

CHAPTER ONE

Houston's Working Class and the Origins of Organized Labor in the Bayou City

FOUNDED IN 1836 by the brothers Augustus and John Allen, Houston was a town built on speculative growth and dedicated to the spirit of unfettered capitalism. Located on the desolate Texas coastal plain about fifty miles north of Galveston, the city they envisioned along the banks of White Oak and Buffalo Bayous eventually became the leading financial, commercial, and industrial center in the Southwest. Between the 1830s and the 1890s it slowly transformed itself from a frontier society into a growing economic center. Cotton, timber, and railroads fueled Houston's economic growth in the nineteenth century. The three interacted together, as cotton and timber harvested in the outlying regions encouraged railroad construction. By the end of the nineteenth century Houston had established itself as the region's second most important commercial center behind Galveston. It served as the hub for an increasing number of railroads and was home to the East Texas cotton and lumber industry.¹ As the twentieth century dawned two events propelled Houston past Galveston as Texas' leading financial center.

On September 8, 1900, a hurricane destroyed Galveston and left more than six thousand people dead in its wake. Afterward, prominent Galveston merchants and bankers transferred their operations inland to Houston in order to protect their economic interests from the destructiveness of Gulf hurricanes. The second happened on January 10, 1901, with the discovery of oil at Spindletop near Beaumont. Within several years after the first oil strike, other important oil discoveries were made near Houston and the city became the logical location for the newly emerging Texas oil industry. Due to its previous experience in serving the financial, administrative, and transportation

needs of the timber and cotton industries, Houston quickly became home to dozens of industrial and commercial enterprises associated with the oil industry. The oil and oil-related industries grew and flourished in Houston in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Established in 1908 the Hughes Tool Company manufactured patented rotary drilling bits for the petroleum industry.²

When the Spindletop oil gusher blew in at the beginning of the twentieth century Houston was a bustling city of approximately forty-four thousand people. A sizable working class called Houston home in 1901, and many of its members labored in the construction and repair shops of the Southern Pacific and the twelve other railroads that had maintenance facilities in the city. In addition to these industrial employers, there were numerous car and wheel shops and foundries that served the railroads' needs. All these concerns employed skilled tradesmen such as machinists, boilermakers, blacksmiths, and patternmakers, as well as unskilled labor. The skills and experience of these workers were readily transferable to the new oil tool companies such as Hughes Tool. An important but overlooked aspect of Houston history is that it was home to a substantial working class with a tradition of union-mindedness, labor activism, and racism.

The first vestiges of Houston's labor movement can be traced back to the late 1830s, and the city can lay claim to being the home of Texas' first two bona fide labor unions. In April 1838 journeyman printers in Houston organized the Texas Typographical Association to promote the interests of their trade within the Texas Republic. At its first meeting the printers proposed a standardized wage scale, elected officers, adopted a constitution and bylaws, and invited all Texas printers to join. During its first year the Typographical Association was very active. Monthly meetings were held, and several new members were "elected and qualified." In October 1838 the union went out on strike in Houston over wages and won a 25 percent wage increase. Houston carpenters organized in 1839 in order to establish uniform wages and to exact what their "services justly deserve." The record is sketchy about whether the carpenters succeeded in their quest for uniform wages, and the carpenters and printers unions faded into obscurity. No evidence exists of any labor union activity in Houston between 1839 and 1866.³ Several factors retarded the growth of organized labor in the antebellum period.

The small number of workers and the lack of industrial development in Texas at this time were major contributing factors. Texas'

geographic isolation likewise played a role, and Texas workers appeared to have little contact with or knowledge of labor in other areas. The extent of outside contact was limited to the individual workers who moved to Texas with some prior contact with organized labor. No outside union, national or local, gave any aid to organizational efforts in Texas before 1870. Texas workers did know of other labor unions, but distance and poor transportation and communication placed them beyond the influence of labor activism in other sections of the country. The frontier nature of Texas society, with its emphasis on individualism, most assuredly played an important role. Group identity, collective action, and class identification were weak in antebellum Houston.⁴ Despite these obstacles the seeds of worker activism were sown in antebellum Houston, and following the Civil War the city's labor movement would reemerge with new vitality.

Between 1865 and 1914 Houston's workers established numerous unions that were active in promoting working-class issues such as wages, hours, and access to political power. From 1865 to 1889 a number of small trade unions, such as the Houston Typographical Union Number 87, with a charter membership of about twenty printers, organized. Between 1889 and 1914 other unions, such as the Workmen's Club, Lone Star Division of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers Number 139, the Machinists and Blacksmith's Union, and a Workingmen's Benevolent Association, were established.⁵

By the 1880s the Knights of Labor had become Houston's most prominent labor union, with seven locals totaling approximately 740 members. The Knights continued as a force in the city's labor movement until the mid 1890s when its power waned and it was replaced by the Houston Labor Council.⁶ An important characteristic that tainted Houston's labor movement and showed its ties to southern traditions was an unyielding commitment to racism, white supremacy, and Jim Crow segregation. Race prejudice segregated Houston's workers occupationally, socially, and economically and established a racial caste system that defined the city's labor movement. The racism that infected Houston's working class was rooted in antebellum slavery and the Jim Crow social structure established in the city during the 1870s.

