Historians usually consider the revived Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s to have been consistently opposed to labor unions and the aspirations of working-class people. The official outlook of the national Klan organization fits this characterization, but the interaction between grassroots Klan groups and pockets of white Protestant working-class Americans was more complex. Some left-wing critics of capitalism singled out the Klan as a legitimate if flawed platform on which to build white working-class unity at a time when unions were weak and other institutions demonstrated indifference to working-class interests. In industrial communities scattered across the Midwest, South, and West, white Protestant workers joined the Klan. In Akron, Ohio, the Klan helped to sustain white working-class community cohesion among alienated rubber workers. In Birmingham, Alabama, the Klan violently repressed mixed-race unions but joined with white Protestant workers in a political movement that enacted reforms beneficial to the white working class. But Klan attention to working-class interests was circumstantial and rigidly restricted by race, religion, and ethnicity. Ku Klux definitions of whiteness excluded from fellowship many immigrant and Catholic workers. Local Klans supported striking white Protestant workers when Catholic, immigrant, or black rivals were present, but acted, sometimes violently, against strikes that destabilized white Protestant communities. Ku Klux sympathies complicated urban socialist politics in the Midwest and disrupted the effectiveness and unity of the United Mine Workers. Lingering Klan sympathies among union workers document the power of reactionary popular movements to undermine working-class identity in favor of restrictive loyalties based on race, religion, and ethnicity.

In October 1923, Morrison I. Swift, a radical socialist and champion of working-class agitation, publicly addressed the surging popularity of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan’s brash insistence on 100 percent Americanism, its formal commitment to “a closer relationship of capital and labor,” and its vow to combat “unwarranted strikes by foreign labor agitators,” seemed to place the Invisible Empire in direct conflict with the veteran activist’s devotion to radical reform and working-class power. Between 1894 and 1914, Swift had led demonstrations of unemployed men in Boston, asserting “the right of every one to have work” and demanding public jobs and pensions for working people idled by “the incapacity of the capitalists and financiers to carry on the nation’s business without disaster.”1 In contrast, the revived Klan had spent the twilight of the Progressive Era bullying perceived wartime slackers, breaking several prominent strikes, and denouncing the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and other radical unions.2
Yet in 1923 Swift did not echo the condemnations of the Klan issued by labor unions as disparate as the IWW and the American Federation of Labor. Despite Ku Kluxers’ “ruffianly and rotten methods,” Swift stressed the “very eminent causes for [the Klan’s] existing.” He explained that “‘respectable’ people had become such perfect shirks regarding the most vital problems of American society” that they had surrendered the initiative to “semi-respectable” action organizations such as the Klan. Chief among the problems requiring immediate remedy, the midwestern-born agitator stated, was the “amazing mongrel immigration” that furthered “the decay of American stock.” Swift’s radicalism harbored a nativist tinge that welcomed the Klan’s call for immigration restriction to “stop this stream of undesirables and thus prevent the glutting of the American labor market.”

Other left-leaning critics shared Swift’s identification of the 1920s Klan as an unsavory yet genuine representative of white Protestant workers. Southern progressive Virginia Durr recalled that in the Birmingham, Alabama, of her youth, the Klan became an organizational refuge for white workers in the open shop drives of the 1920s. “The Ku Klux Klan,” Durr asserted, “was actually … the white unions driven underground who formed a secret society to resist the corporate combination” of industrialists and politicians who dominated Alabama. Surveying suppressed unions in Akron, Ohio, home to the state’s largest Klan, the radical intellectual Scott Nearing in 1924 identified the KKK as an outlet for working-class expression. Matching Swift’s dismissal of feckless “well-established organizations” such as the church and fraternal groups, Nearing lamented that “the militant worker can no longer express his protest through the labor movement.” Yet, claimed Nearing, “he can express it through the Klan. Consequently in all of the important industrial centers of Ohio, but particularly in those towns and cities where the Unions were most completely wiped out, the Klan has grown with phenomenal rapidity and has shown astonishing strength.”

