



Policing Upheaval: How Employer Responses to the Labor Movement Drove the Development of State Power in Chicago

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Like other U.S. cities, Chicago built a powerful police force virtually from scratch in the second half of the nineteenth century. This essay posits that business leaders in Chicago pushed the municipal government to create such a force in reaction to the labor movement, and focuses on the crucial decade of the 1870s. As the city descended into an economic depression after 1873, Chicago seemed more divided along ethnic than class lines. A German-led People's Party ran the municipal government, and the native-born elite scrambled to reassert its power. Businessmen soon created the Citizens' Association to ensure professional control of the police no matter who won elections. When the strike of 1877 reached Chicago, businessmen further united to strengthen the police force, donating enormous sums to put down the strike and buy weapons for the department. They also formed a new, more exclusive organization dedicated to promoting their interests and police power, the Commercial Club of Chicago. This story suggests that business interests, not the threat of crime, drove the development of the police department, and that the police served to reconcile electoral democracy with the extremely unequal and exploitative Gilded Age economy.

Between 1855, when its police force was founded, and 1886, when it successfully repressed the city's anarchist movement after the Haymarket bombing, Chicago built a powerful police presence virtually from scratch. Chicago was not alone—every major U.S. city built a similar force during roughly the same time period. These new police departments required municipal resources on a scale unheard of before the late nineteenth

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century. They also made possible a vast new extension of the power of the state into the daily lives of American citizens, and in many ways they constituted the standing army that the founding fathers feared. The creation of police departments, along with other powerful municipal organizations like fire departments, also shows that the Gilded Age was not a period when the United States possessed a weak state, but rather that state formation proceeded very rapidly, but was concentrated in cities rather than in the federal government. In this essay I argue that businessmen's fears of working-class upheaval drove the development of the police department, at least in Chicago. Those fears led businessmen to overcome their resistance to taxation and to unite politically in organizations dedicated to the maintenance of order that repeatedly pushed the municipal government to strengthen the police.

As of 1873, Chicago's native-born business elite had a severe problem. They were a wealthy minority in a majority immigrant, wage-working city. The elite had attempted to enforce strict control over the city in the previous two years by forming a Committee of Seventy that helped elect a Republican mayor and city council. This mayor gave the Committee direct control over the police, banned wooden buildings in favor of brick, and enforced strict temperance regulations. But this attempt to control the city had failed. In reaction to the banning of cheaper wooden buildings and temperance, a German-led People's Party swept into the mayor's office and a majority on the city council. The People's Party was still led by businessmen, and had a very moderate program, but it was not controlled by the city's traditional elite.¹ On top of this, the nation plunged into an economic depression that exacerbated class conflict. As early as the winter of 1872, the police put down a bread riot in front of the Relief and Aid Society.²

This class conflict would soon break the unity among Germans that had led the People's Party to power. When the People's Party took office in 1873, the depression was already underway and the unemployed demanded more poor relief. The People's Party requested that the private Relief and Aid Society distribute aid to all the unemployed. But when the native-born-controlled Relief and Aid Society insisted on maintaining its system of distinguishing "worthy" from "unworthy" recipients of aid, the People's Party did nothing. This led many Germans to abandon the People's Party in disgust. In January 1874, a group of mostly German-born radicals founded a new Workingmen's Party of Illinois to challenge

¹John Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City, Chicago in the 1860s and 1870s," *Journal of Urban History* 17 (May 1991); Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* (Champaign, Ill., 1998); Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago, 1995); M. L. Ahern, *The Great Revolution: A History of the Rise and Progress of the People's Party in the City of Chicago and the County of Cook* (Chicago, 1874).

²John Flinn, *History of the Chicago Police* (1887; New York, 1972), 147-48.

the People's Party for control of city and state government because they insisted that the People's Party did nothing to help the poor. This new party failed to dislodge the majority of Germans from their support for the People's Party, but it marked the beginning of an increasingly deep division between Germans like the leaders of the People's Party, who sought inclusion in the political and economic system, and German radicals who wanted to overthrow that system.³

The growth of a radical threat and the ascension of the People's Party both made the native-born elite increasingly nervous. Their basic problem was that in the rapidly growing city filled with foreign-born wage workers, the native-born elite simply could not sustain an electoral majority. As historian John Jentz pointed out, this pushed Chicago's elite to question the wisdom of universal suffrage and to contemplate extreme measures, even before the strike of 1877. "The way to prevent the spread of communism here," the *Times* proposed in 1874, "is to close our seaports against the further ingress of European vagabondage."⁴ Horace White, editor of the *Tribune*, proposed more forceful policies to deal with Chicago's poor:

Cure the elders with club and bayonet, and force the young into schools. Drain their sewage-soaked streets. Cleanse the tenements reeking with disease, in which their minds and bodies rot. Do, in a word, what can be done to give them a fair chance at life, and then, if they still cling to their false gods of misrule and crime, let justice be swift and sharp.⁵

Of course, part of the problem for White and those who thought like him was that because of the weakness of the Police Department, there was no force readily available to "cure the elders." So instead, the elite sought to ensure its economic power by reinforcing the forces of order and by reaching a compromise with the pro-business immigrants.