Many of Houston's early white settlers brought slaves with them. The first recorded accounts of African Americans in Houston place them in the city in the summer of 1836 when they and Mexican pris-

oners captured in the war of Texas independence were put to work clearing land for the original town site. As justification for using black and brown labor for the backbreaking job, a popular myth was cultivated by Anglos that said nonwhite labor was essential to clearing the swampy area because no white could have endured the insect and snake bites, malaria, impure water, and other hardships associated with the task. Other slaves in Houston worked as house servants or worked on farms and plantations on the edge of town. Some were employed as cooks and waiters in hotels, as teamsters, or as laborers on the docks and warehouses along Buffalo Bayou. Slave labor helped build roads and railroads over which agricultural produce entered the city, and they helped construct the city's commercial buildings. Although most slaves performed unskilled labor, some skilled black craftsmen in the city alarmed white workers, who felt threatened by them. One objective of the early Houston labor movement during the antebellum period was to limit the employment opportunities of skilled black tradesmen and protect white jobs.⁷

Following the Civil War jobs became the most important need for former slaves. Before the Civil War slave labor had been critical to Houston's economy and emancipation did not diminish the city's need for black labor. Former skilled slaves who had been hired out for wages operated blacksmith shops and worked as shoemakers. Although these black craftsmen were small in number, white craftsmen feared this black encroachment into white employment areas. The relatively successful black craftsmen were the exception, and most freedmen ended up as low-paid, unskilled workers.⁸ The abolition of slavery did not significantly alter the relationship between blacks and whites in post-bellum Houston.

White Houstonians regarded blacks as inferior beings that needed to be kept in their place. In the wake of the Civil War hundreds of former slaves flooded into the city and caused great unease among the city's white population. By 1870 blacks numbered 3,691 and comprised nearly 40 percent of the city's population. Fearing the rising number of blacks living within their midst, in the 1870s white Houstonians enacted local ordinances to segregate the races and subordinate African Americans to whites, a situation that Reconstruction had temporarily suspended.⁹ Jim Crow segregation enveloped every aspect of life for Houston's black population, and the city's schools, churches, social functions, and civic clubs were nearly totally segregated by 1875. White

privilege and overriding prejudice among Anglo workers limited the number of jobs open to blacks and dictated that the city's unions be racially segregated.¹⁰

Houston's major industries during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century included sawmilling, blacksmithing, carpentry, printing, flour- and gristmilling, railroad repair shops, foundries, and car and wheel shops. Houston's industries clearly had a significant demand for unskilled workers, and African Americans filled most of those positions. For example, in the 1880s blacks comprised 39 percent of the city's population and made up 79 percent of the unskilled workforce; whites monopolized all the semiskilled and skilled positions. African Americans who did possess skills were for the most part barbers or other personal service workers, though there were a few black carpenters and blacksmiths. Since African Americans were generally shut out of the skilled and semiskilled work, their wages were considerably lower and the work they performed was generally more physically demanding than that performed by whites.¹¹ Spurned by Houston's white unions, which were instrumental in creating the occupational plight in which blacks found themselves, African Americans recognized that they would have to organize themselves in order to safeguard their economic interests. The first instance of black workers organizing in Houston can be traced to the National Labor Union in 1871.¹²

The National Labor Union represented the first attempt by the American working class to organize on a national scale and protect itself from the growing power of America's industrial tycoons. Industrialists embraced the economic doctrines of *laissez faire* and regarded labor as a commodity to be bought as cheaply as possible with little or no regard for workers' humanity. Consequently workers challenged their reduction to a commodity in the new industrial order by organizing on a national level and attempting to create national unity within the ranks of labor. Though the National Labor Union regarded southern and northern workers as potential allies in its battle against large industrial combinations, its white leadership roundly condemned racial mixing and ultimately insisted on segregated locals.¹³ This was clearly borne out in Houston.

Black Houstonians established a branch of the National Labor Union for Colored in 1871, and it became the first union in the city's history affiliated with a national labor organization. Despite the union's commitment to racial segregation, Houston's black workers proved

willing to establish a local as a means to promote their issues. At this time they had nowhere else to turn to for organization, since the few white unions in Houston excluded them. Organizing a colored local of the National Labor Union was the one option open to them, and they seized it.¹⁴ At this early stage in the city's labor history African Americans proved much more willing than whites to affiliate with a national labor union, even when the union segregated them by race. This suggests the importance that Houston's black working class placed on organizing unions to protect their class interests. Houston's black unionists endured a much harder struggle than their white counterparts because they faced not only employer opposition to unions but racism from white unionists and employers. Despite its promise, this early effort at black unionization in Houston turned out to be short lived. The National Labor Union began to decline following the death of its charismatic president William Sylvis in 1869, and by 1872 the national organization passed into oblivion. This contributed to the demise of Houston's colored local, but what ultimately killed it was vicious white condemnation of organizing blacks.

Local newspapers railed against the National Labor Union and warned that "in the great struggle between capital and labor, labor must find some skillful strategy, or the battle will go against it." Including blacks should not be part of the strategy. Houston's white working class regarded the National Labor Union as a threat because they believed, unjustifiably so, it would be a race leveler and that its call for collective worker action would disrupt their happy land where "thrift and industry will raise any laborer . . . to any position that he may choose to assume within the compass of his intellectual powers."¹⁵ In contrast Houston's African American working class willingly joined national labor unions in their struggle for economic justice and solidarity. During the 1880s the Knights of Labor emerged as the city's most prominent union and was popular among whites and blacks. But the union bowed to Houston's racial segregation and organized separate assemblies for whites and blacks.