What led white workers and their radical supporters to identify the Ku Klux Klan as an institutional defender of working-class interests after World War I? The factors are complex but not paradoxical. The Ku Klux movement’s fluid structure allowed local Klans to ignore the national organization’s anti-labor orthodoxy and instead cultivate Protestant white community solidarity against unresponsive institutions and oppressive elites. And white Protestant American workers enjoyed historical privileges that predisposed them to view workers from different backgrounds as unequal rivals. American craft unions defended native-born whites, usually Protestants, against less-skilled laborers. Throughout the early twentieth century, skilled white workers in construction, typography, railroads, and other specialized trades denied immigrants and workers of color access to the jobs and exclusive status set aside for “American” workers. Changes in labor patterns and postwar anti-unionism alienated white workers. Low-wage semiskilled and unskilled workers, many of them immigrants or blacks, displaced native-born whites in numerous industries. Beset by shifting economic circumstances yet still expecting the advantages conferred by white Protestant status, some workers embraced the overt white Protestant nationalism of the Klan. In northern Louisiana, a 1922 report declared, “labor union leaders have been employed as klan organizers.” These blue-collar kleagles urged white unionists to join the Klan “against immigration and … the negro” in order to “make labor scarce and bring high wages.”
For alienated white Protestant workers, the Klan reaffirmed a sense of collective identity that had been muted during the Progressive Era and damaged in the open shop campaigns of the 1920s. Progressive support for workers ranged from an embrace of working-class democracy to ameliorating unjust or dangerous working conditions, but many progressives discouraged class consciousness and union identification among workers in favor of a broader notion of shared citizenship. Expressions of class solidarity were even more unwelcome in the 1920s. Klansmen, however, constructed an alternative movement celebrating white Protestant unity and cultural ascendancy. Several hooded demands, such as immigration restriction, paralleled mainstream reforms, thereby softening for some converts the extremism of Klan allegiance. The American Federation of Labor advocated immigration restriction since 1906 to protect the wages and high status of skilled workers. Concern over the “immigration problem” similarly motivated some progressive reformers to support the Dillingham Commission’s 1911 call for restriction. The quota laws of 1921 and 1924 passed without significant Klan input, but their popularity reflected the power of Ku Klux appeals to a selective American identity.

This examination of the Ku Klux Klan’s relationship to the white working class and its radical allies builds upon a reorientation of Klan scholarship. A generation of studies has downplayed the secret order’s national leadership and reinterpreted the Invisible Empire as a decentralized, flexible movement attuned to local concerns. Countering efforts by Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans and his Atlanta hierarchy to centralize control and dictate policy, local Klansmen shaped white Protestant nationalism to fit grassroots circumstances. Some klaverns, as Klan locals were designated, built fraternal white Protestant identity, reinforcing a restrictive community through a festive array of parades, picnics, sing-alongs, and entertainments. Others challenged local elites for control of school boards, demanded street repairs and improved public works, infiltrated charitable bodies, and influenced other institutions central to community identity. Rivalry with local Catholic communities or freelance prohibition enforcement defined Klan actions elsewhere.

Historians have identified instances of cooperation and conflict between pragmatic Klansmen and unions, white workers, and socialists. This, however, is the first extensive study of the 1920s Klan and white Protestant workers. Working-class Ku Kluxism appeared in the midwest, south, and western regions amid concentrations of native-born white Protestant workers. Studies of Klan membership rosters suggest that skilled workers joined the secret order in greater numbers after 1924. Most infamous examples of Klan union-busting preceded the influx of working-class Klansmen. As the Invisible Empire expanded, Klansmen crafted labor policies to suit specific conditions. In Akron, Ohio, the Klan helped sustain community identification among white Protestant Appalachian migrants during the low point of union activity in the city’s rubber industry. In contrast, the Klan in Birmingham, Alabama, attacked mixed-race unions, but forged a political alliance with white workers that reached into the late 1920s. In numerous railroad towns, Klansmen rallied behind striking unions if blacks, Catholics, or immigrants threatened the jobs or autonomy of white Protestant workers. Yet when labor disputes pitted white Protestants against one another, Klan vigilantes tore into strikers and their unions.
The Klan’s bigotry and restrictive definition of Americanism after World War I did not preclude the Invisible Empire from promoting native-born white Protestant worker cohesion either within or outside the structure of unions. Yet hooded intolerance undercut working-class consciousness as a practical identity. The Klan maintained a religious and ethnically narrow standard of whiteness that thwarted fellowship among even skilled workers. Extremist white Protestant exclusivity further fragmented a labor force already separated by skills, gender, citizenship status, and ethnicity. For socialists, the absence of class identity among Klansmen compromised the Invisible Empire as a vehicle of working-class protest. Despite the promise of hooded worker militancy, Nearing admitted that the “owning class” controlled the “official machinery” of the Klan and predicted that the organization would split apart as class struggle became concrete.\(^\text{12}\) Internal dissent and leadership scandals, not class conflict, shattered Klan unity, but as the hooded movement collapsed at mid-decade, Ku Klux influence also disrupted unions. Stubborn Klan footholds in the diverse membership of the United Mine Workers, for instance, exposed basic weaknesses in New Era unionism. The 1920s Klan helped some white Protestant workers find an attenuated approximation of community, solidarity, and even pride in a challenging era. The stunted white Protestant nationalism offered by the Invisible Empire, however, left intact the fundamental powerlessness and division that characterized working-class organization in the lean years of the 1920s.

