two.

While 1892 did not mean the death and abandonment of all unions in New Orleans, it did mean they ceased to function. With unions non-functioning, the pretext under which biracialism was established was severely undermined. Biracialism in New Orleanian unions was never a movement for social equity. It was a widely accepted strategy of action to contend with the issues that arose from a reserve labor force and to counter merchant power. (Arnesen 1994: 40-41, 44-45) Yet antagonistic unionism was no longer a legitimate choice for unions in the city, and cooperative unionism failed to produce results. (Bennets, 1972. 450-53) Thus, in an effort to secure immediate needs in unstable working conditions and to explain the failure of 1892, white workers turned to the previously established toolkit of understanding, white supremacist racism. This effectively undermined biracial organizing across New Orleans and resulted in a return to the form of the 1870s and earlier. (Arnesen, 1994. 120; Marshall, 1967. 64-65)

The rise and fall of New Orleanian unionism is the story of individuals working out what would be the form of labor unionism in the city and the contention that arose from differing operational strategies. While certain aspects of it, like biracialism, were broadly adopted given the failure of alternatives to it, cooperative and antagonistic strategies contentious. (Arnesen, 1994. 63; Bennets, 1972. 317, 399) The process of building these new ways of organizing involved the modification of existing cultural toolkits but not the wholesale abandonment of the ideas embedded in them. The resulting organizations were powerful, but their strategies remained tentative and were not fully legitimated within the subgroup of individuals involved. (Swidler, 1986; 276) Thus, despite a decade of successes, the first major failure of biracial cross-trade unionism resulted in the abandonment of commitments to it and a return to previously

established strategies of action. (Arnesen, 1994. 120-22; Bennets, 1972. 449; Marshal, 1967; 63-64)

This case points us toward a broader understanding of how organizations that diverge from existing knowledges come about in the first place, and the risks associated with their legitimation. To understand what happens in any given case, we must also understand what ideas, material conditions, and immediate needs lead us to it. Then, we must understand the particular “interaction effect” of these preexisting conditions with the new ones we find ourselves in. Success and failures in this initial stage necessarily demonstrate to individuals on the ground that the new form of approach is legitimate or illegitimate. (Pierson, 2002. 20-23) Different individuals will hit upon different ideas, and contention about what is “right” will inevitably emerge. As a result of the failure of an approach, certain broadly accepted realities may become delegitimated implicitly as they hinged on the success of the approach in the first place. Thus, what is “right” and its associated ideology is constructed post-facto as the result of the success or failure of an approach.

Missteps have cascading effects, and we find that differing strategies of action may hinge on the presence of others. Individuals within these organizations come to the table with incomplete knowledge and the “distortions” that come with it. (Simmel, 1974. 9-11) Outside of the context of the organizations they are working to create, or given their failure, this previous cultural toolkit may be reemployed. The organization itself thus constitutes a new field wherein existing social rules and regulations are modified and adapted. (Bourdieu, 1980.) In so doing, people may work towards new understandings. (Marx, 1978. 72, 144) Importantly, however, nothing “must” happen here. The struggle to define and understand is open-ended and worked out across time. (Markoff, 2011) We should not fall into teleological notions of strict path dependency. (Pierson, 2002. 28) Rather, we should observe that there are legitimate constraints on the choices available to individuals given their understanding of the world and the material circumstances that they find themselves in. (Swidler, 1986.) Particular material circumstances may serve to change the options open to people. However, in new cultural contexts, these same material circumstances may reconfirm preexisting understandings or send individuals off on divergent paths. (Hall, 2021; Althusser, 2005. 110-114)

Methods and Data

Methodologically this paper follows Markoff (2011) and Pierson (2004). It believes events that unfolded in New Orleans must be understood as a time-ordered sequence and the result of different individuals responding to both material and cultural conditions. Those in the city had particular understandings that needed to be built, affirmed, and legitimated. Political factions, merchants, union members, and black and white people throughout the city contested the political economy of New Orleans. The content of New Orleanian labor unionism was not set in stone. It was being worked out by union members on the ground through trial and error with often conflicting obligations and ideas. It takes a structural Marxist approach, following Hall (2021) and Althusser (2005), believing that, at least in this case, we cannot untether race and labor from the recent material circumstances of industrialization and chattel slavery in the South. This is not to say culture and ideology are unmeaningful. They are, in fact, essential.

In New Orleans, we find adaptive responses to material conditions guided by ideologies created in past eras producing new social forms as individuals make decisions according to immediate needs. We shouldn't understand these as rational choice as Becker may have, but rather people are coming into new circumstances with the old cultural "toolkit" they have on hand. (Becker, 1976; Swidler, 1986) For Swidler, culture should be understood in short as "beliefs," "meanings," and "rituals of daily life" (Swidler, 1986. 273). These beliefs and meanings are necessarily constructed from the workings, the success, failures, proper and improper adaptations, rationalizations, or justifications, from previous generations that are then reused and reapplied to life in the present. (Pierson, 2002; Marx, 1852) The use of these old ideas in new contexts will produce divergent forms, what Althusser would call "articulations" or more concretely, a case specific result of the ideological haggling that comes with bring old ideas that may no longer "work" to a new set of material conditions. (Althusser, 2005.)

This paper uses primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include 123 articles published in the Daily-Picayune and Times-Democrat from October 1892 to November 1893, letters between John M Callaghan and Samuel Gompers reprinted by Foner and Lewis (Foner, Lewis. 1979), internal debates from the Typographical 17 collected by Cook (1983), national and local census data compiled by Blassingame (1973). These sources were chosen to understand unions' and merchants' motivations, understandings, and decision-making processes before, during, and after the 1892 general strike. Further census data provides insights into the economic and demographic conditions of New Orleans from 1870 to 1890. Future research should focus more heavily on the collection of primary sources such as Orleans Parish Census records and black-run newspapers such as the Southwestern Christian Advocate, and pro-labor magazines like the New Orleans Mascot, which are held on microfilm and in physical editions at Louisiana State University, Xavier University, the University of New Orleans, and national archives in Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, unions like the CMEC did not maintain, or there are no surviving records of, internal deliberations. (Arnesen, 1994. 64)

As such, access to economic and demographical data is limited. However, there is enough to show rough estimates of the racial composition of skilled and low-skill labor from 1870 to 1890. These estimates could be better, as the lists are not exhaustive on the racial composition of all jobs in the city. The list of unions is also incomplete, as the general strike is said to have comprised 43 unions, and this list contains only 36. The list was compiled through Daily-Picayune reporting on unions that joined the strike and letters signed by the unions involved. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 1, Nov 5, Nov 6, 1892) No exhaustive reporting on the specific unions involved in the strike in newspapers, court reporting, or secondary sources has been found. Additionally, some reporting is contradictory, as they list unions as being involved in the strike that is known not to be. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 5, 1892.)