The Knights of Labor became the quintessential expression of the American labor movement in the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first successful mass organization of the American working class. Launched as a secret fraternal society among Philadelphia tailors in the late 1860s, the Knights grew in the 1870s and 1880s by actively recruiting skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers in the railroad, steel, and mining industries. By the late 1880s membership

reached three-quarters of a million and became the country's first true national labor union. The Knights introduced the radical concept of industrial unionism that nurtured working-class solidarity by organizing workers by industry rather than by narrowly defined craft lines that often excluded semiskilled and unskilled workers in an entire industry. Besides the usual working-class issues such as higher wages and better working conditions, the organization concentrated on the moral and political uplift of the working class.¹⁶

Only if workers could come together in a great brotherhood pledged to mutual aid and cooperation could they understand that "an injury to one is the concern of all."¹⁷ The Knights sought to reform industrial capitalism so workers could fully enjoy the wealth they helped create and to help laborers "develop their intellectual, moral, and social faculties, [enjoy] all the benefits of recreation, and share in the gains and honors of advancing civilization." At its peak the Knights helped sustain a national debate over the social implications of industrial capitalism.¹⁸ Although the Knights of Labor welcomed all workers regardless of race, the union segregated its black and white membership into separate locals.

By 1885 Houston's workers had established five white and two black assemblies of the Knights of Labor and boasted a membership of approximately 740. The five white locals mixed skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers in the same assemblies and drew their members from among the industries most common in Houston at the time; blacksmithing, bootmaking, carpentry, railroad repair shops, sawmilling, and tinsmithing. The Knights' joining of skilled, semiskilled, and unskilled workers in the same assemblies had an unanticipated negative effect. The practice undermined its effectiveness as a collective bargaining agent by making it difficult for the Houston lodges to address members' concerns in a specific trade or industry. The Houston Knights also embraced a conservative philosophy concerning the battle between capital and labor. Its membership spurned "[making] war on capital or capitalists" and simply demanded "justice [and] a fair day[']s work for a fair day[']s pay." The Houston lodges promoted their aims through political action, through social activities, and in some cases strikes. The Knights also published a local paper, the *Houston Labor Echo*. The paper served as the official news organ of the union and enjoyed a large circulation not only among the membership but also in all the city's railroad repair shops and among skilled tradesmen.¹⁹ In all these instances the racial barrier was rigidly enforced. The white

assemblies simply ignored blacks and refused to accept them in a wide range of activities such as picnics, festivals, sporting events, excursions, Labor Day celebrations, and strikes.²⁰

The Knights of Labor reached its zenith in Houston in 1886 and afterward began a slow decline that culminated in oblivion by 1900. In 1886 the Knights of Labor suffered a crushing defeat in the Great Southwest Strike when it struck the Southwest Railroad System controlled by Jay Gould, a powerful, astute, and unscrupulous financier.²¹ Houston, unlike most Texas cities, escaped the strike but the union's defeat and intense labor repression nationally following the Haymarket Square bombing in Chicago devastated the Knights and marked the beginning of its end. After 1886 Houston's skilled workers abandoned the industrial unionism and idealistic social vision called for by the Knights and focused on organizing themselves into craft unions. By 1900 only four Houston assemblies of the Knights of Labor remained, and only two were active, Musicians Assembly No. 1857 and the Bakers and Confectioners Assembly No. 1897.²²

In 1889 delegates from the city's trade unions established the Houston Labor Council, and the city's labor movement took a new course that would carry it into the twentieth century. The goals of the Labor Council included coordinating, consolidating, and institutionalizing the bargaining strength of the city's skilled tradesmen by organizing them into craft unions.²³ This marked the introduction into Houston of the American Federation of Labor's philosophy of utilizing the strength of hard-to-replace skilled workers and mobilizing that power to advance the immediate economic interests of its members in terms of wages, hours, and conditions. The workers drawn to the Houston Labor Council's constituent unions had skills that enabled them to bargain effectively with their employers as long as they limited their demands to improved wages and working conditions. Disillusioned by defeat in the Great Southwest Strike and disenchanted with the Knights of Labor's idealistic philosophy of industrial unionism, Houston's skilled workers embraced an organizational strategy that they hoped would maximize their power and minimize their weaknesses. The council ultimately evolved into an umbrella organization for Houston's emerging craft unions that rallied them so they could focus and coordinate their efforts in reaching their objectives. It often served as an intermediary between member unions, mediated jurisdictional disputes, provided support for organizing activity, and assisted during strikes.²⁴

Between 1893 and 1914 the number of craft unions associated with the Labor Council in Houston increased from seven to fifty, and membership reached approximately fifty-four hundred, nearly 22 percent of the workforce. The various crafts and skills represented among the Houston locals included plumbers, electricians, blacksmiths, machinists, iron molders, and numerous others. Houston's unionized craftsmen represented a working-class aristocracy who were basically conservative, in general agreement with the materialistic and acquisitive values of American capitalistic society and regarded their unions as vehicles for upward social mobility and entry into the middle class. Houston's craft unions made no efforts to organize the city's unskilled and semiskilled workers, which remained the least organized group in the city. While the most fully organized trades such as the plumbers, brickmasons, and printers boasted 100 percent participation, only about 10 percent of the unskilled were organized. The city's trade unions had the means, influence, and the skilled membership to keep their organizations exclusive and influential, and they saw no reason to reach out to the unskilled and semiskilled, who had little direct economic impact on craftsmen and posed no threat as strikebreakers.²⁵ Ninety percent of Houston's common laborers remained unorganized during this period.