WORKING-CLASS KLANSMEN IN TWO CITIES

Akron and Birmingham were industrial cities that experienced substantial Klan growth as unions suffered setbacks. Specific circumstances in the two cities, however, produced different results for the Invisible Empire and its working-class supporters. Akron’s Klan provided temporary but vital networks that helped strengthen community ties among beleaguered white workers between 1921 and 1927. Yet in 1936, former Klansmen in tire plants resisted the formative strikes that empowered the United Rubber Workers. Daniel Nelson credits the Akron Klan as the “agency that organized the rubber workers,” especially after employers defeated an AFL organizing campaign in early 1923. The white, rural southern migrants who labored in the city’s rubber plants clustered in south Akron. Lacking economic power and culturally marginalized in a growing, multiethnic city of 208,000, Baptist and Methodist families in south Akron focused their discontent on overcrowded and neglected public schools. Protestants charged that miserly elites on the school board and north Akron Catholics withheld funds to educate south Akron children. Beginning in 1921, the Akron Klan rose to power on pledges to improve public schools and imprint them with the values of patriotic white Protestantism, as well as to police public vice. Declaring resistance to corrupt public institutions and alien cultural practices, Klansmen endorsed Bible reading in public schools and demanded prohibition raids against private clubs and bootleggers tolerated by dishonest police and “political bosses.”\(^\text{13}\)

Although there are no reliable membership figures for the Akron Klan, observers agreed that south Akron’s white Protestant workers flocked to the Klan. Ku Kluxers claimed that “the organization is avowedly strong among factory workers.” Anti-Klan rubber worker John D. House, future head of the United Rubber Workers, admitted that “thousands of rubber workers had been conned into joining” the Invisible Empire.
House’s sister had a Klan wedding. Ku Klux enthusiasm was so widespread, when House took ill, his Catholic foreman assumed the ailing worker was sneaking out “to take part in the KKK parade.” Akron’s massive Klan, attracting by its own count some 52,000 members in Summit County, embodied south Akron’s assertiveness. The Klan imposed white Protestant working-class control over Labor Day by introducing lavish hooded parades on the workers’ holiday in place of company-sponsored events or Italian celebrations.14

High-handedness and incompetence on the Klan’s part, however, brought Akron’s Klan era to an abrupt end. The Klan majority on the school board met in secret, packed the school system with cronies, and bullied dissenters. Klansmen on the board allegedly pressured school administrators to dismiss Catholic teachers, which prompted anti-Klan board members to resign and lead a public movement against Ku Klux control of schools. Meanwhile, Summit County’s Klan-endorsed sheriff confirmed that illegal liquor seized in raids disappeared while in the possession of volunteer deputies furnished by the Klan. Defections and financial mismanagement bankrupted the Akron Klan in 1927. It effectively disbanded the next year, depriving white Protestant Akron workers of a flawed but vocal institutional ally. The disgraced leaders of the Akron Klan were business and professional men, not rank-and-file workers. Most prominent among them was Joseph B. Hanan, school board leader, one-time Exalted Cyclops of the Akron klavern, and an assistant office manager at B. F. Goodrich. Despite the volatility and impermanence of the Klan, white Protestant working-class participation in the Klan movement cemented associational bonds and sustained collective identity among rubber workers when organized labor faltered in the 1920s. Most rubber workers rejected the conservativism of former Klansmen in the 1936 sit-down strikes, but 1920s Ku Kluxism helped make their victory possible.15

The Klan appeared earlier in Birmingham and prospered longer than in Akron. Alabama’s Klan organized in 1916 shortly after William Simmons revived the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia. Formed amid the coercive patriotism of World War I and the postwar Red Scare, Alabama’s Ku Klux zealots acted forcefully against slackers, radicals, and those who challenged the inviolability of the color line. Racism and antiradicalism first steered Birmingham Klansmen into violent anti-unionism. By the early 1920s, however, the Birmingham Klan identified with white working-class resentment of elite corporate and political domination. An unlikely alliance between the white Protestant working class and Klan politicians achieved statewide power in 1926 and remained intact deep into the decade.

The racial and industrial landscape of Birmingham shaped relations between the white working class and the Klan. The steel mills and mines that powered the Magic City created an industrial labor force of unusual size for a southern city. By 1924, steel and iron firms employed over fourteen thousand workers. Five thousand miners worked the iron ore and coal pits of the Birmingham district. White building trades, railroad, and craft workers in segregated AFL unions controlled Birmingham’s labor movement. Union organizing in mining and mills stumbled over the barrier of Jim Crow. Most Birmingham district miners were black. Unions willing to organize miners across racial lines had been driven from the pits in 1921. Convicts, overwhelmingly African Americans, leased to the coal and iron companies supplied additional unfree, nonunion
mine labor. Skilled white metal trades workers monopolized the top-paying iron and steel jobs, but substantial numbers of unskilled, mostly African American, nonunion workers labored in the foundries and factories. Mechanization raised some black workers to semi-skilled status; skilled white workers considered them threats to white job security and superior racial status. Thus craft union restrictions, state power, industry-imposed job distinctions, and the unwavering color line separated black and white workers.16

The combined opposition of corporate, government, and cultural authority beat back interracial challenges in the World War I era. The United Mine Workers, America’s largest interracial union, attempted to organize miners. Already defeated in a 1908 strike, the UMW suffered a crushing blow in 1921. Governor Thomas E. Kilby, arbitrator of the 1921 strike, denied recognition to the UMW in Alabama coalfields and absolved employers of any obligation to rehire strikers. Kilby accused black miners, who constituted nearly three-quarters of the strikers, and devious labor agents of subverting order. “The southern negro is easily misled,” he declared, “especially when given a prominent and official place in an organization in which both races are members.”17