Year	Percent of Labor Force	Number in Labor Force	Percent defined Low-Skill Wage Earners (“Laborers”)	Number in “Laborers”
Black Labor Force				
1870	25.9%	12992	52%	4941
1880	23.7%	14027	44.2%	6534
Foreign-Born Labor Force				
1870	49.5%	24831	36.8%	3503
1880	33.2%	19565	22.9%	3394

White Labor Force				
1870	24.6%	12293	11.2%	9499
1880	43.1%	19581	32.9%	14777
Total Labor Force				
1870		50116		
1880		59173		

Figure 1

Figure one shows the percentage of white, black, and foreign-born individuals as a percentage of the total labor force and as a percentage of those employed as laborers in 1870 and 1880, respectively. (Blassingame, 1972. 229-33, 235) Unfortunately, the data set does not list specific low-skill labor occupations, and instead uses a general “laborer” category. As such, a list of unions and their associated racial labor make up have been omitted. However, of known unions, 18 were low-skill. We can see a sharp increase in the percentage of laborers who were identified as white as a percentage of the total labor force and as a percentage of those employed as laborers. In addition, there is a sharp decrease in foreign-born individuals as a percentage of the total labor force and those employed as laborers. We see only a moderate decrease in the percentage of laborers who identified as black and a moderate increase in the total labor force that was black. Given the increase in unemployment caused by the 1873 financial crash and the drastic increase in the number of white people working in the labor sector, there was likely an increase in competition for jobs in labor sectors. (Arnesen, 1994. 45) Yet as the 1880s began to stabilize the New Orleanian economy, whites could have begun to leave low-skill labor and filter into higher-skilled sectors as white workers tended to be preferentially hired over black workers. (Bennets, 1972. 166)

Skilled Unions	Industry Black Labor Percentage, 1880	Industry Black Labor Percentage, 1890
JIL Brown Carpenters and Joiners	27.7%	22.3%
ET Gibson Carpenters and Joiners	27.7%	22.3%
EJ Melarohher Carpenters and Joiners	27.7%	22.3%
LD Landry Carpenters and Joiners	27.7%	22.3%
Lee J Hui Brotherhood of Painters and Paper Hangers	18.1%	17.3%
Barbers Union	29.1%	29.1%
Geo Speiss Cooper’s International	27.7%	28.1%
Typographical Union No. 17	2.2%	N/A
Baker’s Union	45.7%	N/A
B Moses Musicians	23.2%	N/A
Fishermen’s Union	29.2%	N/A

Aaron Butler Marine Firemen	N/A	N/A
Electric Workers	N/A	N/A
AR Ketchum Marine Mates	N/A	N/A
Jos Markey Gas Workers	N/A	N/A
FL Winters Pile Drivers and Wharf Builders	N/A	N/A
Chas Horn Marine and Stationary Firemen	N/A	N/A
Geo Speiss Cooper's International J.E. Boyle Horse Shoers	N/A	N/A

In figure two, we can see that 18 known skilled labor unions were involved in the general strike of 1892. Across industries with a known black labor percentage, we see an average black labor percentage of 22%. In instances with no known black labor percentages from 1890, numbers from 1880 are used. While these numbers are imperfect, this lends credence to the claim that this was a biracial movement. (Blassingame, 1972. 229-33, 235)

Secondary sources are books on New Orleanian history, black life, unpublished dissertations on the labor struggle, books on the New South, labor encyclopedias, and biographies of prominent union leaders and politicians. Secondary sources on the formation of unions in New Orleans pre-1890 are limited, with only Arnesen (1994, 1991), Bennets (1972), and Shugg (1939) covering it extensively. Shugg remains somewhat correct when he said in 1938 that “One may search the annals of American Labor history without finding mention of this strike” as sources for the general strike of 1892 are only slightly more robust and covered by Cook (1983) Bennetts (1972) and Shugg (1938), while Arnesen (1994) Rosenberg (1988) Foner and Lewis (1979) Marshall (1967) and Foner (1955) take the time to mention it but do not go into extensive detail. These sources were selected to understand the political obligations and struggles in New Orleans, the cultural and material circumstances impacting white and black workers, and how different obligations overlapped for all involved. Secondary sources for black life are Blassingame (1972), Logsdon (1992), and De La Funtess Gross (2020). These sources were chosen to understand the social and economic issues facing black people in New Orleans and how New Orleans compared to other Southern cities and Latin cities. For white life, Merritt (2017) and McLaughlin-Stonham (2020) provide insight into how white people generally view race and segregation. Books and essays on New Orleanian politics (Nystrom, 2010) Ettinger (1985) and (Mandel, 1955) were chosen to understand the relationship between the machine government in New Orleans and labor and between the state government and New Orleans.

Finally, select books and essays were chosen to understand the presence and relationship of national labor federations like the Knights of Labor (Foner, 1955) AFL (Foner, 1955; Mandel, 1955) and International Typographical Union (Cook, 1983) had with the workers in the city.

Literature Review and Historical Background

Biracialism emerged out of the material reality of New Orleans, but only after other avenues had been shown to fail. White unions dominated in the 1860s as black unions developed more slowly due to black codes, poor economic conditions, racial violence, and an “individualistic” attitude towards improvement that dominated the middle classes. (Shugg, 212. 1939; Blassingame, 1972. 64; Arnesen, 1994. 51) At first, white labor attempted to keep black labor out by force in an effort to secure a position for themselves. (Arnesen, 1994. 20-21) White employers would also take a hand in this as some would refuse to hire black workers (Bennets, 1972. 167). This would prove to be an untenable strategy as the number of black workers increased, and black labor began to organize in the late 1860s, forming 15 unions by 1880, and in industries where black people dominated or constituted a significant percentage of the labor force it was nigh impossible. (Arnesen, 1994; 20-21; Bennets, 1972. 166; Blassingame, 1973. 64).

As has been shown, black people accounted for around a quarter of the labor force in New Orleans and maintained a disproportionate share of low-skill labor. Yet they also maintained a firm hold on specific skilled labor sectors in New Orleans. They were “perhaps the most skilled” in the South owing to the presence of black creoles, an aristocratic group of people of color born free before the Civil War who provided education and apprenticeships to freedmen after the war. Thus, the reality of the need for white workers to organize with black workers existed across industries in New Orleans. (De La Fuente, Gross: 2020, 116; Johnson, 1992. 40 51; Logsdon, Cosé 1992: 204-205) Thus, through necessity biracialism entered as a potential strategy of action for New Orleanian unions.

