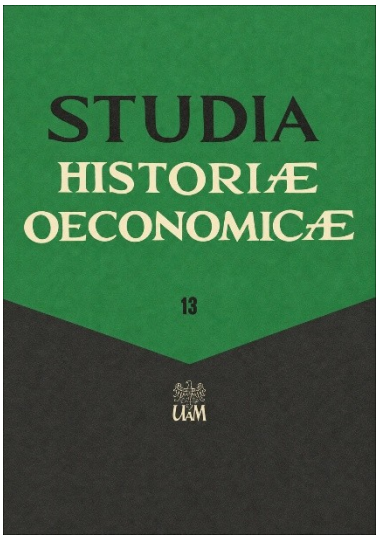


Brożek, A. (1978) 'Polish Ethnic Group in American Labour Movement', *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*, 13, pp. 173–182.

https://doi.org/10.14746/sho.1978.13.1.016

Text of article:
https://pressto.amu.edu.pl/index.php/sho/article/view/58539

The text was digitised from an earlier printed edition of *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae*. The digitisation process involved scanning, automated optical character recognition (OCR), and subsequent manual verification of the recognised text. The original source material is held by the Collegium Historicum Library at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań.
bch.amu.edu.pl

The task was carried out within the framework of the competition "Social Responsibility of Science II – Support for Scientific Libraries". The project entitled "Digitization of archival editions of scientific journals collected by the Library of the Coll. Historicum of Adam Mickiewicz University". The project was co-financed from state budget funds granted by the Minister of Science within the framework of the Programme Social Responsibility of Science II. Support for Scientific Libraries (agreement no. BIBL/SP/0092/2024/02 of 05.12.2024).

Total value of the project: PLN 247,236.00. Amount of co-financing: PLN 220,836.00.









STUDIA HISTORIAE OECONOMICAE
UAM Vol. 13 — 1978 Poznań 1978

Andrzej Brożek (Katowice)

POLISH ETHNIC GROUP IN AMERICAN LABOUR MOVEMENT

A considerable majority of Polish immigrants arriving to the United States from the end of 19th century to the First World War settled in the towns and industrial centers of the Northern States along the Great Lakes between the Atlantic and the Mississippi River. The Delaware and Ohio rivers became the Southern borderline of this area. Most of the Polish settlements were concentrated in the three most industrialized States: Pennsylvania, New York and Illinois. Polish immigrants found employment in the Pennsylvania Anthracite Area as well as in West Virginia and Illinois, metallurgical industry in New York, Indiana and Pennsylvania, Chicago stockyards, the East Coast ports and shipyards and in communal enterprises in big towns. Women were employed mainly in domestic or hotel service as well as in textile and clothing trade in the States of New England and New Jersey. The Poles were also attracted by a developing automobile industry. Besides, many representatives of a small group of Polish farmers worked in factories and spent only some of their time on farms cultivated, in fact, by other members of their families (Connecticut river Valley). According to Mieczysław Szawleski, one of the most penetrating investigators of Polish immigration in the United States, as much as 85% of immigrants settled in towns and factory or mining settlements.[1] In many industrial centres Polish immigrants constituted the most predominant element of regional working community. According to an American historian Victor R. Greene in 1896 the Polish-born workers were, even in comparison with the native-born workers, the most numerous group among the workers employed in the Philadelphia and Reading Coal and Iron Company — the biggest company in the Pennsylvania industry— the leading economic region in the country. Taking into consideration the Anthracite Area in 1903 the Poles were employed in two fifths of all working teams, which means that after the native-born workers they were the largest group in the mining community structure.[2] According to some Polish consu-

[1] M. Szawleski: *Wychodźstwo polskie w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki* [Polish iminigrants in the United States of America]. Lwów—Warszawa—Kraków 1924, p. 41.