The conservatism of Houston's trade unions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was rooted in several factors. Houston's trade unions accepted the notion that the aspirations of "labor and capital [were] not antagonistic[,] and while the interests of capital and labor are adverse, they are not necessarily hostile and should not be." Houston did not have large, mass-production industries before the outbreak of the First World War. Thus there was no influx of unskilled immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, who might otherwise have exerted a potentially radical influence over the city's labor movement, as they did in northern industrial cities. While Houston's total population increased between 1870 and 1910, the percentage of foreign-born residents steadily declined. In 1870, 16.7 percent of the city's residents were foreign born; in 1890 that figure decreased to 11.3 percent; and in 1910, only 8 percent of the city's population claimed foreign birth. Finally, the ethnic and racial homogeneity of the white trade unions that dominated the city's labor movement were unwavering in their commitment to white supremacy, protecting white jobs, Jim Crow segregation, and relegating African Americans to primarily unskilled labor.²⁶

Max Andrew, publisher of the city's labor paper, the *Houston Labor Journal*, and a member of the local typographical union, served as president of the Texas State Federation of Labor (TSFL) between 1902 and 1905. He personified the conservatism of Houston's trade unions regarding race and class struggle. Established in 1900 the Texas State Federation of Labor served the same function as the Houston Labor Council but at the state level. The primary functions of the TSFL were to lobby the legislature to pass labor friendly legislation and to act as a coordinating agency for many types of activities carried out by various Texas unions. The state federation concerned itself with such legislative issues as abolition of convict labor, prohibition of child labor under fifteen years, the eight-hour workday, and equal pay for men and women. Many of the state federation's and the Houston Labor Council's liberal political positions were rooted in the radical agrarian tradition of Texas' Grangers, Farmer's Alliances, and the Populists. Moreover, the Texas State Federation of Labor and the Houston Labor Council borrowed heavily from policies and programs introduced by the Knights of Labor.²⁷

In 1911, the TSFL passed a resolution supporting a Texas minimum wage law, and after years of lobbying persuaded the legislature in 1919 to enact legislation creating an industrial welfare commission with the power to establish minimum wage rates for women and minors. The victory was remarkable for three reasons: the TSFL persuaded the Democratic party's leadership to include support for a minimum wage law as a plank in its platform; the bill became law in the virulent anti-union post-World War I era; and it was the only minimum wage law, of the four enacted at the state level between 1917 and 1919, secured almost exclusively by the efforts of organized labor. Though the legislature repealed the law under pressure from employers during the anti-union open shop era of the 1920s, the TSFL's transient victory demonstrated labor's ability to mobilize its power and influence public policy, a major reason why businessmen feared it.²⁸ Though the TSFL was committed to the struggle for labor's rights, it was equally committed to keeping unions racially segregated.

In 1905, during Andrew's tenure as president, the Texas State Federation of Labor issued a report that formalized the prevailing racial prejudice of the state's trade unionists. It said in part, "[a] sense of justice, to say nothing of the wisdom of the policy, would dictate organizing the Negro into separate unions."²⁹ The call for racially segregated unions advocated by Andrew and the TSFL ultimately

guaranteed that Houston's African Americans were barred from apprenticeships and journeyman status in skilled trades such as pattern maker, machinist, molder, blacksmith, and electrician. In the twentieth century, as the Hughes Tool Company and other oil tool companies emerged in Houston and the demand for workers with these skills increased, the racial covenant of the Texas State Federation of Labor and Houston Labor Council guaranteed that blacks would be excluded from such jobs. The advance of trade unionism in Houston in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thus brought little improvement to the working lives of the city's African American workers.

The city's rapidly expanding economy in the early decades of the twentieth century opened additional jobs to black workers, but the occupational status of Houston's black workers did not improve significantly since the vast majority of jobs available to them were unskilled. Many of Houston's white employers were skeptical of the ability of blacks to perform industrial labor, and this attitude served to limit African American workers to menial "Negro jobs." One white employer remarked "that it is very hard to arouse enthusiasm or pride of accomplishment in Negro workmen. They will not assume even minor responsibilities[,] resulting in shiftlessness and lack of thrift." Additionally, blacks often did not have the skills necessary to perform many of the jobs created during Houston's industrial expansion in the twentieth century, and city authorities were uninterested in supporting vocational and industrial training programs for the city's African American population.³⁰

Max Andrew also advocated that organized labor in Texas accept the capitalist system, find a niche within it, and reject radicalism. He vigorously rejected the notion of class struggle and urged that organized labor and capital must work together for their mutual benefit. He emphasized that labor unions must adopt conservative policies. Andrew believed that, given the mutual dependence of capital and labor, employers should recognize that the existence of organized labor rationalized the market economy by promoting stable working conditions, shop floor contentment, and wage uniformity. He further believed that Houston's unions should promote a conservative labor ideology in order to curry public favor and to convince the citizenry that unions were merely "business organizations of the labor element." Thanks to Andrew's leadership, organized labor won considerable community favor in Houston and at the state level. Nonetheless, many Houston businessmen were unyielding opponents to organized labor.³¹