Interracial overtures in the steel industry also met stinging defeat. White metal trades unionists striking for an eight-hour day against the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company (TCI) offered self-interested support to unskilled black TCI workers in 1918. To pressure TCI, white unionists encouraged the radical International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers (known as Mine Mill) to organize African Americans. The experiment in building cooperative unions across the color line spurred furious repression that crushed the strike, muffled steelworkers’ autonomy, and reinforced Birmingham’s status as an open shop city. Municipal officials punished militancy and racial apostasy by enforcing vagrancy laws against white workers. Labor representatives expressed outrage that a legal means to control blacks was directed “solely at the men who refuse to work for low wages.” Industry had subdued labor. During the national upheaval of the 1919 steel strike, Birmingham remained relatively still.18

Klansmen were among the most vicious agents in the defeat of these strikes. Once Mine Mill organizers began to work among black steelworkers in the 1918 Birmingham strike, the Magic City Klan organized a march of 150 hooded Kluxers in opposition. Hooded vigilantes joined company enforcers to disrupt assemblies of black workers. Shadowy assailants bombed the home of Ulysses W. Hale, an African American AFL organizer who was drawing large crowds in black neighborhoods. A month later, suspected Klan nightriders “posing as members of the Vigilantes,” underscored Birmingham’s intolerance of radical biracialism by kidnapping Hale and Edward Crough, a veteran white Mine Mill organizer, at gunpoint. After beating the two men, masked attackers instructed Crough to leave town and further punished Hale with a coat of warm tar and feathers. Additional incidents of anti-labor Klan violence occurred across Alabama over the next four years. Unlike the relatively nonviolent Akron Klan, Alabama Klansmen terrorized and roughly corrected unmarried couples, adulterers, and bootleggers, culminating in a nationally publicized rash of whippings in 1927.19

In its initial, repressive incarnation, the Birmingham Klan served the conservative establishment. Many police officers and defenders of order belonged to the hooded body, as Klan ranks swelled to perhaps 15,000 to 18,000 in a city of under 200,000 residents. But the Birmingham Klan also attracted critics of the dominant power structure. These included middle-class prohibitionists from the Anti-Saloon League and,
increasingly, white Protestant workers embittered by corporate mistreatment. The fraternalism of the klavern, as well as the picnics, parades, and associational aspects of Klan membership furnished a sense of community that built fellowship and collective identity among those who enjoyed the privilege of whiteness in Birmingham without sharing political or industrial power.20

Despite its aggression and bigotry, the Birmingham Klan helped construct a viable platform of progressive white working-class citizenship in Jim Crow Alabama. Mainstream acceptance of working-class Ku Kluxism contrasted with Birmingham’s intolerant rejection of interracial labor cooperation. Alabama Klansmen and organized labor supported public school reform, mainly in the interest of white students. In step with labor positions, the Klan lobbied for a state compulsory education law, supported merit pay for teachers, and in local communities worked to pass school bond measures. When cash shortages threatened to close Birmingham public schools in 1925, Klansmen raised funds through concerts and promotions to pay teachers for five weeks. Hooded school reform, however, advanced within the framework of white Protestant supremacy. In 1923, Klansmen and the Birmingham Trades Council resisted plans for an African American high school, arguing that the money should be used to provide free textbooks to elementary school students. Klan pressure forced a popular Jewish principal out of a Birmingham high school and vigilant Knights publicized their determination to root out Catholic teachers and Roman sympathies from public education.21

The Birmingham Klan’s attacks on Popery built upon working-class participation in recent anti-Catholic city politics. A nativist, anti-Catholic organization called the True Americans mobilized Birmingham’s white Protestants sufficiently to elect a slate of city commissioners in 1917. Birmingham’s labor newspaper denounced the nativist ticket as a ruse “for the purpose of splitting the Labor vote,” but alienated white workers in freshly annexed working-class suburbs cast their ballots for the True Americans and against the established order. Labor interests in 1919 criticized the Invisible Empire’s actions in the steel strike, but quickly came to appreciate the Klan’s ability to channel working-class and middle-class dissent into effective action.22

Incongruously, the Klan became the political mouthpiece for disaffected white Protestant workers fighting Birmingham’s industrial oligarchy and its conservative allies statewide. United States Senator Oscar Underwood—wet, anti-Klan, friend to corporate Birmingham—personified the concentration of power among the Magic City’s “Big Mules.” Lycurgus Breckenridge “Breck” Musgrove, a wealthy national officer in the Anti-Saloon League and Klansman, launched a broad-gauged challenge to Underwood and the Big Mules in an unsuccessful 1920 Senate race. Working-class Klansmen supporting Musgrove joined a makeshift alliance of moralists, anti-Catholic ranters, workers, aggrieved farmers, and political opportunists. A joint committee of labor organizations endorsed Musgrove on the Allied Labor and Farmer ticket. The Alabama State Federation of Labor provided enthusiastic coverage of Musgrove’s campaign. Reflecting the odd coalition he represented, Musgrove declared that he “would rather wear the collar of Samuel Gompers … respected leader of the nation’s toilers,” than bow before the Roman collar of despotic un-American principles.23