[2] V. R. Greene: *The Slavic Community on Strike, Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite*. Notre Dame—London 1968, p. 35.

lar and diplomatic sources from the twenties, closely approximating American sources from that period, more than 80% of Polish ethnic group consisted of workers.[3] According to the already mentioned Mieczysław Szawleski the number of Polish-American workers employed in the mines of Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Ohio amounted in the twenties to 20% of all working teams.[4] In 1936 more than 60% of all Polish workers were employed in coal mining, which means that they constituted 25% of all workers employed in this industry.[5]

Considering the role of the Poles in American working class structure of several regions and branches of industry we find that they did not play such a significant part in labour movement and class struggle as it might be expected from their number.

The question of participation of Polish immigrants in American labour movement, strikes and other forms of class struggle is complex in many respects. This question should be approached in a wider context including a confrontation of the two successive waves of immigrants in social and economic life of the United States: the Irish (as a predominant element of immigration from the Western and Northern Europe, the so-called "old" immigration) and the Polish (as a significant element of immigration from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, the so-called "new immigration"). This confrontation has been known, first of all, from its religious aspects since the Catholic Church hierarchy dominated by the Irish and Germans had to face an increasing number of immigrants coming from, among other countries, Poland. The situation in the labour market was similar; though the economic starting point of the Irish in America resembled that of the Poles (except for the advantage of knowing English language by the Irish) nevertheless the latter started working when the former had already overcome the first difficulties of adjustment. As a result when a Polish unqualified worker started to work in American industry his Irish co-worker had already acquired a proper professional training and could become the Pole's foreman. We might also take into account prejudices against Polish workers on the part of American working class aristocracy and the majority of labour leaders of Irish and German origin. In American (as well as in Polish-American) subject litera-

---

[3] M. Tarkowski: *Położenie robotników polskich w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki Północnej w latach 1920 - 1930* [Position of Polish workers in the United States of America in 1920 - 1930] in: Polska klasa robotnicza. Vol. 4. Warszawa 1973, p. 334 - 36.

[4] M. Szawleski, op. cit., p. 59.

[5] M. Tarkowski: *Sytuacja robotników polskich i pochodzenia polskiego w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki Północnej w okresie międzywojennym* [Situation of Polish and Polish-born workers in the USA in the interwar period]. in: Dzieje Polonii w 19. i 20. wieku, ed. M. M. Drozdowski. Toruń 1974, p. 74.

ture[6] one can find an opinion that attitudes of Polish workers were formed according to some general tendencies observed in newcomers in all, also non-American, industrial centres. Since they came from the regions of lower living standards their needs were simpler than those of the native workers; they accepted inferior living conditions, lower wages, etc. In the case of Polish workers in the United States those general tendencies manifested themselves even more strongly since the immigrants from the most backward regions of the Eastern Europe found themselves in the region characterized by the world's most modern and dynamic economic and social development. Besides, their first and main concern was saving money in America since they hoped to return to their native country and to buy a piece of land. As a result they were willing to get work "at any price" (they would be used as strike-breakers) and were reluctant to spend money on any unnecessary, from their point of view, purpose such as payments to organizations that would not in return guarantee insurance rights. Such an opinion seems to prevail in both the subject literature and common belief. Is it really justified?

The other side of the matter are radical attitudes often carried by Polish immigrants from their native villages. In those villages the memories of Cracow revolution of 1846 accompanied by a bloody rebellion of peasants against noblemen had been still vivid. The anti-Russian rising of 1863 forced the czarist government to introduce land reform unusually advantageous, under European conditions, to peasants in order to direct their hostility against Polish noblemen. Radical feelings were characteristically transformed under specific conditions of American liberalism in social life. In America many authorities lost their meaning for Polish immigrants, even the most deeply rooted authority of church institutions was undermined and, as a result the Polish National Catholic Church had been established. The Polish immigrant was attracted, most of all, to Polish-American organizations and he was willing to spend money not only for fraternal but also for social purposes. Thus he would sometimes violently oppose any attempts to limit his non-material needs, such as, for example, all kinds of communication in his native language. Would he not react in the same way when his material needs were threatened? There were some factors hampering his reactions; the Polish immigrant was the "bird of passage" whose main purpose was to collect money enough for raising his social status back at home and such an attitude did not encourage him to participation in the labour movement. Moreover, his living conditions in America were better than those he had experienced in his lifetime in Europe. Not only in America but also in other countries, including Poland, socialist

