

The limits of the Socialist Party's gains also became clear soon enough. In the electoral arena, the SP never managed to reach the status of a viable third national party. The SP may have maintained a significant base of voters—as shown in Debs's 1 million votes in the 1920 presidential election—but their efforts ran headlong into the anti-radical repression during and after World War I and the deeply conservative Republican ascendancy of the 1920s. Moreover, to the extent that Socialist politicians, such as Victor Berger and his allies in Milwaukee, made gains toward practical reform, they also distanced themselves from the more radical class politics of much of the American left. The Socialist leader Morris Hillquit denounced Berger and his allies as “sewer socialists”—sticking them for constantly bragging about how good Milwaukee's sewer system was, even as they had failed to push forward the larger class struggle. Similarly, when socialist trade unionists rose to the leadership ranks in AFL unions, their pragmatism emerged. “Time and time again,” concludes the historian David Brody, “once they had acceded to office, Socialists began to act—if they did not always talk—like any other trade unionists.”¹⁵ Accommodation to established centers of power, however justifiable it may have been for Socialist activists in particular political contexts, added to the effects of internal divisions and repression of the left in limiting the SP's radical challenge to American political and economic systems.

The IWW—in part because the Wobblies had some success, and in part because they sustained an unflagging rhetorical radicalism—also became the target of government and vigilante repression. Wobbly activists leading “free speech campaigns” faced club-wielding police officers and were whipped and even tarred and feathered by vigilantes throughout the West. During World War I, 1,200 miners suspected of being aligned with the IWW in Bisbee, Arizona, were rounded up, forced onto a freight train at gunpoint, and abandoned in the desert without food or water for a day and half before a nearby military commander arranged for their extradition to New Mexico. At the same time, the federal government raided IWW offices across the country and convicted hundreds of Wobblies for antiwar speech. In the end, the IWW became one of the driving forces behind the rise of the American Civil Liberties Union and the push for protections of free speech during and after World War I, but the Wobblies could not save themselves from this repression. By the end of the war, with many of its leaders imprisoned, deported, or having fled the country, the IWW was unable to sustain itself as an institution.

Still more obstacles stood in the way of mass labor organizing in the first decades of the 20th century. Chief among them were the racial and ethnic divisions that ran through the shop floors of American industry. Historians have examined in great detail the intraclass racism that blocked white workers from acting in ways that would have been truly class-conscious. Between the late 19th century and World War I, tens of thousands of black workers gained access to unions, some all-black but some biracial in organization. Yet unions often acted as agents of division; some included racial exclusion clauses in their constitutions, while others gave lip service to solidarity while declaring that, in practice, black workers would undercut the wages and opportunities of white workers. For their part, recent black migrants from the South, the majority of black workers in the factories, alternately feared or despised the “white man's union.”¹⁶

White workers and union leaders used episodes of black strikebreaking as evidence that black workers were inevitably the opponents of labor progress. Whites' descriptions of black workers represented a powerful, if contradictory, mix of racist notions of black inferiority and fear of black physical superiority. Black workers, they feared, could outwork white workers, and black workers would do it on the cheap. In 1901, the AFL defended itself against accusations of racism, arguing that “the antipathy ... some union workers have against the colored man is not because of his color, but because of the fact that generally he is a ‘cheap man.’”¹⁷ But by 1905, the division between white and black work-