The first inklings of formalized cross-trade biracialism emerged on the docks of New Orleans in the late 1870s after the uncoordinated and segregated unions failed to achieve anything more than the maintenance of wages. (Arnesen, 1994. 57) The material conditions of labor on the docks put workers at a disadvantage. Work on the docks was contractual, bosses would pick individuals to form crews, and those crews would bid on work. For much of the work, one needed only to be strong and have stamina; thus, many men fit the bill of a prospective dock worker. (Arnesen 1994: 40-41, 44-45) The relatively low-skill nature of the work meant that a reserve labor force was easy to muster, and unions had already been contending with strikebreakers for years in 1873, when the financial crash would leave around 5,000 people unemployed. Further, dockworkers tended to have a roughly even racial composition of black and white workers. (Bennets, 1972. 284) As late as 1880, evidence suggests irregularly employed longshoremen functioned as a strikebreaking force. (Arnesen, 1994. 23, 45; Bennets, 1972. 274) As a result of the lack of positive gains of segregated unions, the precarious circumstances labor found themselves in, and the roughly even split of black and white workers, and robust reserve labor force, biracial cross-trade unionism began to be experimented with earnest here going into the late 1870s and early 1880s. (Arnesen. 1994. 59-60; Marx, 1990. 784)

The Legitimation of Biracialism and the Antagonistic Strategy of Action:

The first significant dock strikes were carried out by the predominantly black longshoremen's union over wages and hours and lasted from February 1880 to November 1880. These workers were supported by the nonunionized roustabouts starting in September of that year. While the strike ended in failure, low-skill laborers successfully tied up trade and served as a symbolic victory. (Bennets, 272, 283) In September of 1880, the Cotton Yardmen's Association, a cross-trade union of cotton workers, struck for wages, hours, overtime pay, the weight of the cotton bales, and the demand that merchants provide proper tools. (Bennets, 285) This strike would succeed, no doubt helped by having the "virtually irreplaceable" cotton screwers as all other unions could fail, but so long as the cotton screwers remained on strike, they could tie up trade. (Arnesen, 1994. 42; Bennets, 279, 284)

The strikes of the 1880s demonstrated that biracial unions could successfully tie up trade and that the low-skill laborers could be more easily replaced, but with the help of higher-skilled labor, they could create fallback positions which would strengthen the strikers' positions. Thus not long after the strike in December of 1880, the Cotton Men's Executive Council (CMEC) was formed, a biracial federation of segregated and integrated unions that would coordinate together and included virtually all labor on the docks. (Arnesen, 1994. 63) Importantly, however, the CMEC maintained the form of white supremacy. Black unions were numerically inferior, thus had disproportionate representation on voting, no black unionist was ever president, and cotton screwers refused to sign work-sharing agreements. (Arnesen, 1994. 69, 94)

Following 1880, New Orleans would enter a "golden age" of labor unionism. From 1880 to 1882, there were 37 strikes, of which twenty-five had known outcomes. Of these, seven ended in complete victory, eight in partial victory, and ten ended in losses. (Bennetts, 1972. 316) The largest of these strikes was in August of 1881, carried out by the CMEC, over wages and hours and the demand for a closed shop. The strike started poorly as merchants brought in strikebreakers from outside the city, and the merchants preemptively requested police protection. (Bennetts, 1972. 294) The pro-capital Reform politician, Mayor Shakespeare, committed "all available officers" to breaking the strike and hired an additional sixty-four men from the city to act as officers during the strike. Two black unions also used the strike to protest the inequality of representation and unfair work-sharing agreements in the CMEC and withdrew from the strike, which prompted racial violence from white strikers. (Arnesen, 1994. 69; Bennetts, 1972. 296, 297) At this point, the strongest link was the cotton screwers, as, without them, cargo could not be secured in the ships for transportation. (Bennetts, 1972. 294) The police killing of the black striker, James Hawkins, galvanized the unions and prompted three days of violence as black and white strikers were arrested together. The disaffected black unions were invited to rejoin the fold, and there was an outpouring of community support for the strikers. (Bennetts, 1972. 298-301) The strikers would emerge victorious through threats of martial law. They would win wages, hours, the release of all arrested strikers, and a guarantee of their jobs, yet they would miss out on the closed shop. (Bennetts, 1972. 299-303) What could have spelled the end of the CMEC through state violence and racial strife ended with the CMEC winning a significant victory, a strong public legitimation of biracial-cross trade solidarity. (Arnesen, 1994, 59)

The benefits of biracialism became clear throughout the late 1870s and early 1880s. For both black and white workers, biracialism prevented harsher violence in the city, reduced racial tensions, prevented strikebreaking, and maintained wages. For black workers work, sharing agreements would reduce racial discrimination, and the link between themselves and white labor may have had implicit political advantages to black workers as throughout much of this period, New Orleans was in control of a pro-white labor machine government called The Ring that had emerged from a failed white supremacist coup of the Reconstruction era Republican government. (Arnesen, 1994. 75; Bennets, 1972; 167; Ettinger, 1985. 343, 345; Nystrom, 2010.174-79, 184, 188-89, 196) If the growth of unionism in the city was first driven by an immediate need for wages and hours agreements, then their earliest large successes were founded on biracial cooperation and growing cross-trade solidarity originating on the docks of New Orleans. Biracialism would spread out of the docks and into the biracial and cross-trade federation called the Central Trade and Labor Assembly. By 1883 it represented 17 unions and 15,000 white and black workers from different trades throughout the city and conducted public demonstrations of racial solidarity. (Bennetts, 1972. 317, 326)

The Legitimation of the Cooperative Strategy of Action:

The CTLA was more conservative in its approach to striking and tended to view it as a “final option” in labor disputes, preferring to arbitrate with merchants over wages and hours rather than risk striking which was costly and physically dangerous. Notably, the organization’s decision to back strikes was not firmly secured to the color line in the city. (Bennetts 1972. 320, 322, 325) Though it is difficult to make the connection entirely, the rise of the CTLA is associated with a decrease in the total number of strikes. From 1880-1882 there were 37 strikes, while from 1882 to 1886 there were just 34. This reduction and in and risk associated with strikes are general trends in Southern labor. From 1887 to 1904, around 61% of strikes conducted in the South failed, compared to the North, which saw only 43.7% of strikes fail. (Bennetts, 1972. 322, 381. Marshal, 1967. 23-24). The anti-strike Knights of Labor, which had initially struggled in New Orleans, also reached its high point in New Orleans going into the late

1880s, despite bleeding members nationally over its growing cooperative approach to employers. (Foner, 1955. 86-87; Bennetts, 1972. 336)

As such, it seems that there is reason to suspect more workers were beginning to, if not favor arbitration over striking, at least showing hesitancy for striking in New Orleans going into the 1890s. Yet large organizations like the CTLA and CMEC being willing to strike also created a counterbalance to merchant power in the city; strikes were a potential outcome for failing to arbitrate. Therefore, arbitration was more likely to succeed as there was a legitimate risk associated with not giving in to the demands of labor. Thus, capitalists were apt to increase wages, reduce hours, and sign new tariffs. (Bennetts, 1972. 320-322) Yet, strikes were also a risk for unions. They were costly, physically dangerous, and did not always work. Arbitration became a “safe” option for both parties.