[6] V. Greene: *The Polish American Worker to 1930: The "Hunky" Image in Transition*. "The Polish Review", Vol. XXI, No. 3, New York 1976, p. 63 - 78, presents an interesting review of this literature and the changing impression of the immigrant worker since the turn of the century.

ideology appealed most of all to impoverished craftsmen, deprived sometimes of their means of living by the development of industry, but it did not appeal to country people for whom employment in industry meant social advancement. Nevertheless Polish immigrants became involved in the class struggle.

It should be recognized that Polish immigrants in America participated as much as other workers in American labour movement. Although in the period of two decades after the Civil War immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were used as strike-breakers nevertheless "newcomers did not take long to learn. It was remarked that they shortly became sufficiently »Americanized« to become strikers themselves.[7] As far as in 1910 an identical opinion was expressed by Karl Englisch who stressed "an interesting fact that the newcomers quickly start to adjust themselves to American conditions. Their demands have increased and the conflict between them and organized workers tends to disappear. There are more and more successful strikers among the newcomers".[8] The author quotes several examples of such strikers. Also the Poles frequently formed the most radical groups of strikers. It is worthwhile to mention, among others, a forgotten case of riots of Polish workers in Milwaukee, Wis. on the 4th and 5th of May 1886. These riots were connected with a general tension manifested in the well-known events on the Haymarket Square in Chicago starting the First of May tradition. Polish workers were concerned with winning the workers of Milwaukee for the idea of strike. On the 5th of May five workers were killed — all of them were Poles. The conservative "The Nation" commented (13th May): "The riots in Cleveland, Chicago and Milwaukee are producing a rapid change of sentiment in regard to the partition of Poland. It has hitherto been considered by the bulk of American people as a monstrous crime on the part of the three powers which took part in it. But the events of the last few weeks are leading many to condemn the powers for not having partitioned the individual Poles as well as Poland..." and it later complained about "the Poles who are bomb throwing and roving around with red flags in the West".[9]

There are also other examples. After a failure of economic struggles in the Pennsylvania Anthracite Area in the seventies the new strikes in the period of massive immigration from Poland and other Eastern and Central European countries in the eighties were successful in the 1887/88 strike owing to radical workers from the new immigration. Slavic immigrants, first of all

---

[7] M. Kraus: *Immigration, The American Mosaic*. Princeton-New Jersey-Toronto 1966, p. 60.

[8] K. Englisch: *Die Lehren der amerikanischen Einwanderungsstatistik*. "Statistische Monatsschrift". Brünn 1911, p. 376 - 77.

[9] Quoted after F. H. Miller: *The Polanders in Wisconsin*. "Parkman Club Publications", No 10, Milwaukee 1896, p. 244.

Poles, became a driving force of the so-called "long strike" in 1902/03.[10] The famous massacre of the 10th September, 1897 in Lattimer, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania (where out of 400 marching workers who were attacked 11 Poles, 5 Slovacs and 2 Lithuanians were killed)[11] was the most violent episode in the history of American labour movement, besides the massacre in Pittsburg on the 21st June, 1887 (where 20 people were killed). Since then the Poles played an increasing role in local and other authorities of United Mine Workers of America (UMW). In the years 1912 - 18 a weekly "Górnik Polski" [Polish Miner] for Polish workers was published by UMW in Pittsburgh. Thirty-seven thousands of Polish workers, including about ten thousand native-born Poles, took part in the strike in the Pennsylvania Anthracite started on the 1st April, 1922. Information about this six months' strike spread wide across America and it also reached Poland. Three years later during a strike in Passaic, N. J. (twelve thousand Poles out of the total number of fifteen thousand workers) after the leaders of American Federation of Labor rejected a request of strike leaders for mediation in negotiations with firm owners, the confrontation with the police resulted in arresting of the commanding officer and several policemen by the state authorities. As an example of attitude characteristic for Americans of Polish origin we may mention their support for the striking Buffalo tramway workers in 1922, though only 10% of the strikers were Poles.[12] More similar examples may be quoted.[13]