Houston's employers displayed the same animus toward organized labor as their counterparts in the country's traditional industrial regions. Beginning in the 1880s the city's economic, political, and social leadership emanated from two powerful business organizations, the Houston Business League, the forerunner of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, and the Houston Cotton Exchange and Board of Trade. Ideologically they embraced laissez faire capitalism and were committed to its dogmas of antigovernment, antiregulation, antiunion, antiplanning, antitaxes, anti-anything that seemed to place limits on the economic prerogatives and activities of the city's business community. Most importantly they believed in what they regarded as their God-given right to purchase their labor as cheaply as possible without troublesome interference from unions. The members of these organizations built Houston into the commercial center of the Texas Gulf Coast by the early twentieth century. Under their leadership the city emerged as the transportation, warehouse, distribution, and financial center for the cotton, lumber, cattle, and oil industries. As Houston prospered, these business elites were well positioned to reap the economic benefits of their efforts and to protect their class interests.³² In order to protect those interests Houston businessmen relied on the Houston Light Guards, a local militia unit established in 1873. Two of the Light Guards' primary missions were to quell labor disturbances and race riots.

An overwhelming number of Light Guardsmen held positions of high social status as business executives, proprietors, managers, professionals, and government officials. Ambitious businessmen understood that membership in the Light Guards held the promise of advancement in Houston's economic and social community. Only a minuscule number of working-class Houstonians belonged to the Light Guards, and these men were almost all skilled tradesmen. Fewer still were drawn from the ranks of semiskilled and unskilled labor. Class distinctions between Houston's working class, the business elite, and the upwardly mobile middle class probably contributed to labor's virtual exclusion from the Light Guards. The Light Guards obviously excluded blacks and only accepted "[a]ny white eligible for membership in the Texas National Guard, [or] . . . any white man of moral good character."³³

Between 1877 and 1898 the Houston Light Guards were called out five times to break strikes in Houston. The two most important occurred in 1880 and 1898. In October 1880 during the Texas cotton har-

vest 160 black laborers walked off the job at the Houston Direct Navigation Company where they loaded cotton bales onto barges at the city's wharves along Buffalo Bayou for transshipment to Galveston. They also stopped work at several cotton compresses, where cotton was compressed into bales for shipment, and the Houston and Central Texas Railroad, where they loaded cotton bales onto railroad cars. They demanded an increase in daily wages from \$1.50 to \$2.00. The employers refused the strikers' demand, locked them out, and brought in more than 185 Mexican strikebreakers. Strikers, some of them armed, forced the scabs to flee and successfully shut down the city's wharves, railroads, and cotton compresses. At this point the mayor called out the Houston Light Guards to restore order and break the strike. The militia's arrival forced the strikers to retreat and seek negotiations with employers. The strikers eventually returned to work without a wage increase and the strikebreakers were fired.³⁴

During the strike employers played one minority group off against another. This is significant in understanding the racial caste system in Jim Crow Houston and employers' willingness to use it to their advantage. The work that striking African Americans performed was strictly "black" labor, and white Houstonians would never have considered serving as strikebreakers in this context. Equally noteworthy is that after the strike was settled employers did not hesitate to fire Mexican strikebreakers, reinstate African Americans, and reestablish the racial status quo. Houston's racial caste system pointedly dictated the racial boundaries between white and black jobs. The exploitation and prejudice suffered by Mexican workers in the Bayou City could be worse than that suffered by blacks.³⁵

Though Mexican workers were used to help break the strike, they did not represent a significant presence in Houston's working class in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Mexican workers for the most part were not necessary or recruited by Houston's employers because of how the city's economy developed during this period. The city's businesses emerged to service the needs of East Texas agricultural production of grain, cotton, and lumber. An infrastructure of railroads, warehouses, and cotton gins emerged to facilitate the processing and shipping of these goods. For the unskilled workers necessary in these industries the city could turn to its large supply of black labor and also to the surrounding rural counties with their large African American populations. Mexican American scholar Arnolde De León has determined that in 1900 only about five hundred Mexicans

lived in Houston. They became more prominent after 1901 when the demand for workers in Houston escalated to meet the demand for the newly emerging Texas oil industry, but nonetheless by 1910 Houston could claim a Mexican population of only two thousand, whereas the black population numbered nearly twenty-four thousand. Prejudice doomed Mexicans and blacks to menial jobs, and Houston employers played Mexican labor off against black workers whenever it suited their needs.³⁶

In March 1898 the Houston Light Guards played an important role in breaking a strike by 150 members of the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees of America against the Houston Electric Railway Company. In this strike, organized white workers would feel the power of the militia. The union struck over a number of unresolved issues, such as wages, grievance procedures, and a closed shop. Motormen and conductors walked out, and the solid public support they enjoyed within the community alarmed management and other businessmen. The company moved quickly to assert its authority, and Houston's business leaders rallied in support of the company's position.³⁷

