At the height of the canning season in late July 1917, hundreds of Italian workers did not report to their jobs at several San Francisco Bay Area fruit and vegetable canneries. Just four months after the United States had entered World War I, the production of canned foods had become a vital part of the war effort, and the industry was expanding its production to meet the needs of soldiers in the field. The strike was a protest against low wages and long hours and an effort to secure recognition for the cannery workers’ recently formed union, the Toilers of the World. As the workers mounted picket lines and demonstrations at their own and neighboring canneries—the first such episode in the history of the California canning industry—the federal government reacted with alarm, calling out troops and charging that the strike was an act of sabotage mastered-minded by the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). One government official claimed that it was “perhaps the most acute situation” the Federal Food Administration had encountered in gearing up for the war effort. Volunteer crews of housewives and students moved to keep the canneries going, while men joined “pickhandle brigades” to frighten the strikers back to work.

The main drama was over in a week as arbitration replaced picket-line confrontations and most of the workers returned to their jobs. But the strike had exposed significant tensions between radical and conservative forces in the San Francisco labor movement as well as parallel strains between militancy and respectability within the Italian community. The tension in the labor movement centered on the conflict between the radical IWW, committed to organizing the entire working class into “one big union” under a revolutionary program, and the more conservative, craft-oriented American Federation of Labor (AFL), which had only marginal interest in unskilled workers. Al-

Peeling and cutting peaches in a pre-conveyor-belt Sunnyvale cannery. The men at the ends of the tables carry fruit for the women cutters.
Hoffman's entrance into the war meant more business for the canning industry as the United States increased shipments of food and munitions to the Allies. In 1917 American cannery workers expected to produce nearly two billion cans of fruits and vegetables, of which the government and the Allies would require at least 200 million. By 1918 the Del Monte Company management employees' magazine published a poem entitled "The Tin Can in War":

We can march without shoes,  
We can fight without guns,  
We can fly without wings  
To flap over the Huns. 
We can sing without banners,  
Parade without banners,  
But no modern army  
Can eat without canners.

The expanding industry needed markets as much as the armies needed canned foods. Already, in 1914 a manufacturer of canned goods had touted his product in terms that would have seemed quite appropriate in the spring of 1917:

The world could not dispense with canned foods and live; for without them progress would be halted, effort hobbled, if not extinguished, navies dismantled, armies dispersed, the great progress of the world stayed and thrown back upon itself shattered. Deprived of canned foods, all nations would fall into greater depths of depravity than heretofore known.

By 1916 the leading California canning corporations had consolidated to form the California Packing Corporation, or Del Monte, in a merger...
of the four corporations that dominated the market and controlled most of the canning industry in the state. By far the largest contributor to the merger was the California Fruit Canners Association (CFCA), a canning syndicate owned by Marc Fontana, an Italian immigrant. CFCA had dominated the market since the 1890s and at the time of the merger owned thirty of the forty-two canneries in California. By 1913 CFCA operated the world’s largest cannery with an annual capacity of twenty-four million cans, one-seventh of the state’s total output. All of the Fontana canneries were located in the San Francisco area. The Santa Clara Valley provided the produce while the North Beach Italian neighborhoods in San Francisco and similar Italian communities in San Jose and Oakland supplied the labor. In total, the four separate canning organizations included seventy-one canneries and fruit packing plants throughout California, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and the territories of Alaska and Hawaii.

Several factors contributed to the consolidation of the canning industry at the turn of the century. Only an extremely large scale enterprise could afford to incorporate the technological changes in the processes of production and distribution which were becoming necessary to remain competitive. The Del Monte merger typified the emerging modern American business enterprise, requiring among other things a professional managerial hierarchy and coordination of the decision-making processes. Before the merger each canning plant had its own management, its own processing equipment, and its own variety of product grades and sizes. The consolidation of all seventy-one plants was an enormous task, entailing an actual merger of all the administrative and marketing functions in one building under the Del Monte brand label.

In 1917 the corporation launched its first major national advertising campaign to take advantage of the new market for consumer and household goods that catered to homemakers. The corporation advertised its products as the finest fruits, “famous for their goodness
Drying was a seldom discussed alternative for fruits destined for canneries. These peaches were photographed in a Santa Clara Valley dry yard.

and purity . . . packed on the very day they are picked, in clean, sunlit canneries.” One full-page color advertisement in leading women’s magazines and the Saturday Evening Post assured consumers that if they ever visited one of the Del Monte canneries they would marvel at “the rigid system of inspection which guards every detail of the work.” Never again would women have to “put up” their own fruit or vegetables when it was so easy to have the golden sunshine of California brought right to the dining table.11

If American homemakers had taken Del Monte up on the invitation to visit the “clean sunlit canneries,” they would have been shocked. In 1890 a Bureau of Labor Statistics report asserted that “The effluvia arising from the drains and waste vegetable matter is not inductive to the health of the employees.”12 In 1913 the Labor Bureau reported that adequate ventilation, lighting, draining, and toilet facilities were sorely lacking in most of the canneries. The workrooms were humid because of the steam from the cooking process, and the floors were often made of an absorbent material that soaked up the excess water and fruit and vegetable juice. The toilet and washrooms were neither ventilated properly nor closed off from the workroom, and the general area in which the preparation of the food took place was filthy.13