In July 1874, prominent Chicagoans including merchants, bankers and manufacturers from throughout the city formed the Chicago Citizens' Association.⁶ This organization united hundreds of Chicago's most important businessmen, native and foreign born. Future Treasury Secretary Franklin MacVeagh served as the Citizens' Association's first president. He earned his initial fortune as a wholesale grocer, then served as director of the Commercial National Bank of Chicago and on the Board of Government Directors of the Union Pacific Railroad.⁷ The Citizens' Association membership list included department store magnate Marshall

³Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City," 248.

⁴*Chicago Times*, 19 Feb. 1874.

⁵*Chicago Tribune*, 25 April 1874, quoted in Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City," 250.

⁶ For the composition of the Citizen's Association, see also Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 58.

⁷*Daily Inter Ocean*, 14 May 1888.

Field, meatpacker Phillip Armour, agricultural equipment manufacturers Cyrus McCormick and William Deering, and railroad car manufacturer George Pullman, among many others.⁸

The Citizens' Association worked to remake municipal government to ensure that the city would protect the interests of its members. This meant limiting the power of aldermen and elected boards and reinforcing the power of the executive, which they hoped to control. It also sought to reinforce the power of professional officials, such as those who ran the police department. The police leadership might be corrupt, but the Citizens' Association believed that it was less corrupt than elected officials and that professional policemen were at least dedicated to order. Like the police leadership, the Citizens' Association consistently favored a strong force. The Citizens' Association did not organize directly against the People's Party and did not promote specific police policy, as had failed so disastrously a few years earlier when the native-born elite promoted temperance. Rather, the Citizens' Association worked to reinforce the institutions responsible for maintaining order, no matter who won elections. This allowed the Citizens' Association to avoid angering immigrant businessmen. In addition, the Citizens' Association hoped that it could ensure elite order by leaving one area of the field free for politicians and the electorate to wrangle over, while reinforcing the power of the professional, appointed, administrative hierarchy in the police department and every other branch of government. In other words, members of the Citizens' Association now hoped to strengthen the leadership of the police department so that they could trust it to protect their basic economic interests, even if they could not elect one of their own as mayor or control a majority in the city council.⁹ And in a new city charter enacted in 1875, the Citizens' Association achieved most of the reforms it wanted.¹⁰

As the depression deepened and rumblings from the working class grew louder, the Citizens' Association and the city's elite in general turned their attention more directly to the problem of armed force. In August 1874, the Citizen's Association provided \$17,000 for uniforms and equipment to form a new militia unit composed of businessmen and clerks, the First Regiment.¹¹

This militia, along with the police, confronted an increasingly angry population. In early 1875, the city's socialists again proposed a demonstra-

⁸ Records of the Citizens' Association of Chicago, box 2, folder "Committee on Public Safety," Chicago Historical Museum [hereafter, CHM].

⁹ The above analysis is assembled primarily from three sources: Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*; Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City," and Flinn, *History of the Chicago Police*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; see also *Chicago Tribune*, 27 June, 18 July 1875.

¹¹ Schneirov describes the social composition of this militia in *Labor and Urban Politics*, 59.

tion against the Relief and Aid Society. They accused that society of refusing to help and referring the poor to county relief, which was woefully inadequate, since “the capitalists are paying few or no taxes; preferring to fight the city claims in court.”¹² The *Times* headline reporting on these events read “Load Your Guns, They Will Be Needed Tomorrow to Shoot Communists.” This article promised that “the Authorities will make it warm for the malcontents.”¹³ In fact, the proposed demonstration never took place, but throughout 1875 Chicago’s left, now calling themselves alternately socialists, communists, and anarchists, continued to meet at Turner’s Hall, to protest the inactivity of the Relief and Aid Society, and to invoke the memory of the Paris Commune.¹⁴