Honorary Houston Light Guardsman John Henry Kirby, a director of the Houston Electric Railway Company and an uncompromising foe of organized labor, led the fight against the union. Kirby condemned the strike as an irresponsible disregard for the public's safety and summarily dismissed the strikers' demands. Kirby is an interesting and important figure in the economic history of Houston. A powerful presence, he came to dominate and characterize the city's economic growth. Kirby made his initial fortune in the East Texas timber industry, and his rise to economic prominence bears a striking resemblance to that of the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. Both men came from humble backgrounds and through fortunate connections, hard work, guile, and ruthlessness made their fortunes. Much like Carnegie, John Henry Kirby believed he was a benevolent, compassionate employer, but in reality, just like the steel baron's, Kirby's outward paternalism failed to mask his tyrannical oppression in crushing efforts by his employees to unionize.³⁸

Under Kirby's direction the company imported strikebreakers from other parts of the state and barricaded them in the company's office building. All the strikebreakers were white because only whites could hold motormen or conductor jobs. Strikers and strike sympathizers, at one point numbering three thousand, periodically massed outside

the building, harassed those inside, and threatened the scabs. At a mass meeting on March 21, 1898, strike leaders inspired strikers and supporters with the righteousness of their cause. One blasted Kirby and the directors of the company by accusing them of union busting and undermining the supremacy of white labor. "Shall the union men of this city be organized? If we lose this strike we go a notch lower in the scale and . . . would find ourselves on the level with the peon labor of the Southern republic that touches the border of your own states."³⁹ The strikers' racist hyperbole aside, Kirby and the company's directors would never have considered overthrowing Houston's white supremacy to achieve their ends in the strike. This battle would be fought only among whites, whether management or union.

When the company tried to run its streetcars with scabs, more than a thousand people gathered and prevented the cars from making their scheduled routes. Following this confrontation, Mayor Horace Baldwin Rice, a former member of the Houston Light Guards who had led a platoon during the 1880 strike, ordered out the militia to restore order, and in one instance marched at its front when it moved against a crowd. The crowd of strikers and sympathizers gave way in the face of the guardsmen's fixed bayonets.⁴⁰ As the situation worsened a citizen's committee, which included representatives from labor, the company, and those not associated with either side in the dispute, began negotiating a settlement to the dispute.

The parties reached an agreement at the end of March, 1898. The settlement granted a modest pay raise and the company's right to retain forty-nine scabs but with an understanding that the striking union men would be rehired, and management successfully avoided recognizing the union as the employees' bargaining agent. Mayor Rice's calling out the Light Guards, forbidding public assemblies, and promising to protect the company without any commensurate support for the union had strengthened management's hand, and the settlement overwhelmingly favored the Houston Electric Railway Company. The terms that ended the strike were identical to those offered by the company before the militia was called out. In the two strikes discussed, Houston's workers faced employer solidarity and intransigence, strike-breakers, and repression from the Houston Light Guards. Houston's businessmen in both strikes vigorously and successfully defeated collective action by workers. The victories reaffirmed their faith in laissez-faire economics.⁴¹

In addition to using the Houston Light Guards as a means of discouraging unionism, in 1904 Houston's businessmen formed a local chapter of the Citizens' Alliance. Fearing what they perceived to be the growing power of skilled craft unions, businessmen in smaller industrial cities such as Houston organized local Citizens' Alliances under the guidance of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) to counter organized labor. Originally established in 1895 to promote the tariff and protect American manufacturers from foreign competition, by 1903 the NAM enthusiastically assumed national leadership in resisting unions. It denounced unions as, "an enormous Labor Trust [that] is the heaviest oppressor of the independent workingman as well as the common American Citizen. . . . [T]he greatest danger lies in recognition of the union."⁴²

As a condition of membership all candidates for the Citizens' Alliance were required to pledge that "I hereby make an application for the membership in the Citizens' Alliance and I affirm that I am not a member of any labor organization, which resorts to boycotting, or any form of coercion or unlawful force and fully agree to discountenance all strikes and schemes of persecution."⁴³ The organization's principles set forth the idea that America was made great by free enterprise and that all citizens must seek industrial peace and protect the right of workers to sell their labor to whom they pleased and for the price they could obtain.

The fact that Houston's Citizens' Alliance had 125 charter members is a striking indication of the strong hostility unions faced at the hands of the city's employers. They elected H. F. McGregor, president of the Houston Electric Railway Company, as the chapter's first president. With approval of the Citizens' Alliance, McGregor provoked a strike in June 1904 with the company's nemesis, the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees of America, which still had a foothold in the company. The all-white union consisted of motormen who operated the streetcars and conductors who collected fares. Both jobs were exclusively white. After the 1898 strike, the union had survived and remained popular with employees and the public. This time, McGregor's intention from the outset was to break the union.⁴⁴

McGregor used a number of techniques to instigate the strike. First he fired sixteen union members over alleged complaints of poor service while at the same time hiring fifty new employees and warning them not to join the union. Another two union men were fired because

they were active in union affairs, and when the local's president protested the firings the company reprimanded him for insubordination. Things worsened when management leaked information that the company had hired strikebreakers who were standing by in case the union called a strike. McGregor and the Citizens' Alliance imported white strikebreakers from other cities. As in other southern cities suffering streetcar strikes, the union stoked sectional resentment against strikebreakers who were usually recruited from northern cities. Tensions finally exploded when McGregor fired union president Oscar Miller for critical statements he made to the press about the company's oppression of the union. Immediately afterward the all white union voted unanimously to strike.⁴⁵