The health and safety conditions in the canneries were no better in the 1920s. Before receiving his Ph.D. degree in 1928, historian Donald Anthony spent eight years working in canneries in the Santa Clara Valley. He reported that bandaged hands were a common characteristic of women cannery workers and that infections and blood poisoning were frequent.14 In 1929 the situation had not changed significantly. One woman worker in an Oakland cannery reported:

The work in the canneries on the Pacific Coast is hard to learn and is hard work. The hands of the workers are stained and from holding the knife, the fingers blister and the workers’ palms get raw. The fruit acid eats right into the sores . . . Many of the time slips of the knife cut the hands
very severely. But we must stand it in order to make a living.15
And in 1937 the cannery workers were still struggling to improve their conditions. One protesting worker complained, “The first thing you notice is how wet you get—and stay—from the waist both ways. I changed my shoes every day and still didn’t have a dry pair on my feet for three months.”16

Women cannery workers experienced these poor conditions most acutely because of the nature of the gender-specific tasks. On the “women’s side” the workers peeled, cored, and cut the product. The men carried heavy boxes of fruit to and from the women’s work tables and inspected the produce for defects. Donald Anthony’s description of the preparation of cherries illustrates the general process of cannery work. First, the cutters removed the cherry stems and sorted the different types of cherries by placing them in boxes laid out in front of them. Then they had to wait for a male checker to replace a full box of fruit with an empty one. Since the women were paid on a piece-rate for each box stemmed, their wages were a function both of their own speed and efficiency and of the efficiency of the male checker. Anthony reported that the male checker often had too many stations to handle or was uninterested in performing the task properly, forcing the women to sit idle and lose money while waiting for work to be brought to them.

Once the cherries were stemmed and inspected, the male checkers brought them to the canning tables, where other women placed them in the proper cans. The mechanics of this step depended on whether or not the cannery was automated. In the old-fashioned canneries the women graded the cherries by hand. In automated canneries the cherries were placed on an automatic grader that sorted the cherries according to size and fed them down a chute to the appropriate can. In either case, the women were responsible for getting the fruit into the correct cans and affixing the proper grade labels. This task was also on the piece-rate system, and again the women were dependent upon a steady supply of work brought to them by the male carriers.

Peaches, pears, tomatoes, and other fruits were processed in much the same way, although some fruits were more difficult to prepare and can than others. Peaches, particularly cling peaches, required special attention, because the cutters had to extract the pit while preserving the shape of the fruit.17 Del Monte standards meant that consumers could count on consistent quality. The consumer should never know that peaches, pears, or apricots came any way other than sliced, pitted, cooked, and canned.

Most of the cannery workers during the peak seasons were women. In 1912 the Bureau of Labor Statistics compiled data on the California canning seasons in each district. Ten establishments were surveyed in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the beginning of the season, the last week of March, there were 190 employees of whom 152 were women. At the height of the season, the last week in July, there were 3,480 workers, and 2,363 of them were women.18 Surviving photographs suggest that many of the women were over thirty-five years old, but otherwise the records do not indicate such things as whether they were generally married or single or whether they held other jobs during the off season.

In the city canneries, which ran a slightly longer term than the rural ones, the season ran from eighteen to thirty-four weeks. Most of the women did not work for the entire duration. Turnover was high, with new recruits constantly available, at least in the cities. After three weeks at a job a woman was considered an experienced worker and entitled to a raise of three cents an hour—from thirteen to sixteen cents—if she was paid by the day. However, the average span of work in the city canneries was only 7.7 weeks. Twenty percent of the women stayed at their jobs less than a week, and forty percent worked less than four weeks in a season.19

City cannery workers in California straddled a line between factory workers and agricultural laborers. They resembled agricultural workers because their work was seasonal, but like factory workers, they were nonmigratory and usually worked in urban areas. Because of their uncertain status, labor organizers were slow to approach them. The AFL had made a half-hearted effort to organize farmworkers between 1909 and 1916, but lack of funds and interest had condemned the campaign to failure. Even this modest attempt had been motivated by a desire to blunt the IWW’s successful drive among agricultural workers, and it had not extended to the cannery workers. Not only were the cannery workers seasonal and un-

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skilled, but most of them were women, and the AFL discouraged the organization of women, insisting that a woman’s primary function rested in the home. In 1905 an AFL official exclaimed, “The great principle for which we fight is opposed to taking . . . the women from their homes to put them in the factory and the sweatshop.” The AFL’s aversion to women in the paid labor force derived largely from the pragmatic realization that they might supplant unionized male workers.

Industry representatives recognized the benefits of female labor, however. Cannery executives perceived the Italian women workers as passive and uncomplaining. One cannery worker remarked that “cannery bosses are claiming that the young girls make the best workers because they have the courage not to complain much of the sore hands.” According to Anthony, it was generally assumed that “most of the workers . . . being of the typical casual laborer type, are not themselves particularly interested in either their future in the canning industry or their future in life. They live in the present, or in their dreams of the future not in any way connected with the canning industry.”