Americans of Polish origin were becoming regional leaders of American labour movement. One of them at the beginning of this century was Leon Krzycki (1881 - 1966) first active in Milwaukee and later in other regions of America. He was not the only American labour movement activist of Polish background[14] but he was the only one who became a leader of this movement on the national scale. In 1933 he became chairman of the American Socialist Party but his opposition against a popular programme formulated by Franklin D. Roosevelt helped neither to strengthen the role of his Party[15]

[10] V. R. Greene, *The Slavic Community* ..., p. 79 and 102.

[11] See also E. Pinkowski: *Lattimer Massacre*. Philadelphia 1950.

[12] M. Tarkowski: Położenie ..., p. 362 - 364.

[13] Some information concerning this subject can be found in: *The Poles in America 1908 - 1972, A Chronology and Fact Book*. Compiled and edited by Frank Renkiewicz, Dobbs Ferry, NY. 1973. The author discusses, among other things, strikes in steel industry and Chicago stockyards in 1919 - 22. On the subject of miners' strikes in 1928 see also: *Echa strajku górników* [Repercussions of the miners' strike]. "Kwartalnik Naukowego Instytutu Emigracyjnego". Vol. 1. Warszawa 1928, p. 196 - 98.

[14] See also F. Gross: *The Polish Worker, A Study of a Social Stratum*. New York 1945, p. 156.

[15] In contrast to many European countries the support for leftist parties in America decreased during the 19th century; in the 1932 election the number of communist and socialist votes was one million, in 1936 - 200 thousand and in 1940 - 150 thousand votes. Cf. W. R. Brock: *The Character of American History*. New York 1965, p. 221.

nor to promote his political career. The other well-known activist and a would-be president of UMW was Joseph Yablonski murdered at the end of 1969. The Poles also contributed considerably to organization of the workers of automobile industry.[16]

At the same time immigrants from Poland either formed their own radical organizations or succeeded in gaining influence in several Polish-American organizations of general character. Already in the eighties Polish journals expressing socialist views started to be published. The Poles sporadically tried to join such organizations as Knights of Labor or parties socialist in character. In October 1900 Polish Socialist Alliance (Alliance of Polish Socialists) was formed in New York at the initiative of groups connected with Polish Socialist Party (PPS) in Europe. A split in PPS after the revolution of 1905 was reflected in forming of the Polish Section of Socialist Party of the USA (1907) including most of the former Polish Socialist Alliance. The two sections were temporarily united into Polish Alliance of the Socialist Party of the USA (it lasted up to 1913) and during the First World War they were united into Polish Socialist Alliance. Before the First World War Polish Socialist Alliance considerably infiltrated the biggest Polish-American organization — Polish National Alliance as well as Young Men's Alliance and a largely expanded Polish Falcons' Alliance of America. Polish Socialist Alliance inspired several actions. Among others it inspired through the Falcons in 1912 the formation of a Committee of National Defence which for some time joined all Polish groups in America. In the interwar period the range of influence of the Alliance considerably decreased. Besides the Alliance even before 1907 Socialist Party had Polish sections, American Communist Party had its Polish Bureau (September 1919) and such organizations as International Workers' Order also had Polish divisions. The above description suggests the picture of a disproportionately small participation of the Poles in the class struggle and labour movement. Nevertheless we should accept an opinion expressed by an author who was not involved in the labour movement. His opinion concerned Detroit but it might be applied as a general description of conditions in Polish-American community: "Although the Pole showed little initiative in the organization of labor, it cannot be said that he opposed affilia-