The cooperative approach may have also fit more easily into the embedded understanding of work relations that New Orleanian laborers had. The city fit into Billings’ characterization of the “New South,” which he defined as of mixture of new capitalists and old planting aristocrats, resulting in a “vigorous commitment to both paternalism and industrialism.” (Billings, 1979. 91-100, 123, 125) There was an understanding, or at least a salient rhetoric, that capitalism would be a reciprocal exchange. (Billings, 1979. 127-129) New Orleanian laborers framed themselves as not working against capital but rather as individuals concerned with capitalism’s well-being. As Bennetts notes, unions came from a “getting a piece of the pie” (Bennetts, 1972. 270, 274) Both black and white workers held views of being “self-made,” and unions framed themselves within reciprocal terms. (Arnesen, 1994. 47; Blassingame, 1972 64, 66, 167) Even during the general strike in 1892 would say the unions represented the right for men to organize “for the benefit of all”. The strike was “not a contest against capitalism,” and unions were “good for both sides”. (Times-Democrat, Oct 30, 1892)

The Contestation of Approaches:

With this in mind, we can turn to the CMEC in the mid-1880s. The organization would split over the relationship between employer and employee and the allowance of

employers into the union in debates reminiscent of those in the Knights of Labor. (Arnesen, 1994. 106-109; Foner, 1955 158-159) The split roughly mapped on to racial lines and resulted in the formation of the CMEC2, a predominantly white group that took an antagonistic anti-merchant stance. Yet these tensions also gave voice to black dissatisfaction with their voting power in the Council and offered grounds to air racial tensions. The CMEC2 enacted rules that disproportionately impacted black labor leadership and would declare the predominantly black, pro-capital CMEC1 non-union and demanded cotton pressers fire them; the CMEC1 would boycott employers who did not. (Arnesen, 1994. 110-111) In response, black workers offered to work at cotton presses at a reduced rate, fearing they would lose employment. (Bennets, 1972. 374)

Yet this was not an attempt to eliminate black labor as the CMEC2 would invite black unions to join. (Arnesen, 1994. 113) Therefore, while the rules implemented by the CMEC2 were undeniably racist, and individual white union members undeniably harbored racist sentiment, the struggle in the CMEC2 seems to be one of the internal power relations between two groups over the relationship between labor and capital. Attempts to boycott the CMEC1 don't have the same motivations as the attempts to bar black labor in the early to mid-1800s. Instead, these attacks were aimed at the CMEC1 as an organization while the CMEC2 offered positions to the black unions still in the CMEC1 so long as they were willing to commit to their strategy of action. With this in mind, the rather unceremonious ends of the troubles begin to make more sense. On Apr 8, two days after union members exchanged shots with each other, the two CMECs held a closed doors meeting, and by Apr 20, the two councils reconciled. (Bennets, 1972. 376) The CMEC abandoned its close relationship with capitalists, and shortly after, white unions were conducting sympathy strikes for black unions. The largest change was that the Screwers unions would, for a time, decide to keep themselves out of the CMEC and adopt a craft-specific approach to union efforts but would rejoin, and white Screwers unions finally signed work-sharing agreements with black unions. Sign work-sharing agreements (Arnesen, 1994. 113; Bennets, 1972. 377)

A Sign of Things to Come:

One of the most consequential results of the troubles were less evident at the time. It made clear to the merchants that they had essentially no control over the employees on the docks and that union control over labor could result in intra-labor disputes, which were as disruptive to trade as strikes could be and forced the merchants into a position where they had to bow to the whims of labor. (Arnesen, 1994. 64, 111) The cotton exchange issued a statement saying, “Business can no longer be properly conducted as the labor unions of this city are now organized” ... “we have practically no control over our employees” and demanded that workers resign from organizations that “impede the commerce of the city.” (Bennetts, 1972. 376) In short, it had become clear to capitalists that the growing strength of unions in the cities needed to be stopped.

Case: The General Strike of 1892

By the late 1880s, the CTLA had decreased in prominence, leading to the creation and ascendance of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) affiliated Amalgamated Council. (Bennetts, 1972. 400) The AFL entered New Orleans in 1890 but began organizing in earnest in early 1892. Notably, the AFL adopted an antagonistic view of labor unionism, saying a struggle was going on “between oppressed and oppressor ... between labor and capital,” and it maintained a commitment to biracialism championed by Samuel Gompers, head of the AFL. (Foner, 1955. 142, 196, 199; Mandel, 1955. 42-43). Though the AFL had tended to focus on skilled labor, the relatively strong presence of black labor in skilled trades in New Orleans meant this would not create a facto exclusion. (Mandel, 1955. 45) Further, the Amalgamated Council counted skilled and non-skilled labor unions among its 43 members representing 27,000 workers; therefore, even unions not directly affiliated with the AFL maintained affiliation via association. (Daily-Picayune, Feb 25, 1893) The Amalgamated Council was led by Typographical No. 17 President James Leonard, AFL state representative John M Callaghan and black longshoremen James E. Porter were board members. (Daily-Picayune, Oct 25, 1892)

The 1892 strike started in October and was said to have resulted from two years of planning and organizing. (Daily-Picayune, Oct 26, 1892) 1892 was picked as an opportune time to strike, given the recent election of pro-labor Ring politician John Fitzpatrick. In May of that

year, Car Drivers had struck and won a closed shop, and the Amalgamated Council dreamed of a closed shop for all affiliated unions. (Bennets, 1972, 390, 402; Cook, 1983. 379; Arnesen, 1994. 114) On Oct 24, 1892, three unions from the Amalgamated Council, the Scalemen, Packers, and Teamsters, calling themselves “The triple alliance,” walked out over arguments about increased wages, reduced hours, and most importantly, a closed shop (Daily-Picayune, Oct 25, 1892).

The Board of Trade represented the merchants, an association of prominent capitalists in the city, and was led by FJ Odendahl. The Board of Trade was entirely against the closed shop. The Board of Trade formed a committee comprised of five merchants, five non-union laborers, and one “umpire,” the head of a major insurance company in the city, to investigate the grievances of non-union men. (Daily-Picayune, Oct 29, 1892) Thirty-seven men attended the meeting, and almost all said they had no issue with the current working arrangements, those who did cited long hours and low pay. The labor side of the tribunal pointed out that the conversations were not particularly meaningful, as all those who had issues were already on strike or affiliated with unions, but the merchants dismissed this claim. (Daily-Picayune, Oct 30, 1892) The Board of Trade’s committee would continue to be in constant, circular conversations with the Amalgamated Council. The Amalgamated Council would issue proclamations in the papers, and the Board of Trade would respond by arguing, saying they did not know what the strikers wanted, while simultaneously discussing what they wanted at length in their own meetings. What is clear is that the Board of Trade was vehemently opposed to a closed shop and the recognition of unions but was willing to discuss wages and hours. (Daily-Picayune. Oct 27, 1892)

The closed shop had been an often-chased goal for unions throughout the 1880s and by 1890 existing New Orleanian unions had largely won wages and hours in the city through striking. To achieve these gains, however, unionist frequently abandoned their goal of a closed shop. The diminishing frequency of strikes suggests many unions had become comfortable with their pay scale or were frequently able to arbitrate on wages. Therefore, the closed shop may have been the only goal prominent unions felt the need to strike for (Bennets,1972. 364, 378, 393).