The industry’s image of the typical cannery worker mirrored the AFL’s attitude toward agricultural workers in general. Unable to develop their own sense of collectivity, cannery workers would have to rely on government legislation rather than trade unionism for protection.

In 1913 the Industrial Welfare Commission (IWC) created by the California Commission of Immigration and Housing (CCIH) attempted to establish uniform standards of wages, hours, and working conditions in all California canneries. California’s progressive reformers originally conceived of the CCIH as a social welfare agency to improve the economic position and aid the social assimilation of the state’s immigrants. After the Wheatland Riot in 1913 called attention to the exploitation of migratory labor in the state’s agricultural sector, Governor Hiram Johnson expanded the IWC’s initial mandate to include a statewide campaign to improve working conditions in the agricultural labor camps. The Commission recommended but did not require minimum standards to which most farm employers agreed, perhaps to head off further uprisings. Such voluntary compliance was precisely what the Commission’s progressive leadership wanted; its members believed that mutual understanding between employers and workers would make trade unionism unnecessary.

Growing out of CCIH’s reformist impulses and its aversion to trade unionism, the IWC sought to improve labor relations in the canning industry to make canning “one of the most desirable occupations for women.”

From 1916 to 1920 the IWC embarked on a program to elevate canning conditions to “American” standards. Working closely with cannery owners, the Commission established a series of minimum wage standards for women which significantly improved their earning power. Since over ninety percent of the women worked on the piece-rate system, the IWC raised the minimum rate a few cents per box. In addition, canneries were required to conform to Commission rulings on specific improvements in the work environment.

The Industrial Welfare Commission worked in conjunction with the industry, and by taking the struggles between labor and management to the state bureaucracy, it hindered the development of trade unionism. The Commission’s work made it easier for the AFL to ignore the demands of women workers because this state organization was already the “legitimate” voice of the women workers.

While the AFL relied on state legislation to replace trade unionism among agricultural workers, the Industrial Workers of the World was ready to organize these workers and to address their economic and political needs. Founded in 1905 by groups of industrial workers who had left the craft-controlled AFL, the IWW reached its peak in California between 1910 and 1924. Its largest local was in San Francisco, and it devoted the majority of its efforts to free speech issues and to the problems of agricultural workers in the state. Unlike the AFL, the IWW eagerly organized women workers, asserting that women “cannot be driven back to the home . . . They are a part of the army of labor . . . [We must] organize them with the men, just as they work with the men.”

By the end of 1916, the IWW’s Agricultural Workers’ Organization had 20,000 members, and total IWW membership had risen from 500 in 1910 to 5,000 in the spring of 1916 to 70,000 at its peak in 1917. This dramatic increase in numbers, accompanied by a powerful image of
 Une grande battaglia si sta combattendo a Lawrence, Massach., da 25,000 lavoratori, fra cui moltissimi italiani.

Lunedi 19 Corr., alle ore 8 p.m.
NELLA
Jefferson Square Hall
925 GOLDEN GATE AVE.

si terrà un GRANDE COMIZIO INTERNAZIONALE nel quale, fra gli altri oratori, parlerà anche il compagno
Edmondo ROSSONI
il noto propagandista italiano.
Intervenite in massa.
Viva la solidarietà del proletariato internazionale!
Il Branch Latino I. W. W.
1660 Stockton St.

IWW activity among Bay Area immigrant groups is evidenced by this 1912 flier calling on Italians to support striking Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers.

the IWW as a revolutionary and dangerous group, was a result of the 1913 Wheatland Riot in which 2,800 workers protested horrendous living conditions at a hops ranch in the Sacramento Valley. Many of the rioters were card-carrying Wobblies, although estimates of the actual number vary considerably. Federal troops were called in, strikers arrested, and some convicted of murder. Radical coalitions in California rallied to raise money for the strikers, and the IWW’s militancy won growing support for industrial unionism from the Left in the state.31

Given the influence of the IWW in California, it is hard to imagine that the Wobblies were not in some way involved in the organization of the cannery workers’ union. Yet in the spring of 1917, it was the AFL that granted a charter to the Federal Labor Union, also known as the Toilers of the World, headquartered in San Jose. By July of that year the union boasted 1,000 members. But “federal” unions—groups of workers unrelated by skill—that little power and received little support in the AFL.32 There was constant tension between the state AFL officials and the Toilers’ leadership, perhaps reflecting suspicion within the conservative AFL that the radical IWW was involved. Indeed, the Toilers echoed the IWW’s all-inclusive policies, recruiting male and female unskilled workers sixteen years or older, and the union proclaimed itself “willing to assist any working class movement regardless of race or creed.”33

The canning and field fruit workers began meeting in March 1917, organizing primarily to address economic issues. The cost of living skyrocketed after the United States entered the war, rising over twenty percent from 1916 to 1917.34 The Italian women workers complained of the increased price of basic necessities, particularly macaroni and olives.35 A union representative claimed that some cannery owners were cutting wages below the stan-
dards set by the Industrial Welfare Commission, and the workers believed that their pay was not commensurate with the enormous profits that the cannery owners were receiving as a result of the increased war production.