In 1876, the People’s Party government collapsed essentially because wealthy Chicagoans refused to pay taxes. The native-born elite was willing to make peace with German-born businessmen, but was not willing to support an insurgent political party, however moderate. Nonetheless, the new Republican mayor Monroe Heath was very careful to maintain the fragile unity between native-born and German-born advocates of order. The fight over temperance in the first years of the 1870s, the reign of the People’s Party, and the traditional elite’s recapturing of the mayoralty reshuffled Chicago’s political alliances. The business leaders of both Germans and the native-born purposely downplayed their differences in order to maintain businessmen’s control over the city, and both joined the Citizens’ Association. However, this reinforced the class divisions that were sharply revealed by the depression; class tension was increasing daily. Thus, between 1873 and 1877 Chicago went from a city that seemed politically divided above all by ethnicity to a city starkly divided by class, with a multi-ethnic elite firmly in control.

This control would soon be severely tested. On July 14, 1877, a railroad strike began in Martinsburg, West Virginia. By the time the strike became a full-scale riot in Pittsburgh and Baltimore, Chicago workers were ready to join in. The strike began in Chicago on Tuesday, July 24, with railroad workers, but quickly spread to lumber shovers on the southwest side, the saw mill and planing mill men, iron workers, brass finishers, carpenters, brickmakers, bricklayers, stonemasons, furniture makers, polishers, shoemakers, tailors, painters, glaziers, butchers, and others, and their crowds were joined by thousands of the unemployed. All day on July 24 and then again on July 25, the police marched from one place to another to confront different bands of strikers. They did not have horses or patrol wagons; instead they walked or took the streetcars. The stationhouses were connected by telegraph, but there was no easy means of communication with men in the field, so messages had to be conveyed by foot. Overall, the police proved quite effective at keeping the disturbances contained, but

¹² Proclamation issued by *Vorbote*, published in the *Chicago Times*, 24 Feb. 1875.

¹³ *Chicago Times*, 24 Feb. 1875.

¹⁴ See, for instance, *Chicago Times*, 19 March 1875.

they could not stop the strike movement altogether. As a result, the city's elite became increasingly nervous.¹⁵

As the police and about three hundred deputies continued to fight strikers throughout the city on July 25, 1877, perhaps 20,000 businessmen met to form a defense organization. Reverend Robert Colyer, a favorite of the city's elite and a frequent speaker at "lyceum" meetings throughout the country, where he charged \$100 per speech, chaired the meeting and assured the crowd that he was willing to give his life "in defense of order."¹⁶ Congressman and future mayor Carter Harrison insisted that the police could control the mobs, because even the rioters had a strong "feeling of law-abiding reverence for those who are the officers of the law." He called on the city's factories and shops to open for business the next morning, claiming that the strike was carried on by "idlers, thieves and ruffians," rather than by the city's honest workmen.¹⁷ Former mayor Levi Boone agreed with Harrison that the police could handle it, but only if they were better armed. Others at the meeting called for the mayor to request that the military be sent in to completely occupy the city. In the end, the meeting resolved to call for volunteers. Alan Pinkerton asserted that a total of 50,000 volunteers joined the newly formed force of deputies during the course of the strike, while Police Superintendent Hickey claimed there were 20,000.¹⁸ In addition to these volunteers, 131 wealthy Chicagoans, businesses, and clubs donated \$15,073 in money and material. The list of individuals and organizations who donated money for the suppression of the strike included many of the most prominent in the city, including the Fields and Leiters, the McCormicks, and ten hotels.¹⁹

Early in the morning on July 26, the third day of the strike in Chicago, a large crowd of rioters confronted about fifty police at the Halsted viaduct and exchanged gunfire and stones. The conflict escalated, and soon 350 police engaged against the rioters, firing into the crowd and clubbing those who remained. Soon, the state militia in the form of two cavalry companies and the second regiment of Irish-Americans arrived as backup, bringing with them two ten-pound guns armed with grape and canister. These militiamen did not enter the fray, but waited in case the police were pushed back. The battle raged up and down Halsted Street all day, with the

¹⁵ The following narrative of the events in 1877 is drawn especially from Superintendent Michael Hickey, *Annual Report for 1877*, Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of Chicago, 4 Feb. 1878, doc. 1288; Flinn, *History of the Chicago Police*, 153-77; and the *Chicago Tribune*, 24-27 July 1877, but it is also informed especially by Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, and Robert Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1959).

¹⁶See *Daily Inter Ocean*, 6 Aug. 1875, for an account of Colyer's lyceum meetings.