The primacy of the closed shop and union recognition was routinely reiterated by the Amalgamated Council, who said they were willing to arbitrate on anything besides these two points and would push for them even when it was clear they had been soundly defeated. (Daily Picayune Oct 25, Nov 11, 1892). As has been noted, unions viewed themselves in capitalistic terms, and we should not consider them as socialists or anti-capitalists. In my research, neither the papers nor merchants make these allegations during the strike. However, this goal did represent a fundamental shift in the laboring process of the city. It was a major transfer of power from employers to employees and the institutional legitimation of unionism. The stakes were high, and all parties involved, even outside observers, were aware of this.

James Leonard, leader of the Amalgamated Council, maintained that without a closed shop, the union has “no reason to exist,” and unions had to be recognized and “treated” as legitimate institutions. (Times-Democrat, Oct24, Oct 28, Nov 4, 1892) The Board of Trade firmly opposed recognizing the union, going as far as to strike the word “union” from documentation during their official meetings. During the Strike, Odendahl said he was “tired of reading correspondence from an organization that will never be recognized.” (Daily-Picayune, Oct 29, 30, 1892) Letters between Samuel Gompers and John M Callaghan show Callaghan saying, “If we win, we have the best union city in the country. If we lose, we have none.” Gompers would say to Callaghan that despite its failure, he believed the movement spoke to the future of organized labor in the South. (Foner, Lewis, 1979. 20, 22.) For the pro-capital reform politician and staunch segregationist, Governor Foster, the question had come down to “that of unionism,” and he claimed the defeat of the merchants in New Orleans would mean “unions all through the state and the conversion of farms to grazing lands” and gave merchants a fund of \$100,000 and gave the Board of Trade them full power to act in-state interests. (Nystrom, 2010. 235-237; Daily-Picayune, Nov 7th, 8th, 10th, 1892) The New York Commercial Bulletin issued a statement in Daily Picayune saying that the “true question was to the despotic powers of labor organizations” (Daily-Picayune, Nov 16, 1892). When it seemed labor was about to break, the Daily-Picayune declared it a “triumph of capital and white supremacy”. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 2, 1892)

The strike did not initially start as general but would become general between Oct 27, 1892, and Nov 8, 1892, as more unions began trickling in to back the Triple Alliance through sympathy strikes. Despite Foner's arguments of an outpouring of class consciousness in the city and Rosenberg's claims of a city "infused with solidarity," the unions that did join did not always do so with ease. (Foner, 1955. 200; Rosenberg, 1988. 34) Those who either did not join or joined only after some time frequently cited concerns about the validity of sympathy strikes, their close relationship with their employers, or fear of losing previously established agreements. The Typographical 17 would join on Nov 8, 1892, but only after numerous votes and days of debate between a cooperative (anti-sympathetic strike and trade-specific) and antagonistic side (pro-sympathy strike and cross-trade). (Cook, 1983, 384)

Some of the Clerks' unions would support the strike but had difficulty enforcing it within their ranks; others would not, saying they had the "friendliest relationship" with merchants. (Daily Picayune, Oct 24th, Nov 6, 1892) The CMEC would not back the strike, citing both not wanting to hurt their "friends" and that their industry continuing to strike would not impact it in any way. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 10, 1892) The Car Drivers union would also join reluctantly, citing fears over losing wages, hours, and their closed shop. (Bennetts, 1972. 416) The paper hangers who had just struck voiced similar concerns over striking again so soon. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 6, 1892) Individual union men would also break with strike and return to work even in the early days of the actions (Times-Democrat, Oct 28, 1892) Simply put, the core of the arguments against joining was a debate over the approach of unionism in general, one that was antagonistic while the other cooperative, the validity of cross-trade unionism, and more immediate economic concerns like the potential loss of existing agreements.

Importantly, there is no evidence to show racial breakages or hesitations to support the strike due to racial tensions among the unions in my research, despite constant attempts in the press and by merchants to break the strike along racial lines. The Board of Trade tried to split the Triple Alliance of Scalpers, Packers, and Teamsters along racial lines. The Teamsters were a predominantly black union, and the Board of Trade offered to agree to the demands of the Scalpers and Packers but that they would not enter into agreements with black workers. (Bennetts, 1972. 410) The papers joined the Board of Trade in their circus of racism, claiming that the

white unionists were insane and “under the influence of Senegambian schemes.” Stories of reported black violence was highlighted daily under sub-headings such as “Negroes attack White man.” (Times-Democrat, Nov 4, 1892; Daily Picayune, Oct 28, 1892) Boss Draymen would be interviewed, presenting a situation where they were humiliated that “a big black negro” would have control of the laboring process of white men. (Times-Democrat, Oct 28, 1892) Black strikers were said to be “enjoying a vacation” or relying on their wives to provide for them. (Daily Picayune, Oct 28, 1892; Times-Democrat, Oct 28, 1892) James E Porter, a black leader of the Amalgamated Council, would be forced to make an official statement saying he was against violence in the Daily-Picayune after they reported that he was calling for it. (Times-Democrat, Oct 28, 1892) Racist argumentation would emerge as a post-facto explanation for the strike’s failure, but for now, the unions would stand firm, and the strike continued.

In the face of the combined forces of the Amalgamated Council, it became clear to Merchants that they needed to organize as well. In October of 1892, FE Odendahl first announced the Merchants Protective Association with vigorous support from other merchants in the city. Merchants conceived of it as a tool to fight strikers and fund merchants who lost revenue due to strikes. The association was framed as a counterbalance to labor power, as the merchants had recognized the power of the unity of workers. (Times-Democrat, Oct 28, 1892) The organization saw much support early on, raising \$6,000 on the first day and expected to raise \$25,000. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 4, 1892) On Nov 5, the day the general strike was announced, the Board of Trade represented “all employers in the city” and officially acted on their behalf. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 5, 1892) In a final effort to avoid the general strike, the mayor stepped in to start an arbitration, yet true to his neutrality, he refused to allow himself or the city council to be directly involved in the process. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 5, 6, 1892) Following this, the Board of Trade began appealing to Governor Foster. As the Board of Trade began conversing with the Governor, rumors of militia action began to circulate in the paper and confirmed reports of militias being armed followed soon after. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 10, 1892)

On Nov 9, the Governor was reported to have been taking over the situation, and a military force was being compiled to march on the city. He addressed Fitzpatrick, saying that if he did not exert the force needed to end the strike, “he (Foster) has the authority to step in at any

time in the interest of good order to maintain the law and would do so if necessary,” the papers began arguing that Fitzpatrick must furnish “proper police protection” and if he did not then a militia was needed. Mayor Fitzpatrick had taken a neutral but implicitly pro-labor stance throughout the strike, and he was willing to allow it to play itself out so long as the strikers kept violence to a minimum. (Daily Picayune, Oct 27, Nov 9, 1892) Governor Foster was already in the city, organizing and planning with the Board of Trade. A sense of fear was being drummed up in the press to justify the use of military force, with a Judge being quoted as saying, “Never in the history of Louisiana was there such a necessity for prompt and vigorous action”... “There exists a state of confusion and lawlessness.” (Daily-Picayune Nov 9-10, 1892) Despite these claims, the Daily-Picayune would say the strike was peaceful just a few days later. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 19, 1892)