The Houston Streetcar Strike of 1904 was merely one incident in a national strike wave that plagued many of the nation's cities in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Though violence characterized many of the strikes and disruption of service inconvenienced the public, striking streetcar men nonetheless enjoyed public support that crossed class lines. As in other cities, middle- and working-class Houstonians harbored deep resentment against the streetcar companies because they were often absentee owned as in Houston, monopolized public transit, and were perceived to enjoy unfair profits at public expense. A Boston syndicate owned the Houston Electric Railway Company. Generally the public supported strikers' demands for shorter working hours for motormen because they feared that overworked, fatigued motormen were susceptible to accidents thus threatening passengers' safety. Conductors who collected carfare often engendered goodwill among the public by nurturing congenial relationships with regular riders, assisting them on and off cars and watching out for their children's safety.⁴⁶

Undaunted by public feelings against its motives the Houston's Citizens' Alliance under McGregor's leadership immediately swung into action to break the strike. It called in the waiting strikebreakers, infiltrated the union with spies, and pressured city officials to protect the company's property from violence. In the face of these draconian measures the union girded itself for a bitter struggle, received the support of the Houston Labor Council, and—perhaps most satisfying for the union cause—enjoyed extensive public support just as it had during the 1898 strike. Mass meetings called by the union drew as many as five thousand participants. Union speakers condemned the company for being managed by outsiders not in sympathy with the Houston com-

munity. One speaker emphasized that the Boston syndicate that owned Houston's streetcar franchise supported repeal of the city's segregation ordinance, which provided separate seating arrangements for blacks and whites. At one time the company proposed removing partitions between black and white sections in a few cars, but the Citizens' Alliance quickly convinced the Boston syndicate to retract its proposal for integrating the city's streetcars because it provided fuel for the strikers and went against the values of the alliance's members. The Boston investors quickly realized their folly in trying to impose liberal northern racial values in Houston. McGregor and the Citizens' Alliance were willing to do the syndicate's bidding in battling the strikers over economic issues and union recognition, but just like the union men they were not going to let the dispute undermine white supremacy in the Bayou City.⁴⁷

Passions against the Houston Electric Railway Company and McGregor ran high among strikers. Oscar Miller and other union leaders cautioned them to contain their anger and not resort to violence or destruction of company property because it would hurt the union and play into the hands of the company and the Citizens' Alliance. Miller and the others knew that maintaining public support was crucial. In order to help citizens in their daily commutes the union, with help from the Houston Labor Council, established hack lines to provide transportation to the city's outlying districts.⁴⁸ On both sides the stakes were high, and the union and the company hunkered down for a long fight. Victory for the strikers meant the right to have a union and a collective voice, while for management it would mean running the company as it saw fit without troublesome meddling from employees.

Shortly after the strike began, violence erupted and the union's position became increasingly untenable. A series of five dynamitings of tracks and streetcars occurred in June and July; fortunately, no one was injured. Although the police department investigated the explosions no suspects were ever arrested and a cloud of uncertainty hung over who was responsible. Union organizer C. W. Woodman accused the authorities of making a halfhearted effort to investigate the blasts, and he along with other unionists believed, though they could not prove it, that the violence was the work of agent provocateurs hired by the Citizens' Alliance. Woodman correctly surmised that the press would infer the dynamitings were the handiwork of radical unionists who disrespected the company's property rights and jeopardized public safety.

To counteract the bad publicity the Houston Trades Council offered a nine thousand dollar reward for the arrest and conviction of the person or people guilty of the dynamiting. Many citizens concluded that the surest way to end the explosions was to end the strike. At this point city officials tried to intervene and arbitrate a settlement but failed. Although some city council members gave credit to reports that the company was responsible for the explosions, they stopped short of officially blaming anyone but did pass a resolution condemning the dynamiting and authorizing the mayor to employ as many men as possible to stop further trouble. The council took steps to mediate the dispute throughout the strike but its efforts proved fruitless since the company refused to compromise or agree to an arbitrated settlement.⁴⁹

As the dispute dragged on through August, September, and into October the inconvenience it caused citizens in daily commuting prompted many to abandon their boycott of the streetcars. As more and more people began to ride the cars, a feeling of helplessness gripped many strikers.⁵⁰ The union continued the struggle until October when it called off the strike. The union's capitulation destroyed the Amalgamated Association of Street Railway Employees in Houston and weakened the entire Houston labor movement.⁵¹ The Citizens' Alliance effort played a major role in defeating the strike and breaking the union. Houston employers learned several important lessons from the strike. Management should not be afraid to provoke a strike in order to break a union, and should stand firm against union demands, make no concessions, denounce unionists as dangerous agitators and a threat to law and order, intimidate strikers by mobilizing local police and militia forces, enlist scabs from among so-called loyal employees opposed to the strike, encourage scabs to cross picket lines and start a back-to-work movement among their colleagues under the protection of local law enforcement agencies, generate animosity toward the strike within the local community, and be prepared to weather a long strike to wear down union resolve.