On May 6, 1917, 1,000 workers, mostly Italian men and women, participated in a mass meeting. Following a parade to the meeting hall, the workers were addressed by local clergy, a representative of the Italian Benevolent Society, the business agent for the union, and the local attorney for the AFL. The speakers at the meeting outlined the strategies for the union. The Toilers would try to gain union recognition first and then discuss wages and hours, demanding a twenty-five percent wage increase. For the men this meant an increase from 25 cents to 31 1/4 cents per hour, or $2.50 per eight-hour day. The women’s demands were not specified.37 Wage rates for both organized and unorganized workers were increasing in most industries as a result of wartime inflation, and most unions were able to secure pay increases without striking.38 But some of the canning companies refused even to negotiate with the Toilers, much less recognize the union, claiming that the Industrial Workers of the World was involved.

During the busiest season of the year the Toilers decided to strike this crucial wartime industry. On Monday, July 23, 1917, 600 workers at the California Fruit Canner’s Association in San Jose set up pickets surrounding the cannery. On the same day 175 men and 125 women walked off their jobs at the Bisceglia Brothers cannery in San Jose. Both companies were forced to close and several hundred sympathizers joined the strikers outside the plants. At the Bisceglia plant a striker was shot and wounded as he tried to prevent a car from driving up to the plant. At the Pratt-Low cannery in Santa Clara, where over
900 workers went out on strike, an incident between a foreman and the strikers left one striker dead and two others wounded.31

The next day workers at the Di-Fiore Company went out on strike, joined in sympathy by the Kartschke-Peterson brickyard employees. Two days later, on July 26, approximately 450 workers at several San Francisco canneries struck in support of the San Jose strikers. Later that day, 150 workers, 50 of them women, traveled to the Griffin-Skelley plant in Oakland to urge the workers to join them in the strike. The Oakland police met them at the train station and sent them all back to San Francisco. A day later the workers made a second attempt and managed to arrive at the cannery before police rounded most of them up and brought them back to the ferry landing. Some of them succeeded in creating a blockade around the cannery and, amidst cheers from their fellow workers, the women scrambled over the fence that enclosed the cannery cooks.

The San Jose Mercury Herald described the militancy of the women workers:

Yesterday, some 50 Italian girls and women riding in autos from the west side of the city, stopped at 7th and Jackson at 6:30 A.M. and made a concerted rush for the doors of the Central California Canning Plant. They discovered the plant locked and started away on a run for the Golden Gate Company’s plant, three blocks away. A dozen patrolmen . . . started in pursuit. The crowd of women took to the railroad tracks of the Niles line to make a short cut to the plant. They were immediately hemmed in by the police . . .

The majority of the women were armed with cutting knives and, as soon as they realized the possibility of arrest, began throwing them in ditches. After the women threw the knives away, a patrol wagon was sent for. At the sight of it, the prisoners tried to break past the patrolmen. The rout became a panic . . .

Both of the Bay Area Italian newspapers covered the strike in San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose extensively. L’Italia and La Voce del Popolo (The Voice of the People) supported the strikers and encouraged them to continue the strike until they received their demands. Yet they tempered their exhortations with advice to remain calm and non-violent, urging the workers not to be carried away by their emotions. The political differences between the two major Italian newspapers had long been an indication of the internal divisions within the Italian community. The older of the two papers, La Voce del Popolo, generally supported labor and the Democratic Party, whereas the more conservative paper, L’Italia, represented local business leadership. However, when the Italians became the victims of nativist prejudice and immigration restriction, even L’Italia came to their defense.43 Both newspapers sent mixed messages to their Italian readers. They advocated their participation in the strike, but worried about their reputation as respectable Americans.

The press praised the working-class consciousness exhibited in the conflict, yet tried to guide the workers cautiously in a more moderate direction. The labor-oriented paper, La Voce del Popolo, was impressed by the solidarity of the workers. One article remarked, “Very few times have crowds of people all been in unison on an issue with all the simplicity and brotherhood . . . their souls have been raised to a perfect unity and an ineffable serenity.”44 The editors thanked the workers for their determination, reflecting that their solidarity was nothing but the “faithful mirror of their misery.” They urged them to persevere and sacrifice to attain victory for themselves and the entire working-class, “Calloused hands have the right to well-being and happiness since the capitalists live in luxury and abundance, squeezing the strength of their muscles.”45

Although it warned the strikers of possible repercussions from unpopular actions, L’Italia supported “their legal strike for the improvement of working conditions.”46 The editors of this paper were convinced that the strikers could not fail to elicit the support and sympathy of the public if they remembered that they were striking for decent conditions and nothing more. The editors urged the Italians to prove their seriousness and discipline by “avoiding nasty demonstrations that only result in discrediting the working class.”47