Under this threat, labor broke, the closed shop would be abandoned, it was agreed that all strikers would be rehired, and wages and hours would be arbitrated at a later date. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 11, 1892) It is unclear if wages and hours were ever arbitrated, but by the 13th, Merchants were already abandoning the promises to reemploy striking workers, some having previously stated it would be “humiliating”. When unions went to the Board of Trade asked them to investigate these charges, and the Board of Trade was content with statements made by merchants saying it was not happening. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 6, 1892; Daily-Picayune, Nov 13, 1892; Daily-Picayune, Nov 20, 1892) The merchant’s claims seem unsubstantiated, given that both newspaper reports and letters from union men discussed the amount of time they were spending trying to find employment for union men and reports of a blacklist against AFL affiliates. (Daily-Picayune, Dec 11, 1892) Leaders of the Amalgamated Council also faced ostracization within the union community and John M Callaghan was forced to withdraw from the AFL entirely, saying he had run out of money and that in his Union, he was a pariah for having organized with black men. (Foner, Lewis. 1979. 22) James Leonard was heavily attacked within his own union and removed from his position with rumors that his firing from his job was facilitated by disgruntled fellow union members. (Cook, 1983. 387) Union leaders reported they were so busy trying to find work for others in their union that they were unable to find work themselves (Bennets, 1972. 432). Further, there were newspaper reports mentioning merchants being unwilling to hire those affiliated with the AFL.

In the first use of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act against labor, it was announced that charges were being brought up against the strike leaders. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 13, 1892) They were alleged to have conspired to restrain inter-state commerce by issuing orders and through violence. The strike leaders were repeatedly forced to denounce the idea of a closed shop and cross-trade unionism. They claimed that there was no organization between themselves and other unionists in the city and that the idea of that was undesirable. Though the charges were eventually thrown out months later, the effect is that for months papers reported on the lawsuit, and well-established union leaders denounced, avoided, or dodged accusations of cross-trade solidarity and the general strike to avoid what was initially a charge that could have brought a six-year prison sentence. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 30, 1892) The whole organization was denounced as a “monopoly of labor,” not dissimilar to rhetorical charges brought against the CMEC during their internal disputes of the 1880s. (Daily Picayune, Dec 10, 1892)

The Counter-Revolution of Capital:

In the aftermath of the strike, merchants began to “urge the necessity of a permanent organization like the Board of Trade be chartered into the exchanges of the city” (Daily Picayune, Nov 13, 1892). The merchants would establish the “New Orleans Law and Order League and Merchants Protective Association” would quickly emerge from the foundation of the Board of Trade’s institutional constructions during the general strike and was formally established on January 11th, 1893. The stated goal of this organization was to prevent unionism throughout New Orleans. (Daily-Picayune, Jan 19, 1893) It was explicitly pro-capital in its charter but maintained it had the interests of labor and capital at heart. It funded the militia who put down the strike, arbitrated disputes individual employees and employers, established what was essentially a merchant-centric closed shop wherein employees were only to be hired with a letter of recommendation from previous employers and had a line to the governor. While they agreed not to discriminate against union men, these guarantees ring somewhat hollow given that the Merchant’s Union did not officially recognize labor unions. (Daily-Picayune, Dec 6, 1892; Jan 13, 19, 25; Mar 31, 1893)

If unions were not dead in New Orleans by November 1893, the final nail in the coffin would be the financial collapse that was just around the corner. Racial tensions were already beginning to flair, and the papers first took advantage of this to fan the flames. They leaned into earlier arguments about white men risking everything for the benefit of black workers and published stories discussing how black teamsters got everything they wanted while white workers lost everything. (Bennetts, 1972. 436) After the financial crash, there was a “return to form,” so to speak, as tensions between white and black workers reignited, and we see a period of tense racial conflict among workers similar to those in the 1870s. Employers got more aggressive with workers, wages were cut, and there was an increase in attempts to exclude black labor altogether. (Arnesen, 1994. 120; Rosenberg, 1988. 37; Marshall, 1967. 64-65)

Discussion:

The Motivational Process of New Orleanian Workers:

Emancipation represented an “uncoupling” of the material conditions of production from the preexisting social structure of the antebellum South and its legal and social justifications. (Hall, 2021. 237) Marx and Engels both argue that material conditions are “determinant in the last instance” but that it “does not prevent the same economic basis”... “from showing infinite (ideological) variations and gradations” and the ideological may “in many instances predominate” in the determination of a particular social formation. (Engels to J. Bloch, Sept 21, 1890; Marx, 1974. 791-792) The ideologies constructed within one set of material circumstances in the past do not go away: however, they “weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” They are what Althusser called “survivals” and constantly interact with new conditions of existence. (Marx, 1852; Althusser, 2005. 114) New Orleanian workers had particular understandings in their heads, which were the cultural outgrowth of years of racist subjugation and chattel slavery that were at odds with emerging conceptions of biracialism. (Merritt, 2017; McLaughin-Stonham, 2020. 84-91) Thus the biracial unions in New Orleans were “contradictions”. Althusser calls the contradictions inherent in applying old ideas to new phenomena “articulations” or “complex structures,” and Hall describes complex structures as “a structure in which things are related as much through their differences as through their

similarities”. (Hall, 2021. 220) They are united in their disunity: things work together as much as they are kept together.

It would be entirely inaccurate to say that biracialism in New Orleanian unions emerged from an ideology of racial parity. Raymond Guess is correct when he argues that political actors are motivated by immediate needs first. (Guess, 2008) We see this clearly in New Orleans as individuals make decisions to meet immediate needs. He is incorrect, however, when he entirely dismisses questions of ideology or culture and argues that individuals make political and economic decisions through ad-hoc pragmatism. Given New Orleanian history in this era, it seems racism would have been an inescapable aspect of it, but the form that race and racism take is not defined in a teleological sense, nor does class unambiguously trump race. Instead, any given set of material and cultural circumstances constrain individual and group choices. In other words, there are “background expectancies” of what one should or shouldn’t do that guides behavior and equips people with a “tool kit,” but not so much that there is a definitive outcome that *must* happen. (Garfinkle, 1964; Swidler, 1983; Pierson, 2004. 39)

Thus, Postbellum New Orleans represented an opportunity, if not a necessity, for formal and informal political and economic experimentation. What would happen in the city was not set in stone but instead needed to be worked out over time by different individuals with different understandings given particular economic and cultural conditions. This process of working out is not guaranteed to produce ideal or even favorable results, but the process is always contentious and contradictory. (Markoff, 2011) Rather than pure pragmatism, or pure ideology, we find pre-established understandings being used, failing, and new tactics being tried out in New Orleans in response to immediate needs and changing material circumstances. (Swidler, 1986. 276)

Racial Cooperation in an Age of White Supremacy:

The ideology of white supremacy was ever-present in New Orleans, but how it showed itself was not always the same. It is not by pure chance that white New Orleanian workers first tried racial exclusion, then racial separation, and only then racial cooperation. Their first inclinations were guided by preexisting understandings. Culture inevitably influences the set of

decisions legitimately available to individuals by way of altering their interpretations and understandings of others. As Simmel says, we see “as through a veil” In this sense, the veil is a pre-established understanding that new information is filtered through “fundamental changes in the qualities of the object perceived.” (Simmel, 1974. 9, 11) This is not to say actors are non-agentic, but instead, there are tried and tested ways of doing things that need to be shown not to work while alternatives or modifications need to be shown to work. (Pierson, 2004. 20-23) In short, the postbellum economic reality of New Orleans came up against the old cultural reality of it.