[16] The subject is also mentioned in the reminiscences of S. Nowak: *Udział Polaków w organizowaniu Związku Zawodowego Robotników Automobilowych w USA* [Participation of the Poles in organizing Trade Union of Automobile Workers in America]. "Problemy Polonii Zagranicznej", vol. 6 - 7, Warszawa 1972, p. 165 - 89 as well as in L. Krzycki: *Polacy w ruchu unijnym* [The Poles in Union movement] in: Polonia — Almanach i Zbiór Faktów. Detroit 1945, p. 19 - 20. The most recent review of this fragment of Polish American activity gives Krzysztof Groniowski: *Socjalistyczna emigracja polska w Stanach Zjednoczonych (1883 - 1914)* [Polish Socialist Emigration in the United States of America (1883 - 1914)]. In: "Z pola walki", Warszawa 1977, No. 1, p. 3 - 35.

tion with the union where one had already existed. In strikes the Poles usually remained loyal to the tenets or policy of the organization".[17]

At this point we would like to consider the question of an insignificant role played in American labour movement by the Polish ethnic group, even though it consisted mainly of wage earners and other proletarian elements. The question is puzzling especially that the Poles anticipated on a considerably large scale in the international workers' movement. The answer should be considered on two planes; the first — concerning general limitations of American workers' movement in the context of both particular features of development of American capitalism and the ethnic structure of American working class, and the second — concerning an overall character of development of the Polish ethnic group in the United States of America.[18]

Analysis of a role played by American labour movement in social reality of America as well as of Polish-Irish, Polish-German etc. confrontations in American factories lies beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless it is worthwhile to mention in connection with American labour movement that the unique economic progress of America was inevitably conditioned by a steadily increasing number of workers supplied mainly in the immigration process. Social polarization related to this process produced an opportunity for a class struggle more violent in character than that in Europe. This opportunity was not realized probably because of a combination of liberal attitudes predominating in all areas of American reality with a fast economic progress. This combination became the basis, on the one hand, of the unique consolidation of American middle class and, on the other hand, of formation of specific structures in social, ethnic and demographic aspects within American working classes. Processes of concentration and centralization of capital after the Civil War resulted in emerging of organized monopolistic forces before the labour movement had a chance to become consolidated, much more so that liberal doctrines sanctifying private property permitted its armed protection by state authorities in case it was threated by, for example, strikes. Thus when the American working class confronted consolidated powers of industry it was pushed to a defensive position. Liberal character of all areas of social life prevented establishing of an efficient and disciplined workers' party. The split in Socialist Labor Party of North America in 1896 resulted from, among others, a definite rejection by American Federation of Labor of any attempts to impose revolutionary discipline on American labour movement. In such situation after the events on Haymarket Square in 1886 it

[17] M. R. Napolska: *The Polish Immigrant in Detroit to 1914*. Chicago 1946, p. 40.

[18] Some remarks on the subject can be found in T. Kozak: *Unie robotnicze i zawodowe a Polacy* [Workers' and trade unions and the Poles]. "Dziennik Polski", Detroit 28th December 1911, quoted ibidem, and also W. I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki: *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Vol. 2. New York 1927, p. 1610 - 13.

became possible for united powers of capital to wage a campaign against aspirations of a non-consolidated working class while at the same time it was declared that "the enemy forces are not American (but) rag-tag and bob-tail cut-throat of Belzebub from the Rhine, the Danube, the Vistula and the Elbe...".[19] The campaign was made easier not only by American social structure with its stratum of farmers (outnumbering workers at that time) unusually devoted to their property but also by the already mentioned structure of American working class in all its aspects. In the social cross-section a rapid increase of working class aristocracy with middle class mentality affected not only the working class itself but also its organizations by introducing reformistic elements into them. Since this part of the working class was getting more and more influential in the discussed community the remaining groups of workers also absorbed, to a smaller or greater degree, the middle class mentality and ideology. This was also true about immigrant proletarians most of whom had long dreamed about a piece of their own land in Europe. In the ethnic cross-section successive overlapping waves of immigration tended to obstruct a process of class integration of this group of proletarians and they also helped to establish position of the middle class, the more so that in America living conditions of even the most deprived immigrants from the Eastern, Central and Southern Europe were superior to those in the native countries. Besides those "birds of passage" were concerned not so much with a settled life in the New World but rather with a return to the native land. It might be also mentioned that as late as in the sixties there may be observed roots of another weakness of the American labour movement, which resulted from prejudices of the National-Labor Union (established in 1866) against Blacks. American labour organizations starting from the Knights of Labor (established in 1869) actively opposed rival supply of labour power from Europe and the American Federation of Labor openly supported immigrant restrictions. As far as the sphere of demographic structures is concerned it should be realized that potentially most revolutionary and socially the most inferior section of American working class, continuously renewed by the immigration, was not able to produce their own leaders even though it contained radical activists of European origin. It was caused by the fact that acceptable leaders would have to be trusted by all ethnic groups of American workers as well as to be able to win a proper position in American working class reality dominated by reformist activists.