Not until 1911 would another major strike rock Houston. Trouble erupted when skilled workers in the repair shops of the Southern Pacific Railroad, one of eight lines owned by the Harriman railroad empire, joined a national strike against the company. Once again using African Americans as strikebreakers was out of the question because the shops employed skilled tradesmen in whites-only jobs such as machinists, sheet metal workers, boilermakers, blacksmiths, and car re-

pairmen who overhauled and repaired locomotives, rolling stock, and all manner of equipment necessary to keep the trains running. The Houston strikers belonged to several whites-only unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. They included the International Association of Machinists, International Brotherhood of Blacksmiths and Helpers, International Brotherhood of Boilermakers and Iron Ship Builders, and the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen of America. Seeking to increase their bargaining power and to counter management's divide-and-conquer strategy of negotiating with each union singly, the individual unions confederated and formed what they called the Harriman System Federation (HSF), so they could present a united front when negotiating with management.⁵² Management, which refused to recognize the newly formed Harriman System Federation, was willing "to meet representatives of individual unions, but not the Federation." Harriman officials claimed that recognizing the HSF would cripple the corporation and leave it at the mercy of the "supreme and unlimited power" of its unions. The rank and file supported the goals of the HSF and voted overwhelmingly to strike when management refused to yield. On September 30, 1911, nearly 40,000 workers struck the Harriman lines. In Houston approximately 1,200 to 1,500 joined the walkout.⁵³

The first three months of the strike were the most critical. Harriman immediately employed numerous detective agencies that furnished scabs and guards. Violence flared on the picket lines between strikers and scabs in Houston and throughout the South. In Houston on October 2 pickets confronted strikebreakers; a fight broke out; and panicky scabs bolted for the fenced railroad yards. As they approached the compound, railroad guards manning the fence mistakenly identified the rushing men as unionists and fired into them. The guards' fire killed one man and seriously wounded another.⁵⁴ Three days later tragedy struck again when a Southern Pacific guard patrolling his post on company property was killed by a shotgun blast from an unknown assailant. An unidentified sniper later killed one scab and wounded three others as they were escorted through union pickets into the Southern Pacific yards. In another incident, at the Union depot in New Orleans, a traveling companion of Texas governor Oscar Colquitt was mistakenly identified as a strikebreaker and assaulted. In an effort to protect scabs from further violence, attorneys for the Southern Pacific filed suit in Houston's federal court seeking an injunction to

disband the picket lines. On October 5, the federal judge Waller Burns responded by issuing an injunction and ordering the picket lines disbanded.⁵⁵

Although the shopmen's federations were not affiliated with the Houston Labor Council, the council endorsed the strike and supplied financial aid to the strikers. In November the Labor Council increased its financial support, held mass meetings, and organized parades in support of the walkout. But the efforts by the Labor Council failed to rally public support for the strike because of the violence associated with it. The daily press strongly endorsed management's cause and refused to publicize the shopmen's side of the dispute. In desperation union officials tried to persuade the federal government to condemn railroad equipment repaired by scab labor as dangerous and unsafe to the public but to no avail.⁵⁶

By December public opinion had turned squarely against the strike and Houston's businessmen became increasingly alarmed over the potential harm that would be done to the city's commerce if the walkout continued indefinitely. Though the Southern Pacific suffered financially from the walkout, it had sufficient resources to grind down the strikers and gradually, thanks to the injunction that protected scabs, overcame the problems of running its shops without the regular men. The strike became a grueling endurance test, and as time passed strikers were forced to seek other jobs to support their families. The strike officially continued in Houston as late as 1914 but it had long since ceased to have any meaningful effect.⁵⁷

Houston's trade unions learned several important lessons during the strike. They learned that national industrial combinations such as the Harriman Lines were formidable adversaries and labor's only hope of competing against such power was to fashion similar federations of national unions, nurture public support of the righteousness of labor's cause, enlist the sympathies of the press, and hope for progressive and evenhanded government to arbitrate labor disputes. Another lesson learned by Houston's unionists in this strike and earlier ones was that collective action on their part would be opposed not only by national industrial combinations but also by local business combinations.

By the time Howard Hughes Sr. and his business partner William Sharp established their company to manufacture rotary drilling bits in 1908, Houston's labor movement had suffered a number of defeats but had rebounded and survived. It had experienced two discrete stages of development: one between 1865 and 1889 when the Knights

of Labor and industrial unionism influenced the movement, and another from 1889 to 1914, when the Houston Labor Council consolidated the city's trade unions into a cohesive organization. During both stages Houston's unionists embraced Jim Crow segregation, racism, and white supremacy.

During major strikes that threatened to disrupt the city's commerce, unions faced a united foe that included Houston's employers, the local militia, and large national corporations. They suffered agonizing defeats but also showed a remarkable ability to bounce back, rally support among Houston's white working class, and survive. Houston's unionized skilled tradesmen demonstrated a great deal of union spirit and loyalty in the face of adversity but refused to recruit semiskilled and unskilled workers into their unions. Their racism excluded African Americans from union membership and undermined labor's power by excluding a significant portion of Houston's working class. The two factors that weakened Houston's labor movement—elitist trade unionism and Jim Crow racism—would not be seriously threatened until the Congress of Industrial Organizations arrived in Houston in the 1930s.

When Hughes and Sharp founded their company, they needed skilled machinists, blacksmiths, boilermakers, patternmakers, and other tradesmen, as well as semiskilled and unskilled labor. As the company gradually grew in size and gained a near monopoly over the manufacture of rotary drilling bits for the oil industry, it needed to hire more and more employees. Growth demanded the hiring of professional managers to run the company, and the owners abdicated the day-to-day running of the firm to a hard-nosed breed of executives and foremen.⁵⁸ Consequently worker disaffection increased. This, along with Houston's strong union tradition and Jim Crow segregation, made it inevitable that unions and race would become as much a part of the Hughes Tool Company as the famous drilling bit it manufactured.