The Italian press had reacted similarly on other occasions when Italians were involved in labor struggles. In 1903 Italian miners from the Western Federation of Miners joined with non-union sympathizers to demand an eight-hour day and union recognition. L’Italia urged the Italian workers to cooperate with their American brothers to attain their demands. The Italians were to be involved but not to be too committed and certainly not to assume leadership positions. The editors feared
the vindictive wrath of employers years down the line. In the lumber industry in 1909, Italians took collective action in what the editor of L'Italia termed a "justified" strike. He wrote, "That demonstration made it clear to the big jobbers in this country that Italians know how to feel personal and national dignity; that they are no longer a flock of sheep . . . but that they know how to be treated, finally as human beings equal to their brothers of other nationalities."47

The government responded immediately to the canning strike. The day after it began, on July 24, federal troops from nearby Camp Fremont reached San Jose. One hundred Coast Artillery men serving as infantry went into the Pratlow cannery in Santa Clara prepared to take action against what was described in local papers as rioting and mob demonstrations. The message from the Santa Clara county officials to the War Board urged the temporary location of federal troops in San Jose to "protect the food industry from violent intimidation by agitators and large groups of disaffected migratory labor . . . [They] assemble in large numbers and by threats and violence intimidate women workers in food packing plants."48 The editor of La Voce del Popolo expressed outrage at the government's overreaction, pointing out that San Francisco had had industrial fights "a hundred times more difficult than this" which had been solved without the intervention of federal troops.49

Many middle-class Americans shared the government's alarm. The cannery owners gathered San Jose Rotary Club members, prominent doctors, lawyers and businessmen; posses of citizens were formed and ninety Home Guards were trained. This vigilant activity was neither unique nor spontaneous. Local organizations such as the Liberty League, Knights of Liberty, the Boy Spies of America, and the Sedition Slammers appeared in every Western community where there was labor conflict, particularly where there was IWW involvement. These groups frequently took the law into their own hands to suppress "wartime disloyalty."50 The federal troops left after two days, but the employers joined with community members to form a pickhandle brigade which went to the factories to intimidate the striking workers. One worker submitted the following poem satirizing this action to the Oakland socialist newspaper:

They are men both strong and valiant;
They are trusted, tried and true;
They are guarding our fair city;
They are shielding me and you
From these terrorizing strikers—
On strike; though overpaid—
Who would kill us all, if it were not for
"The Pick-handle Brigade."51

The government made an effort to suppress information about the strike, fearing the disruption would spread to other industries throughout California. Officials were determined to keep the strike activities quiet. A telegram from Attorney General Thomas Gregory to the Executive Officer of the California Commission of Immigration and Housing stated that the Department would do its best to see that no publicity was given to the strike. A coded telegram to the director of the CCIH from the head of the Industrial Welfare Commission pleaded, "Whatever you do, don't hold a public hearing down there."52

In a telegram to President Wilson, the Canner's League of California suggested that the conflict might be more than a simple controversy over wages:

This is not a strike but a conspiracy to stop fruit and vegetable packing resulting in destruction to large quantities of food products necessary for use for our army and navy, our allies and the country at large. Imperative that the National Government take action to control this desperate movement of the enemies of our country which is sweeping over many Western States.53

In the canning executives' nightmare, the "enemy" was an IWW-German alliance.

The Italian press vigorously denied that there was any IWW influence in the strike. L'Italia asserted that charges from the government that the Germans were using the IWW to manipulate the workers were merely a ploy to avoid confronting the demands of the strikers. Fearing a link between the radical IWW and the cannery workers that might discredit the strike, the press maintained that the Italians only wanted the best relationship between workers and capitalists.54

Cannery owners also worried that fruit under government contract for war supplies would spoil, although both the Italian press and the San Jose Mercury Herald reported that there was no real danger to the fruit crop. If the strike had continued, some of the fruit that was not canned could have been dried. In addition,
some of the cannery workers, in the strike affected other canneries in the Bay Area, and others had connections to different plants as a result of the recent merger, making it possible to transfer fruit. These alternatives were not discussed, however, during mediation of the strike.

The Italian press supported mediation, contending that arbitration was the "American" way, as long as it "adjust[s] things in the best possible way for the good of the working-class." But the press was not concerned only with working-class interests. La Voce del Popolo conceded, "Maybe the workers acted too fast, and not in the way they were supposed to act, yet their behavior after the strike has been correct and not threatening." The desire to be seen as respectable American citizens was equally important.

Four days after the strike began, Harrison Weinstock, state market inspector, and Ralph Merritt of the Food Control Department directed by Herbert Hoover met at the Labor Temple in San Jose to begin arbitration. These representatives were joined by AFL officials and the leadership of the Toilers. All of the discussions were translated into Italian. A general meeting of the union membership at the Labor Temple followed. Merritt urged the workers to go back to work if there was fruit to be processed and assured them that the arbitration council would settle the differences as soon as possible. Angry workers rose to leave the meeting while the AFL official threatened to expel the Toilers from the AFL if the strikers did not listen to the mediators, again indicating the marginal support provided by the AFL for the Toilers' cause. (L'Italia reported that the AFL speaker did not speak Italian and no one translated his speech.) Speaker after speaker was interrupted with catcalls and hisses from the audience. The workers did not intend to go back to work until they were assured that their demands would be met. According to the San Francisco Examiner, 500 of the 1,000 Italians present ran from the building shouting at the top of their voices that they were being betrayed into the hands of the capitalists. They voted
to continue the strike, although many workers did go to work the next day, while mediators, labor leaders, and lawyers met to discuss the situation.58