Black workers had made it clear that they would not be excluded from the workforce, and racial separation had produced no positive gains for either black or white workers. Thus racial cooperation became the next available option for union organizing. As has been established, racial cooperation benefitted both groups. It prevented racist attacks against black people, secured standardized wages, and in some sense, gave them greater political representation through their linkage to white labor and the New Orleanian machine government’s patronage-based relationship with it. For white workers, it had become clear that black workers were an inescapable reality of high and low-skill labor throughout the city. Their racial prejudice had been shown to represent their “weakest link” and thus needed to be accounted for in the form of biracial unions. The successes of biracialism legitimated it as a form of unionism. It provided “positive feedback” as biracial union federations continued to make gains for themselves from 1879 – 1892 the belief in biracialism as a legitimate strategy grew. (Pierson, 2004. 20-23; Swidler, 1986. 277) This created a situation wherein biracialism had become a routinized aspect of New Orleanian labor unions to the point that there is no evidence in my research to suggest labor unions broke down due to racial tensions.

To reiterate, this is not to suggest that biracial unions were bastions of racial equality, nor is it to suggest that biracialism had been fully legitimated in New Orleans. The phrase racial cooperation is chosen because it does not imply equity. The racial contract was alive and well in New Orleanian unions. (Mills, 1997. 12-14) Biracial unionism hinged on the “interest convergence” of white and black people. Derrick Bell describes interest convergence as “The interests of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges

with the interests of whites.” (Bell, 1980. 523). As discussed, there was an unequal representation of black voices within councils; black union members faced unequal work-sharing agreements, the needs of black workers were not always addressed, and unions remained largely apolitical. Racial tensions were an ever-present problem within these unions and had occasional outbursts like in 1881 and the CMEC turmoil. Yet the unions also frequently showed signs of a more egalitarian relationship between white and black people than was found in other sections of the city, and black and white workers frequently supported each other in struggles. Thus, the form of the unions was one of white supremacy, but their content was one of relative racial cooperation. (Simmel, 1974)

As racial tensions never left New Orleanian unions, however, they had to create effective channels to contend with the constant threat of racism within them in order to maintain the benefits of biracialism. (Arnesen, 1994. 93-94; Bennets, 1972. 153) We can see this is the case of the CMEC2, wherein even the predominantly white unions enacted policies undercutting black leadership, they were still interested in maintaining an agreement with black unions. The ubiquity of black labor on the docks (and New Orleans in general) made biracialism the de facto state of affairs in the federated unions of the city, and as discussed, there is little evidence to suggest this produced irrevocable breakages in the unions until after the failure of the 1892 general strike.

Arguments of Strategic Action:

The debates that do produce breaks within New Orleanian unions aren't debates over race but rather debates over what position unions should adopt in relation to capitalists within the city. From 1879 to 1882, New Orleanian unions established themselves predominantly through striking, not unlike biracialism; striking had been proven to work for the unions in the city. Yet after 1882, the rate at which unions strike began to taper off, and in its place, there was a rise in the number of union deals that were struck via arbitration with merchants in the city. Again, union wins through arbitration have the effect of legitimating arbitration throughout the federated union structure. New Orleanian unions had two divergent organizational logics or strategies dominating how they approached unionism, that both produced results. (Vaughan, 1997. 33-53;

Swidler, 1986. 277) One was cooperative, less inclined to strike, and may have even viewed merchants as “friends.” The other was more antagonistic and wanted to keep merchants at arms’ length. These were salient debates in unions throughout the U.S. and, as 1892 shows, salient within New Orleans. (Foner, 1955 158-159). Within both camps, we see contentious views on the legitimacy of sympathy strikes, strikes carried out to benefit another union that is not directly related to yours.

These organizational logics both implied divergent ways of understanding situations and divergent decision-making based on that understanding. The options and tactics that “made sense” to these two camps of unionists were different, and both had legitimate reasons for believing in their understandings of what did and did not work. They “saw” things differently in a fundamental sense. Unlike biracialism vs. racism in the unions, cross-trade, trade-specific, antagonistic, and cooperative approaches had all been shown to work in the new economic order of the postbellum South and were, therefore, more contentious. If biracialism was a material fact of New Orleanian unionism, antagonistic, cooperative, cross-trade, nor trade-specific approaches had been shown to be. (Vaughn, 1997. 33-53)

Therefore, as established, other unions backing the triple alliance was not an “outpouring of class consciousness” but a hotly debated topic among union members. While the break in the strike was undeniably the result of the threat of military force coming to bear, the substantive result of the breakdown of the strike was the invalidation of an antagonistic and cross-trade form of unionism. After the failure of the general strike, the Typographical 17’s conservative branch would say, “the outgrowth of the strained relations which it seems must ever exist ... between the ‘man with a grievance’ and the more reliable, conservative workman ... has long been abroad in the channels of our craft. To this ubiquitous individual can be ascribed some of the turmoil”... “We trust his day and generation are of the past, along with other discordant elements that have afflicted us, and that the future will find the conservatism and good sense of our membership marshaled.”. (Cook, 1983. 387) This sentiment seems to have been pervasive throughout unions after the strike, as the Amalgamated Council is said to have essentially disappeared, and many unions cut ties with the AFL. (Daily-Picayune, Mar 16, 1893) While explicit reporting on why unions left the AFL and Amalgamated Council is infrequent, those that exist tended to cite both

the failure of the general strike, a desire to focus on trade-specific unionism and establish closer relations with capitalists. (Daily-Picayune, Dec 11, 18 1892. Jan 22, 25, Feb 3, Mar 16, 1893). Leaders of the strike, like John Callaghan, would express regret over their role in the strike. Another Amalgamated Council leader. While individuals close to James E Porter were said to have been instrumental in arguing for the end of the strike. (Daily-Picayune, Nov 12, 1892, Jan 18, 1893.).

The Breakage of Unionism:

Yet if the unions in New Orleans were also working out how to define themselves in the city, so too were the merchants. The danger of unions having too much control was first demonstrated to New Orleanian merchants in the late 1880s during the troubles with the CMEC. The result of this was as detrimental to merchants as a strike would have been, and it had become clear to merchants that they needed to show a unified front to match labor unions. (Daily-Picayune, Oct 22, 1892) The Board of Trade expressed fundamental opposition to a closed shop and, in the aftermath of the strike, took steps to punish the antagonistic actions of unions through the courts and informal means break federated union bodies and replaced them with their own organization that had the backing of the state government. Therefore, in the aftermath of the strike, cross-trade antagonistic unionism had not only been shown to not work but had been shown to bring down the force of the law, making it clear what could and could not be done, and resulted in the allocation of political power to their enemies. (Pierson, 2002. 35-36) Individuals who may have been more inclined to strike were removed, shamed, or blacklisted from employment, and the organizations that supported them were shattered in the city.