¹⁷Quoted in Flinn, *History of the Chicago Police*, 181.

¹⁸ Hickey reported this number in the *Annual Report for 1877*.

¹⁹Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of Chicago, 20 Aug. 1877, doc. 468.

police giving much better than they got. They killed an unknown number of rioters and clubbed down hundreds. Many more were imprisoned at the 12th Street station, where, in the aftermath of the battle, one dead man lay on the floor, another lay dying, and “the streets thronged with people evidently in sympathy with the prisoners and rioters.”²⁰ In fact, the police did almost all the fighting themselves, even if the presence of the militia might have helped overawe the strikers. The police themselves reported killing ten rioters and severely wounding forty-five. Seventeen policemen were wounded in the fighting, though none were killed. Although the fighting hung in the balance at times, the police had emerged victorious and the strike was over in Chicago.²¹

Many in Chicago and across the country recognized that the rioters had almost overwhelmed the combined forces of order. This recognition prompted a demand among wealthy people across the nation to increase the armed forces that could be deployed against future strikers and rioters. From the end of the Civil War until 1877, the Democratic Party had called for the disbandment or at least a great reduction in the army, but the upheaval of 1877 changed that. In Baltimore, for instance, the Democratic city government that had been overwhelmed by strikers now called for an increase in the army to handle domestic disturbances. Many people involved in Chicago politics felt the same way.²² The city council tried to facilitate the coordination of all the various forces that had been called upon to put down the disturbance. They called for a clearer chain of command over the volunteer militia units with the aim of putting all armed forces under the control of the mayor in times of urban emergency.²³ But many also recognized that, unlike in Pittsburgh or Baltimore, the Chicago Police Department had succeeded in putting down the strike.

Before 1877, the city’s elite had been as likely to blame and attack the police for corruption and inefficiency as they were to praise them. This was no longer the case afterward. As the nineteenth-century journalist John Flinn points out, before the riot the “public” saw the “average blue-coat as a barnacle and a nuisance. He was only tolerated because there still remained a doubt as to the wisdom of trying to get on without him.”²⁴ Before the riot, the persistence of gambling, prostitution, Sunday drinking, vagrancy, and unions seemed to prove that the police were ineffective. Afterward, the elite never again questioned the necessity of the police, even if it did not yet regard them as heroes.

²⁰ Quote from Superintendent Hickey, *Annual Report for 1877*.

²¹ Figures from *ibid.*

²² *Chicago Tribune*, 28 July 1877.

²³ Proceedings of the Common Council of the City of Chicago, 6 Aug. 1877, doc. 394.

²⁴ Flinn, *History of the Chicago Police*, 202.

It is important to recognize the limits of the city's newfound love for its police force. In fact, Mayor Heath cut the police force in 1878.²⁵ This cut was part of Heath's extreme program of fiscal retrenchment, rather than any specific attack on the department. Cutting the force was not novel or particularly remarkable, but what had changed after 1877 was that this cut met with real opposition. In response to a petition from businessmen on the Southwest side, the city council even passed a resolution urging the mayor to refrain from cutting the police or fire departments.²⁶

Most important, the riot pushed the city's elite to organize itself even more fully than it had up to that point. First, the Citizens' Association raised funds for weapons that could be used by the police or the militia in the case of another riot. Over the next year, it raised \$27,515 for the purchase of weapons. This money came from a broad cross section of Chicago's businesses: \$10,650 came from banks, railroads, insurance, and other corporations; \$6,400 from merchants; \$4,070 from the city's manufacturers; \$3,700 from the Board of Trade; and \$3,295 from the lumber interests.²⁷ The Citizens' Association used this money to purchase 599 breach-loading Springfield rifles plus ammunition, four 12-pounder Napoleon cannons with 250 rounds of canister and 125 rounds of case shot, full equipment for a cavalry battalion, and one Gatling gun plus ammunition. It also paid the debts of the First and Second regiments of the state militia.²⁸ It distributed 303 of the guns and the cavalry equipment to the militia and the rest to the police department.²⁹ "Prominent citizens and business men" donated an additional 102 muzzle-loading Springfields to the department during 1878.³⁰ These enormous voluntary contributions stand out even more given that wealthy Chicagoans had refused to distribute poor relief throughout the depression, and that they had brought down the People's Party through a tax strike.

The following year Chicago's elite formed a much more exclusive organization, limited to the sixty most powerful men in the city: the Chicago Commercial Club. The original sixty members were a cross section of the most important businesses in the city. Marshall Field's partner Levi Leiter served as the first president. The organization's other members included William Chisolm, President of the Union Rolling Mills;

²⁵ Report of the General Superintendent of Police of the City of Chicago to the City Council for the Fiscal Year ending December 31st, 1878 (HWMRC).