Both Italian papers accused the English-speaking press of conspiring with the cannery owners in reporting that the strike had ended before the strikers had decided to return to work. Rumors to this effect were simply used to intimidate the workers, they claimed, and should be ignored. In a letter to the editor of La Voce del Popolo, one cannery worker wrote, “It doesn’t matter what the cannery officials say. Their goal is to create discord among the workers to better subjugate them. But the workers know very well this trick and they know well what these people are trying to get at.”59

If the cannery officials and the government were indeed setting out to create discord among the workers, the issue of patriotism became a convenient tool. One of the strike mediators, Ralph Merritt, referred to as the “dictator of food supply” by L’Italia, made the following speech to the workers during the strike: What the government wants you to do and what the government is interested in is that you listen to us as we are the representatives of the poor people of the United States and it is they who are going to be affected by this strike. Also, if the fruit is not packed, we are going to lose the war and if you do not want it said that the Italians of California lost the war you must listen to us and not ask what is right.60

Articles in the San Francisco and San Jose papers exploited the patriotism question in a more subtle manner. Rather than malign the “unpatriotic” activities of the Italian strikers, they repeatedly glorified the efforts of those who helped out in various ways during the strike. When the workers were still out on strike, middle-class women in the area took some steps to save the fruit crop. One article described the bravery of women from the Oakland Defense Unit, who “risked their lives and led 100 housewives to work in the canneries.” The article claimed that the Italian women workers—who had been frightened by IWW threats but
were back at work already—were relieved to see such acts of patriotism and heroism. The middle-class women gave “confidence and a feeling of security to the workers.” Students from the University of California also took time off from their schoolwork to go into the canneries for a few days to prevent any fruit that was under government contract from spoiling.

Patriotism became an advantageous tool to pit the “loyal” middle class against the “suspect” Italian workers. Sensitive to accusations of “un-Americanism,” the Italians became the victims of a psychological weapon meant to discourage working class solidarity. Women of Alameda County advocated a plan to set up distribution centers in Oakland where women could buy the fruit to can at home. The San Francisco Labor Clarion, the official organ of the AFL San Francisco Labor Council, showing little sympathy for the efforts of the Toilers, made one of its few references to the strike by supporting the home canning drive as a patriotic wartime undertaking. It even suggested that each neighborhood arrange “canning bees.”

*La Voce del Popolo* responded to this strike-breaking activity with reports that the women and students were not taking the work seriously and were unconscious of the fact that they were taking jobs away from workers who needed them. Similarly, the Tri-City Labor Review of the Alameda Labor Council satirically called the middle-class women “saviors of our apricots” who “scabbed for the miserable half-starved crew of striking women in the canneries.”

Oakland’s socialist newspaper exclaimed that the “society women” had no shame and decried “these women who have all the luxuries of life, working for those who really need to make the money.” The newspaper suggested that if these women wanted to help they should look into the conditions of the canneries and “expose the dirty deal the workers get in these scab holes of California.”

By July 31 the mediation team had reached an agreement with eleven canning companies in and around San Jose. On behalf of the Toilers, the AFL agreed to represent only the male workers. Although the evidence is inconclusive, it appears that the Toilers made this concession in order to stay within the AFL. The Toilers agreed that the men would be paid no less than 30 cents an hour up to January 1, 1918. The women workers would be represented by the Industrial Welfare Commission, an informal member of the mediation process which the AFL accepted as their “legitimate” voice. The Commission raised the hourly rate from 16 cents to 17½ cents, and the piece-rate scale was raised a few cents per box. The companies agreed to abide by the decisions until the first of the year, and the workers agreed to work without striking for that period. In addition, all strikers were to be reemployed without discrimination. However, the employers did not recognize the Toilers of the World. They feared that union recognition would lead to annual negotiations and further labor trouble.

Elizabeth Reis’s article on the Italian cannery workers is the 1985 winner of the California Historical Society’s Alice J. Clark Essay Contest. Established in 1982 by friends of Ms. Clark, the contest awards an annual prize of $200 for the best original essay on the history of the San Francisco Bay Area and its people in the twentieth century. Authors must be no older than forty-five.

Ms. Clark took a lifelong interest in young people and financially assisted their educational and cultural enrichment. A native San Franciscan, she was fascinated by the city’s history, particularly its ferry boats and cable cars.

Friends of Ms. Clark who contributed to this year’s prize are: Ms. Maridell Anderson, Mrs. Jean Blair, Ms. Marie Conroy, Mr. Brian B. McGrath, Ms. Elizabeth Owen, and Dr. Thomas Wolff.

The annual deadline for submission of manuscript essays to the contest is December 31.
after the strike's conclusion. By mid-1917 the government was harassing and prosecuting IWW members in every Western state for treason in aiding and abetting the enemy.