It seemed that cooperative camp had not only been right to hesitate about striking, but cooperation was also the only legitimate option available to unions. Attempts at striking resulted in failure as organizations like the car drivers lost 200 members and didn't have enough of their existing members employed in the field to pull off successful strikes. (Bennets, 1972. 432-433) The inability to strike seems to have been a widespread phenomenon, as it is said there were no significant strikes and no strike victories for over a year, and overall, there were fewer unions in New Orleans after 1892. (Marshall, 1967. 63) The unions were thus in a weaker position all

together, and merchants appear to have felt emboldened by both their position of strength and began to no longer honor pre-strike agreements nor follow agreements made after the strike, such as rehiring workers who struck. (Arnesne, 1994. 120; Bennetts, 1972. 432; Marshall, 1967. 64) Therefore, it seems that the cooperative approach hinged on the presence of a substantial organized body to function as a counterweight to New Orleanian capitalists. When this body disappeared following the 1892 general strike, the merchants replaced it with their own body that treated workers as atomized individuals and had little reason to arbitrate with workers who didn't have the ability to strike if their demands were not met. The 1893 Depression sent things into a tailspin as the amount of work available decreased, and the number of unemployed people increased. (Arnesen, 1994. 121; Bennets, 1972; 451-452). The surplus of labor and the reduction of work meant merchants were even stronger. Thus, it is not that unions entirely ceased to exist in New Orleans, but rather that the benefits of being unionized did, and by extension, so too did the benefits of biracialism. The breakdown of unions included not just the removal of the structure through which racial tensions within unions were mediated but also the breakdown of the reasons for biracialism in the first place.

The conditions for biracial cross-trade solidarity thus needs to be “correct” and once established either through purposeful action or happenstance, they must be protected as they exist in a precarious position. The Board of Trade and the Louisianian Government took action to ensure these conditions no longer existed. The 1893 financial collapse was not necessarily the cause of the destruction of biracial unionism but rather the final nail in the coffin. A solidifying event that had cascading effects throughout the city wherein workers had already become weakened, insular, and individualized found themselves in structures that existed to facilitate and encourage a preexisting “toolkit” of understanding, that of the individualist “self-made” work in a reciprocal capitalism that always existed in New Orleans. In this context, the instability during economic collapse did not lead to solidarity but rather to heightened competition between individuals and between the surviving unions.

Conclusion:

The case of New Orleanian biracial cross-trade unionism points us towards the tentative position of new outwardly strong institutions. Existing scholarship has expressed dismay and an unfortunate lack of depth on the question of “why” the Amalgamated Council-affiliated unions collapsed. (Arnesen, 1994. 114-118; Rosenberg, 1988, 30-37 Shugg, 1938) When looking closely, what we find is that while the strategy of cross-trade biracialism offered an effective counterweight to the power of merchants, they were not necessarily “strong.” This form of unionism had not yet been “consecrated” in New Orleanian unions. The path to consecration is fraught with risk, and that risk is exacerbated by divergences from established ways of thinking and doing. That is to say, the greater a new organizational strategy deviates from the established cultural toolkit, the more tentative its place is in the heads of different individuals.

We should consider particular organizations as being legitimated within subgroups of individuals who carry with them understandings, both particular and general, of how things should be given their place in a longer string of material and cultural realities. The individuals in biracial cross-trade unions were making and unmaking themselves as biracial cross-trade unionists through their own successes and failures. They were building a particular type of knowledge through actions motivated by responses to immediate needs. Yet the process of this legitimation is not defined and constantly fought over both internally and externally. These internal and external forces have their own goals and ways of doing things which they, too, seek to normalize. The case of New Orleans illuminates how alternative strategies of action, e.g., cooperation, may hinge on the strategies of action they contest. Therefore, we must pay attention not just to the tensions between groups but also to their reciprocal exchanges, how one may implicitly support the other. Further, aspects of an organizational strategy not directly implicated in the failure of another may hinge on the success of it.

In New Orleans, this was the position biracialism occupied. The pretext for racial cooperation was embedded in the successes of the unions themselves; when the antagonistic form of unionism failed, and the counter-revolution of capital effectively weakened unionism to the point that arbitration and cooperative approaches to unionism no longer worked. After this the commitment to biracialism rapidly diminished. Thus, the first major failure of biracial cross-trade unionism was able to mark the end of organizational strategies that had been proven to

work over the course of ten years. Individuals who may have previously seen the benefits of biracialism now saw it in a similar light to how they used to, with “revulsion” (Arnesen, 1994. 20). Given no legitimate or strong avenues to pursue the strategies of action developed in the 1880s, the 1890s saw workers return to previously discarded options of racial exclusion and violence, and rely more heavily on closer relationships with merchants.

While beyond the scope of the present study, future research should consider the effect that technological advancement had on unions within New Orleans, for example, new modes of securing cotton in the bays of ships, the rise of railroads, etc. (Arnesen, 1994. Bennets, 1972. 451) We would also be well advised to consider the increasing importance of segregationist rhetoric and policy at the time and its effect on the perceived legitimacy of biracialism. (McLaughlin-Stonham. 2020. Nystrom, 2010.) If we cannot extract biracialism from previous eras, we, of course, cannot extract it from its present era.

Yet, while biracial unions existed, they undoubtedly offered a better chance to build towards a more racially equitable society than its alternatives. As De La Fuentes and Gross say, “One need not exaggerate the egalitarianism of the organization to show the way the ideology of cooperation changed the views of different groups of each other.” (De La Fuentes, Gross, 2020. 73) If we follow Marx’s logic, individuals construct themselves and the social form they find themselves in through their laboring process. (Marx, 1978. 72, 144) The racial cooperation within unions thus offered a better, though far from ideal, chance for white individuals to “see” black individuals. (Fanon, 1952. 89-95) In New Orleans, we saw minds changing on the ground through unionism. Letters between John M Callaghan and Samuel Gompers is proof of this.

Initially, Callaghan had shown skepticism about organizing black workers. However, with the polite encouragement of Samuel Gompers, he began to, and within a few months, he met James E Porter, a black longshoreman and union organizer. In letters to Gompers heaped praise upon Porter and recommended him for positions within the AFL, ending the letter saying, “I find I have been giving his good qualities and not his name; his name is James E Porter” Callaghan would later comment on Porter, “I am sure he can succeed where I would most likely fail .” (Foner, Lewis. 1979. 45-46) Black unionists would report similar experiences saying they

felt a stronger sense of racial equality within the unions than elsewhere in the city. (Arnesen, 1994. 91) Yet despite whatever potential biracial unionism had in New Orleans for the betterment of working lives and the betterment of race relations, this was not to be the case. As the general strike of 1892 had effectively undermined the structure that supported biracial unionism in the prelude to the Jim Crow era

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