Despite organized labor’s discomfort with Ku Klux moral vigilantism, the Klan-labor political alliance in Alabama prevailed. Some questioned Musgrove’s attention to prohibition and Catholics, but the hooded millionaire from Jasper County remained a labor
favorite. One month after the *Birmingham Labor Advocate* denounced “mob law” carried out by a Klan whipping squad, Musgrove headlined the Birmingham Trade Council’s 1921 Labor Day festivities. By 1924, the *Advocate* declared that “the Alabama Klan is composed of loyal, true, law-abiding citizens.” Another reforming Klansman, Hugo Black, replaced the retired Underwood as senator in 1926. The election that year of Montgomery Klan Exalted Cyclops Bibb Graves as governor culminated the Klan-labor alliance. Although Graves failed to condemn violent Klansmen, his administration produced a progressive record of achievement that included school reform, public health improvements, roadbuilding, and infrastructure development, all funded by taxes on utilities and corporations. Graves also abolished the convict lease system, which had long damaged Alabama unions and buttressed corporate power.24

In other communities and in industries with relatively homogeneous white, native-born, Protestant work forces, similar ties to those in Akron and Birmingham formed between the Klan and the working class. Klan-sponsored Labor Day parades were commonplace in midwestern strongholds of the Invisible Empire. In Lansing, Michigan a huge crowd of fifty thousand people celebrated workers and the Klan on Labor Day in 1924. Identification with the white, Protestant cultural values of the Klan deepened union loyalties among the rural white Michiganders who worked in Lansing’s Reo automobile plant. These “Reo Joes made a union of their own, a union of white, Protestant, tax-paying, home-owning, respectable, male worker-citizens.” One former worker claimed that Ku Kluxers helped unionize Reo and, unlike their hooded counterparts in the rubber industry, participated in the decisive United Auto Workers-Congress of Industrial Organizations sit-down strike of 1937.25 Despite the national Klan’s vocal opposition to unions and its disregard for working-class autonomy, a strain of conservative white Protestant working-class identification endured within the Klan as well as in some union locals.

**THE LIMITATIONS OF KLAN RACIAL IDENTITY**

Although white Protestant workers cultivated community bonds within the Klan network, Ku Klux identity reinforced ethnic and religious differences that blunted class consciousness in the diverse American workforce. Even Klan critic John House believed that Catholic foremen favored their coreligionists among rubber workers. The Klan’s toxic nativism and Protestant chauvinism cut even deeper gaps between workers. Klan activities sometimes contravened union aims. As Evansville’s Klan attempted to control Labor Day celebrations in the heavily kluxed and unionized Indiana community, labor representatives reminded local miners and mechanics that worker solidarity was more important than hooded fraternity. “Labor leaders, who see in the klan issue a profitless fight dividing the workers on religious grounds, are striving to keep the economic issue above water with slight success,” lamented one union periodical.26

The Klan’s claim to represent white Protestant workers was further complicated by the fluid nature of whiteness as a passport into the American mainstream in the 1920s. Both the Invisible Empire and organized labor defended the interests of white workers, but over time the Klan and unions came to define whiteness differently. In 1905 Samuel Gompers articulated a craft union vision dedicated to the protection of “Caucasians”
against the wage-lowering influx of “Negroes, Chinamen, Japs, or any others.” The latter category included Greeks, Italians, Poles, Hungarians, and other new immigrant nationalities. Employers and white native-born workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries grouped Southern and Eastern European immigrants together with more clearly stigmatized racial Others. Local white workers in western mining and railroad towns characterized Greeks, Slavs, and Southern Europeans as “blacks” or “Mexicans.” Irish dockworkers in Boston included African American and Italian immigrants in their proscription against “black” labor. Eastern and Southern European immigrant industrial workers were assigned separate—often dirtier, more dangerous, and poorly paid—tasks from those of “white” or “English-speaking” workers. White workers included Irish and Germans who had been considered either nonwhite or un-American in the nineteenth century.27

By the 1920s, new immigrant workers began to make the passage into white ethnic racial status. In meatpacking, textiles, and other industries, the once-derided Hunkies and Dagoes proved themselves to be disciplined, militant unionists. As employers broke strikes by appealing to the prejudices of established American workers and as immigrant workers filled semiskilled jobs, unions began the long metamorphosis from craft to industrial organization. As the new immigrants were tutored in American patterns of unionization, they also began to absorb the prejudices that characterized white racial identification in the United States. Feelings of superiority to African Americans, Asians, and Latinos persisted in the expanding white working class.