At this point, we can only speculate how much the IWW was actually involved with the Toilers, but the fear was real, and the Toilers lost support as a viable labor union because of it. The San Francisco Labor Clarion never reported the chartering of the Toilers of the World and reported—briefly—on the strike only after it was over. On the other hand, the Alameda Labor Council paper covered the Toilers and the strike extensively. The Toilers had successfully penetrated the canning industry in the Bay Area and Santa Clara County, so the paper's attention to their activities is not surprising. What is unusual is the Clarion's curious silence.

It is possible that the Clarion did not cover the canny workers' strike because the Toilers was a federal union of unskilled workers. More likely, however, the Clarion was reluctant to report on a union that might have connections with what the Clarion editor called "the combination of mental defectives known as the Industrial Workers of the World." Referring to the formation of the United Railroad Workers union, the Clarion wrote, "The truth is, these persons with IWW proclivities never produce anything but trouble."67

Perhaps the AFL leaders in San Francisco thought that the rhetoric of the Toilers of the World resembled too closely the radical language of the IWW, particularly on the issue of labor's commitment to the war effort. Frequent editorials in the Labor Clarion pledged organized labor's support for the war. "Labor has ever been true to democracy," began one editorial, "and has never faltered when the call came for sacrifices to preserve or promote free institutions." The author boldly insisted, "If the captains of industry and commerce stand as loyally and unselfishly by their country as do the workers there will be no cause for complaint and a speedy and victorious war will be the result."68

The language of the Toilers was much stronger and less obsequious:

[The cannery employer] who would deny his help a portion of his war profits is guilty of treason and should be so handled. The unprincipled operators of trade and stock exchanges, who dealing in foodstuffs have gambled, robbed and speculated, are the real traitors to the government and should be given short life, as aiders and abettors of the enemy.69

Decrying the inequity of profits and advocating profit distribution must have sounded too close to IWW philosophy.

AFL leaders were not alone in their desire to dissociate trade unionism from IWW radicalism. The state bureaucracy, embodied in the California Commission of Immigration and Housing, was equally interested, albeit for different reasons. The Commission believed that IWW radicalism was eroding the potentially harmonious agricultural labor relations upon which their anti-union strategy rested. The IWW represented, according to Commission member Carleton Parker, "an unfortunately valuable symptom of a diseased industrialism."70 In order to uncover the extent of IWW influence among the agricultural workers, the Commission began covert investigation of IWW operations in 1914, which continued until the end of World War I.

J. Vance Thompson, a secret investigator employed by the Commission, wrote regular, detailed reports on Bay Area labor activities, including the canning industry. Because he was paid to find evidence of IWW activity, his reports should be treated with circumspection. In May 1919 Thompson reported that a "well-organized insidious propaganda" was being spread among all agricultural and migratory workers. Supplying detailed evidence of the involvement of specific IWW members, Thompson argued that "their peculiar psychology of destruction furnishes effective avenues for successful operation by those designing to hamper the efforts of our government for efficiency."71

Thompson followed the meetings of the Toilers of the World and the strike very closely. It is likely that his reports to the Commission encouraged its attempts to keep the conflict unpublicized. In one report on IWW activities in the Bay Area, he wrote that the IWW thrived on press publicity, "the more adverse, the more useful to their ends." According to Thompson, publicity only rallied sympathy for martyrdom and should be avoided at all costs. "New idols and new issues," he wrote, "are essential to the continuous success of the movement." He specifically suggested that to stop the spread of "noisy radical propaganda it will be necessary to eliminate the food upon which the movement
thrives; namely, press publicity and the creation of martyrs."72

Thompson feared IWW sabotage and likened the situation in the Bay Area to a “dormant volcano.” He believed that the Italians were particularly susceptible to IWW influence because “the majority of cannery workers are illiterate and frequently subject to ruthless exploitation.” He elucidated the system of sabotage, known in IWW language as “wearing of the wooden shoe,” and described in detail methods for burn-

ing store houses, barns, and fields. He also learned of the more subtle methods of destruction, such as filling a boiler with water in the winter and waiting for the frost to cause an explosion. According to this spy, not only were the Wobbles in San Francisco opposed to the U.S. involvement in the war and outspoken in their sympathies for the Kaiser, they were sabotaging the war effort by destroying crops and transportation facilities and, as the cannery strike revealed, curtailing food supplies.73

Thompson admitted, however, that the presence of a strong AFL in San Francisco severely hindered IWW activity. He wrote, “The IWW complain bitterly against the friction between themselves and the AFL unionists, admitting that the strength of the latter around San Francisco hampers the activities of the Wobbles; they being kept too busy fighting the AFL to pay much attention to the Sab Cat (sabotage).”74 According to Thompson, the IWW tried to persuade the cannery workers to leave the Toilers of the World and join the IWW by charging, “The AFL loses for you by selling you out. The IWW will win for you because we oppose the boss and demand full product of our toil.” Circulars had been ordered, he reported, which would show the cannery workers “how their strike was sold just when they had the industry crippled, and victory in sight.” The circulars were to be distributed in conjunction with IWW efforts to create dissatisfaction or partial stoppage at the plants and perhaps to agitate for another strike before the prune crop came in. Thompson credited the IWW for the success of the cannery strike and be-
Offices provide being question of whether the IWW was involved in the Toilers. He maintained that when the cannery workers did not leave the Toilers as the IWW urged, the IWW then urged its own members to join the AFL in their respective crafts, including canning, and to get themselves elected as delegates and to official positions. Thompson buttressed his argument by claiming that efforts to destroy the California fruit crop were widespread and threatening and that the sabotage was “AFL in name, Wobblie in action.” Moving into the AFL would have been a major departure from IWW policy, which had always been to have nothing to do with the AFL and to repudiate the “boring from within” strategy. If Thompson’s report was true, it no doubt reflected serious differences within the IWW which came in response to the mass wartime hysteria aimed directly at crushing the organization. But however internal divisions may have weakened the IWW, they only contributed to its demise. Although the Wobblies in California tried repeatedly to revive their organizing campaign among agricultural workers, federal repression rid the state of all IWW activists, making questions of organizing strategy moot.

