

Workers frustrated with the exclusionary practices and political moderation of the AFL could turn to an embattled world of labor radicalism which was going through something of a renaissance after the defeats of the 1880s and 1890s. American radicals—led by the socialist Eugene V. Debs and an eclectic band of militants that included Mother Jones (Figure 2), Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, “Big Bill” Haywood, and Lucy Parsons, among others—pushed for more radical and immediate change through the Socialist Party, insurgent industrial unions in mining and textiles, and through the Industrial Workers of the World.



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Figure 2. “‘Mother’ Jones and Her Army of Striking Textile Workers.” Peirce & Jones for the *New York World-Telegram & Sun*, Philadelphia, PA, 1903.

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, digital ID: LC-DIG-ds-07713.

Founded in 1901, the Socialist Party of America (SP) quickly emerged as a powerful political force. Within a decade the SP had built more than three thousand local branches and forty-two state organizations. Dozens of candidates affiliated with the new party won municipal and county elections on town squares stretching from Texas through Illinois to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Meanwhile, the party’s leader, Eugene V. Debs, won 897,000 votes in his run for the presidency in 1912 and more than a million votes for president in 1920, while he was in prison after being convicted of sedition during World War I.

In the 1910s, garment workers in New York City and Chicago organized unions in the industry for which the term “sweatshop” was coined. Although workers suffered oppressive conditions in sweatshops, they were isolated from the rest of the workforce, and they could not take action directly against the manufacturers. But as manufacturers moved production to larger factories in order to produce standardized clothing and to distance themselves from the increasingly negative reputation of sweatshops—spread by Progressive reformers—the larger shops also brought unskilled workers out of their relative isolation. Working conditions did not necessarily improve in larger shops, but opportunities to build worker solidarity presented themselves. Employers attempted to maintain divisions among workers, separating them by ethnicity and gender, and by offering “bonus pay” to the most productive workers.

After years of suffering, garment workers organizing came in quick surges: the “Uprising” of 20,000 in New York