The Klan endorsed the oldest and most restrictive understanding of white working-class racial identification. Restating themes of Americanization sounded by Gompers and the AFL, one hooded correspondent implored his fellows to “strain every nerve to prevent our land from becoming Greater Italy, Greater Greece, Greater Bulgaria, Greater Austria, Greater Germany or Greater Anything except Greater America.” A midwestern Ku Klux newspaper assured readers that, even in Indianapolis, American workers found it “impossible … to compete” against foreign “padrone” labor that undercut “the standards of American living.” Hooded moral arbiters detected racial as well as economic threats to white Protestants in the movement of Southern European male job seekers to the United States. Vigilante Klansmen in Utah, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Alabama targeted Greek men for what the Kluxers considered to be racially inappropriate relationships with white women. Appealing to traditional standards of whiteness and job protection, the Klan repeated turn-of-the-century racial tropes in a bid for the loyalty of native-born white workers troubled by unregulated immigration.28

With these stances, the Klan walled itself off from a portion of the white working class. Resisting changing popular notions of whiteness, Klan ideologues advocated an unbending Protestant, Western European standard of white identity. In addition to maintaining the color line against the inroads of Asians, Mexicans, and African Americans, the Klan refused to concede white racial status to Eastern and Southern Europeans. The Invisible Empire’s unshakable anti-Catholicism further restricted the Klan’s embattled citadel of true white citizenship. Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans and his hooded propagandists insisted that Catholic Irish and Germans, the agents of Americanization in some unions, were not authentic Americans. The Ku Klux defense of native-born, white Protestant Americanism spoke powerfully to pockets of the white working class in Akron, Lansing, Birmingham, and Evansville, but even critics from within the Klan

---

27. The Ku Klux Klan, Labor, and the White Working Class during the 1920s

28. The Ku Klux Klan, Labor, and the White Working Class during the 1920s
found the Invisible Empire’s Americanism too restrictive for a changing nation. “The classification of the white Catholic and Jew with the negro is a stupid blunder,” argued Klan dissident Henry P. Fry. “It is splitting the white race into factions at a time when it should stand together.” As the fluid boundaries of whiteness in America broadened, the Klan’s reliance on a fixed understanding of religious and racially based citizenship limited Ku Kluxers’ ability to sustain their movement, especially in the shifting ranks of the working class.29

OCCUPATIONAL ACTION

The Klan’s relationship to labor and the left mirrored the diversity and contradictions that distinguished the hooded social movement itself. Location and circumstances determined whether Klansmen rallied behind native-born white Protestant workers or viciously attacked unions and radicals. Ku Klux behavior varied, but a consistency of purpose lay behind seemingly disparate actions. Klansmen exhibited hostility to nonwhite, immigrant, and Catholic workers and to the unions that represented them. Ku Kluxers tended to support white Protestant workers struggling against nonwhite, immigrant, or Catholic rivals, whether the white workers were unionized or not. Finally, hooded locals forcefully resisted strikes by white workers that destabilized white, Protestant-dominated communities.

Southwestern Klans shaped white working-class identity to fit distinctive local purposes. Ku Klux moral policing of white farmers and workers in Oklahoma redirected class consciousness among poor whites into conservative racial unity. Economic conflict and radical politics had led “white agrarians and labor activists … to cooperate with African Americans and Native Americans to confront the power of wealthier whites.” Violent correction of illegal drinking, unsanctioned sexuality, and rowdy comportment reinforced the Invisible Empire’s insistence that “poor whites should act respectably in order to preserve their race, not act radically in order to defend their class.” Oklahoma’s turbulent Klan war was thus not only an armed political contest but also a battle to redefine whiteness.30

By contrast, Dallas Klansmen stoked white working-class anti-elitism to their own advantage. As in Birmingham, prominent establishment figures in city government and politics, the police, mainline Protestant churches, and business initially populated the Dallas Klan. But elite reaction against hooded vigilantism and Klan outreach to the white working class recast Ku Kluxism as a protest movement against privileged and unresponsive institutions. Despite the order’s anti-union reputation, Dallas Klan No. 66 “recruited labor support” as “a working-class cultural alternative to that offered by the earlier Populist and Socialist movements.” Klan office seekers highlighted their labor sympathies, while cloaked editorialists publicized craft union complaints that the city hired Mexican immigrants “to the exclusion of white, American citizens of our community.” Klan strategists played up the assertion of the establishment Dallas Morning News that the Invisible Empire attracted “men whose impulse in politics is radical.”31

In regions with a substantial white, Protestant working class, local Klans sometimes bypassed hostile unions to engage directly with workers and their institutions. In his pioneering study of the Klan movement in Colorado, Robert A. Goldberg discovered a significant labor component in the state’s powerful Klan, despite the Colorado
Federation of Labor’s formal opposition. Goldberg identified officers from four different craft unions among Klansmen in one county. Ku Klux election materials included candidate statements detailing “plans to advance the rights of the workingman.” Politically pragmatic Klansmen in one county supported striking local miners and attempted an unlikely alliance with the IWW, usually a bitter foe, in pursuit of modest electoral gains in 1927.32