The Toilers of the World did not last much longer. In 1918 the union called another strike over wages and hours in an Oakland cannery, but it ended quickly, arbitrated by the same mediation team that had ended the 1917 strike. The Toilers left the AFL in 1918 but continued to push for $3.50 for an eight-hour day. A year later the union, now known as the Fruit Workers Union, returned to the AFL, which then tried to organize all the local unions in California under the name of the Fruit and Vegetable Workers Union. That union gave up its charter in 1922 when agricultural prices declined sharply and its organization crumbled. In 1920 Governor Hiram Johnson ordered the Industrial Welfare Commission to set wage rates for the entire fruit and vegetable industry. It adjusted grievances throughout the state in cooperation with the cannery owners and without the inter-
ference of trade unionists. The canners were pleased with this arrangement and complied with the Commission's rulings throughout the 1920s.78

Following the Industrial Welfare Commission's lead, the canning companies tried to appease the workers in order to avoid further labor unrest. After the merger of California's four leading canneries, the new Del Monte Corporation was as interested in presenting the image of one unified national brand to its employees as it was to the consumer. Eager to develop harmonious labor relations, Del Monte tried to create a sense of family, camaraderie, and devotion to a larger entity.

In 1918 a committee of management employees began publishing a monthly periodical financed by the corporation and entitled Del Monte Activities. Written by and for middle management, the magazine reported the social activities of each department, usually rumors of romances between floors, and the scores of company baseball games. The workers in the canning plants were rarely mentioned. In one issue, however, the editors printed a poem written by "a young lady whose thoughts . . . though she is busy selecting quality fruits for Del Monte consumers, turn to the patriotic aspect of the work":

Merrily we work along
work along
In the cannery.
The fruit we can is Del Monte
Del Monte
Del Monte
The best brand in the land.79

In 1919 the editors of the Del Monte Activities announced the addition of The Lug Box, a newspaper intended to tie the "home office" with the "outside employees." The majority of the articles were in English, and since some reports suggest that most of the Italian workers read only Italian, it is likely that they never even read the paper. There was, however, one section translated into Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, designed to convey a message about workers' roles in the plant. One article explained, "Irrespective of what your work may be, yours is the most important work in the plant. If you do not do your own work carefully and thoroughly, you are a weak link in the chain."80 Another article that might well have been titled, "From Stockboy to Superintendent," outlined "steady but sure progress" in the career of one Italian cannery worker. His promotions over the years exemplified, according to The Lug Box, the truth that:

The heights by great men reached and kept
Are not attained by sudden flight;
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upwards through the night."81

The lessons were clear: work hard, and maybe one day you will be promoted to foreman of the plant. The paper explained that to work at Del Monte meant more than just having a job. Workers were to think of themselves as part of a much larger organization, dedicated to the common cause of packing the world's finest fruits and vegetables.

The development of labor relations within the canning industry and the program of protective labor legislation initiated by the state filled the gap left by the demise of the trade unionists and the IWW. In the 1920s welfare capitalism replaced collective economic and political action. It was not until the crisis of the 1930s that worker militancy and the radical leadership of the communists, built upon the ruins of the IWW insurgency, altered the state's agricultural sector, and led to the organization of the Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union.

But in 1917, the cannery workers had no such powerful and committed leadership. The AFL was unwilling to organize and support agricultural and unskilled workers wholeheartedly. It was reluctant to organize women. And it was leery of the Toilers' possible association with IWW radicalism. In the eyes of the AFL, the Toilers of the World was a renegade union. The IWW, in contrast, was eager to organize unskilled agricultural workers and made a special effort to organize women. Yet the Toilers were not willing to give their full allegiance to the IWW.

The Italian cannery workers were caught in the middle of a labor movement riven with conflict. Aggravating their situation was the need to assert their class interests and yet gain respect as patriotic Americans. The Italian press expressed this tension, supporting the strike and the workers' class consciousness, but always with ambivalence. The Italians were torn both between two different tendencies in the American labor movement and between their own conflicting desires.□

I would like to thank Professor Lawrence Levine's research seminar at the University of California, Berkeley. Special thanks to Stephen Aron, Dario Biocca, Gordon Huckins, Nina Silber, Stanley Tamarkin, and John Torpey.

(See notes beginning on p. 241.)