As far as the second plane of an overall character of development of the Polish ethnic group is concerned, main reasons of the already mentioned marginal position of the Poles in the discussed area of activities can be traced

[19] Quoted after L. Dinnerstein, D. M. Reimers: *Ethnic Americans, A History of Immigration and Assimilation*. New York 1975, p. 64.

to increasing repercussions of two processes. The first was the tendency of Polish-American community to form Polish ghettos and the second — consequences of a split of the labour movement in Poland.

As for the first matter it seems that Polish parishes in America as unusually well-integrated units, though (or maybe because) their functions differed from those in Poland, decisively prevented infiltrations of any foreign ideologies within their structures. In this way they hindered any attempts of labour or political organizations of class character to become assimilated in Polish parish communities. History of Polish-American parishes and organizations provides numerous examples of energetic actions of the clergy directed against socialist ideology (the only exception was, for some time, the clergy of Polish National Catholic Church). It also seems that the Roman Catholic and, even more so, PNCC parishes were better adjusted to the needs of their parishioners living in a particular American social and economic system than any Polish leftist organizations in America. Antagonistic attitude of Polish-American community towards non-Polish organizations had subjective as well as objective motivation. The subjective reason was an influence and domination of Polish supra-regional ethnic and religious ties in result of which joining of any anti-religious party outside Polish community meant, in practice, a complete alienation from this community. The objective reason was a poor knowledge of English language displayed by the Polish immigrants and a reluctant attitude of American labour organizations towards them. Finally, it seems that the Polish ghetto did not provide a proper background for any activists of class-conscious labour movement. It produced Polish-American priests and national activists but socialist activists could hardly hope to gain authority in this community. Józef Chałasiński, one of the best experts in sociology of Polish ethnic community in America, quotes such an opinion about a party meeting in South Chicago: "And what about their leader who was a shephard back at home but here he wants to spread communism. I would not trust a person..."[20] Leon Krzycki, who was to become the leader of American Socialist Party, decided in the year 1908 to join the party but he chose American Socialist Party rather than Polish Socialist Alliance.

Let us consider at that point the consequences of the split in the labour movement in Poland. From an ideological point of view influence of the Old Country on Polish-American community (especially in personal terms) was not revolutionary but national in character — in the spirit of Józef Piłsudski's ideology and it affected general tendencies in activities of Polish-American socialist organizations. It should also be mentioned that Polish-American socialist activists influenced by processes of formation of Polish

[20] J. Chałasiński: *Wśród robotników polskich w Ameryce* [Among Polish workers in America]. "Wiedza i Życie". Warszawa 1934, No 8/9, p. 658.

national identity[21] (especially intense in immigrant community) were under pressure to become involved not so much with problems of revolution but rather with the idea of reconstruction of the Polish State. The other consequence was that the activists did not look for ways to adjust their programmes to the reality of American capitalism.

---

[21] Cf. A. Brożek: *The National Consciousness of the Polish Ethnic Group in the United States, 1854 - 1939, Proposed Model.* "Acta Poloniae Historica", Vol. XXXVII, Warszawa 1978, p. 95 - 127.