But in the northeast, where the working class was largely immigrant, ethnic, and Catholic, Klansmen moved to crush labor activism and radical unionists. A representative incident played out in Maine’s north woods in February 1924, where IWW agents organized lumbermen—many of them Catholics of French Canadian descent—in remote camps supplying the wood pulp industry. Acting at the behest of town officials and the paper companies, several dozen Down East Klansmen forced the IWW organizers onto an outbound train. According to the Daily Worker, the Ku Kluxers acted “to purge the community of radicals and catholics (sic).” Although IWW-affiliated lumber workers marched in solidarity against Klan intimidation and IWW representatives soon returned, community pressure and legal action against the three principal Wobbly organizers derailed efforts to unionize the Franco-American woodsmen. Across New England, the Klan’s hostility to immigrants and Catholics fueled hooded persecution of working-class institutions. New Jersey Klansmen characterized a fall 1924 strike in Paterson’s silk mills as the irresponsible act of “foreign-born workers, called and maintained largely at the instigation of foreign agitators who are not American citizens.” Echoing Paterson’s mayor, the Klan recommended deporting strikers.33

Klansmen, however, did not uniformly oppose strikes, especially when Ku Klux political influence and white Protestant hegemony could be advanced by a well-chosen stand on the side of labor. Temporary political alliances between the Klan and white Protestant workers had improved public schools, taxed corporations, and challenged elite control of public policy in several communities. In the same fashion, some local Klans opportunistically intervened on behalf of striking white workers. The railroad shopmen’s strike that interrupted nationwide rail traffic through the summer and autumn of 1922 exemplifies selective strike support by Klansmen. The northeastern Oregon town of La Grande was a railroad repair and maintenance center. Over one-third of the town’s Klansmen were railroad workers, concentrated in nonstriking craft unions. Nevertheless, the La Grande klavern strongly supported the strike. One of its members served on the town strike committee, while the klavern investigated four local strikebreaking Knights. White Protestant identity rather than economic solidarity principally motivated Ku Klux activism. La Grande Klansmen issued their harshest condemnation against the four hooded strikebreakers for “teaching Negroes and Japs to take places of strikers.”34

White Protestant assertiveness also stimulated Klan activity in Kansas railroad towns during the strike. Governor Henry Allen, a noted foe of the Invisible Empire and the chief exponent of the state’s stringent anti-picketing law, tried to keep railroads operational despite the attempted shutdown by striking workers. Klan recruiters emphasized Allen’s anti-labor sentiments to forge bonds with disaffected shopmen and their supporters. In Arkansas City, a community strongly sympathetic to the strikers, Klansmen solidified the alliance between white workers and the hooded order by targeting nonstriking African American railroad workers. Klansmen in full regalia prepared to march near the railroad shops “as a gentle reminder to strike breakers of possibly dire consequences if
they remained at work.” Allen directly intervened to stop the march, intensifying connections between aggrieved workers and the Klan, on one hand; and, on the other, African Americans and the repressive apparatus of the state. Elsewhere, violent intimidation of scabs accompanied the upheaval of the strike. Several incidents in the south resembled the work of Klan whipping squads. The strike’s chief historian acknowledged “the likelihood of Ku Klux Klan involvement” in some cases.35

Overlapping white and union identities may have motivated individual Klansmen to support the strikers. Calculated attempts to implant the Klan movement into receptive labor communities were also evident during the shopmen’s strike. Klansmen’s participation in the brutal repression of the strike and the lynching of a striker in the Arkansas Ozarks, however, erased impressions of Ku Klux concern for workers. Conflict along a stretch of the Missouri and North Arkansas Railway during the work stoppage was especially prolonged and bitter. The economic health of small communities in the undeveloped region depended on the railway. Sympathy for strikers quickly gave way to resentment and then bitter antagonism as disruptions in traffic damaged businesses and livelihoods. The absence of imported strikebreakers prevented unionists from rallying sympathy for local men against racial or ethnic outsiders. Both strikers and strikebreakers were local white Protestants. The deeply rooted Klans of the region sided with community sentiment against the workers. As the strike dragged into 1923, “virtually open warfare” pitted desperate strikers against a thousand-man “citizens’ committee” anchored by armed Klansmen in the town of Harrison. After strikers burned several railroad bridges, dynamited tracks, and disabled locomotives, Klansmen and their allies spilled into the countryside determined to “put an end to the outrages by driving the strikers out of the country.” As frightened unionists and their families fled, makeshift courts detained and whipped strike supporters. Vigilantes burned the furniture from the union hall in the town square. Ed Gregor, a strike supporter suspected of sabotaging trains, exchanged gunfire with the mob. The vigilantes hanged him from a railroad bridge.36