²⁶ The petition is from the Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago, 1 Jan. 1878, box 38, folder 2. The resolution is from the Proceedings of the City Council of the City of Chicago, 14 March 1878, doc. 1337.

²⁷ Records of the Chicago Citizens' Association, box 1, folder 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Records of the Chicago Citizens' Association, box 1, folder 1; box 5, folder 1.

³⁰ Report of the General Superintendent of Police of the City of Chicago to the City Council for the Fiscal Year ending December 31st, 1878.

John Drake, proprietor of the Grand Pacific Hotel; Charles Fargo of the American Express Company; Marshall Field; J. Russell Jones, president of the West Chicago Railroad Company; Franklin MacVeagh; E. M. Phelps of the Phelps Dodge corporation; George Pullman; and Anson Stager, vice-president of Western Union. New members could enter the organization only upon the death or resignation of an old member.³¹

The Commercial Club organized regular meetings at which the city's most powerful businessmen discussed the issues of the day and tried to reach consensus. These meetings were closed, but important figures like the mayor might attend by invitation. Some of the topics were broad, such as that for the meeting held on April 27, 1878: "The situation in our municipal affairs."³² Others were more pointed, such as "The military as protector of property, local and national."³³ Over the next six years, the Commercial Club meetings included discussion of Sunday Laws, bankruptcy regulation, municipal revenue, the "nuisances such as smoke, whistles and blocked streets that afflict Chicago," saloon licenses, and the right of the state to interfere in public corporations. Its topics also included: "the increase in immorality in the city—can anything be done to lessen it?" "What are the causes of the present depression in commercial and industrial interests and what the remedy?" "Is speculation an infamy or a benefit to the general business interests of the country?" "Unemployed laborers—what obligations rest upon our citizens for their maintenance?" Like the Citizens' Association, the Commercial Club was capable of raising considerable funds, of pressuring politicians to accede to its demands, and of helping achieve consensus among the city's most powerful businessmen.³⁴

The official history of the Commercial Club insists that it was founded originally to entertain important potential investors from Boston. Nevertheless, its founding one year after the upheaval of 1877 was not a coincidence and reflects a more class-conscious and unified elite. As class conflict increased again in the 1880s and 1890s, the Commercial Club would play an important role. It purchased a building for the militia and land for a military base north of the city, from which troops would occupy the city during the Pullman strike.³⁵ From 1878 on, both the Commercial Club and the Citizens' Association consistently pushed mayors of both parties to increase the numbers, equipment, and training of the police

³¹ Constitution of the Chicago Commercial Club, box 1, folder 1, Records of the Chicago Commercial Club.

^{32,32} Records of the Chicago Commercial Club, General Club meetings minutes, box 1, folder 4.

³³Records of the Chicago Commercial Club, Executive Committee of the Commercial Club, 29 March 1879, p. 11, box 7, folder 1.

³⁴ Records of the Chicago Commercial Club, Executive Committee of the Commercial Club, 11-85, box 7, folder 1.

³⁵ Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City," 248.

department, and in the 1880s their program was enacted as the department tripled in size, instituted a new training regimen, and built a massive new communications and transportation infrastructure.³⁶ Chicago's elite was increasingly organizing itself to make sure the government at all levels met its needs. And the single most important of those needs was the maintenance of order.

Historians have long argued that the events of 1877 marked a decisive shift in the national attention from the problems of the sectional crisis to those arising from the nation's industrialization. Not only did the year mark a shift in the national attention from the sectional crisis to the labor crisis, but it also marked a shift in the focus of the nation's armed forces. From 1861 to 1876, thousands of armed men in blue uniforms had striven to protect the system of "free labor" from the threat posed by the slave masters. Many of them were farmers motivated by their desire to save their children from the "wage slavery" to which they would be reduced if new land for farms could not be secured. From 1877 onward, thousands of men in blue uniforms in cities throughout the North fought to protect the wage labor system from the threat posed by its own wage slaves. This army of blue-coated men, the police, used violence to reconcile electoral democracy with industrial capitalism. And they did so at the behest of an increasingly well-organized class of businessmen.

³⁶ Sam Mitrani, "Reforming Repression: Labor, Anarchy, and Reform in the Shaping of the Chicago Police Department, 1879-1888," *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* 6 (Summer 2009): 73-96.