The Harrison outrages focused trade union attention on the Klan as a lethal threat to working-class Americans. Even though the Harrison Klan did not formally sanction the mob attacks and Klansmen did not wear the regalia of the Invisible Empire during the violence, the labor press placed Ku Kluxers at the center of operations. In February, the Garment Worker reported that Klansmen had been identified as “members of the ‘committee of twelve’ which directed mob activities.” The following August, the Federated Press Bulletin asserted that “the Arkansas terrorists, composed largely of members of the Ku Klux Klan,” continued to threaten, brutalize, and perhaps kill former strikers and their family members. The Arkansas example supplied sinister connotations to hooded anti-unionism elsewhere. “The ‘open shop’ group of Minneapolis and the ku klux klan were … closely interlocked,” claimed one widely circulated labor press report. Since the Minneapolis Klan faction was in the sheriff’s department, it continued, “what would happen if the ku klux klan repeated in Minneapolis the Arkansas outrages against striking workmen?” The Arkansas violence swung perceptions of the Klan’s mixed record on labor unions clearly toward assumptions of hostility and repression.37

The Harrison mob actions pushed American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers into more forthright opposition to the Klan. Gompers demanded, without result, government intervention to put down the vigilantes and protect working people.
Up to this point, the AFL had not directly condemned the Klan. African American delegates tried to denounce the Klan’s “mob violence” at the 1921 AFL convention. Other delegates, including carpenters union head William Hutcheson, blocked the resolution. The 1922 convention refused to criticize the Klan by name, resorting instead to disapproval of organizations that wore masks or disguises in public. But after the Arkansas incident, Gompers gave his support to the AFL executive council’s report that stated “no trade unionist can consistently participate in the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, … and we unhesitatingly denounce its efforts to supplant organized Government. … During the year the Ku Klux Klan has continued its campaign of terrorism on such a scale that its operations can not be overlooked.” Gompers’ animosity to the Klan carried over into his parallel denunciation of communists in the labor movement. During the debate that led to the expulsion from the AFL of communist William Dunne, one delegate asserted that Dunne was also a Klansman, “wearing a blue shirt by day and a white mask by night.”

William Dunne was no Klansman. Nor was the Invisible Empire popular within the formal structure of organized labor. Central labor federations across the country condemned the Klan and downplayed its influence among workers. While acknowledging Klan activity in Butte, Montana, for instance, the local labor newspaper stated “there is little of a permanent menace in the Klowns.” Yet the Klan’s anti-Catholicism and pitch for white Protestant unity made inroads among American-born radicals and in the diverse ranks of the United Mine Workers, provoking serious organizational division in both groups. Native-born, white, Protestant skilled workers formed the core constituency of a midwestern socialist network that thrived in the early twentieth century. Eroded by wartime persecution and postwar prosperity, socialist groups were vulnerable to Klan infiltration. Some Ku Kluxed radicals envisioned the secret order as an instrument of working-class reform. Midwestern Klansmen shunned vigilantism wherever the hooded movement contended for radical support. Instead, radical Klansmen stressed their defiance of entrenched elites. An African American committeeman of the Indiana Socialist Party reported that hooded recruiters in the Hoosier town of Montpelier insisted that the ascendant Ku Kluxers were “working for the things that the Socialist party want but cannot get.”

Elsewhere, the Klan preyed upon socialist anti-Catholicism to harvest radical converts. Ku Klux influence seeped into Milwaukee’s large German American socialist movement in 1922. Milwaukee’s socialist establishment despised the Klan, as did the national party, which at its 1924 convention formally condemned Ku Kluxism as a threat to worker unity. Victor Berger, the first socialist member of Congress and the Milwaukee organization’s leading figure, was a blunt, tireless anti-Klan polemicist. He frequently thrashed the Invisible Empire in his Milwaukee Leader column. Employing plain-spoken invective, Berger mocked the Klan’s “appeal to the mob-instinct of the common man … mainly depending on idiots, on morons, and on the criminally inclined for its existence.” Yet Klansmen occupied common ground with socialists on the topic of Catholic authoritarianism. Klan gibes directed at the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic fraternal body noted for its outspoken criticism of both socialists and Ku Kluxers, resonated with many rank-and-file Milwaukee socialists. For their part, Klansmen near Milwaukee refrained from the anti-socialist sneers common elsewhere in the Invisible Empire. A hooded
red contingent coalesced in Milwaukee around lawyer John Kleist, who as a dual socialist and Klan candidate for the state supreme court in 1922 won more votes than any previous Wisconsin socialist office seeker. Kleist and his socialist Klan movement defied Milwaukee’s orthodox socialists until the hooded lawyer was forced out of the party in 1924.40

The Klan’s undertow also disrupted the Socialist party in Dayton, Ohio, once again despite resistance by committed radicals. Careful expression of wartime dissent and a knack for pragmatic mainstream alliances allowed Dayton’s socialists to avoid repression. Socialist candidates for municipal offices in the early 1920s polled a respectable 45 percent. Yet Klan denunciations of Catholics and immigrant labor peeled working-class support away from socialism. By mid-decade the Invisible Empire became the dominant platform of dissent in Dayton. Socialist editor Joseph W. Sharts crowded his newspaper with arguments exposing the Klan’s sectarian prejudice. He extolled socialists as faithful representatives of working-class democracy. Ku Kluxers, by contrast, were eager to impose a purely Protestant regime in town and school. But the intoxicating power of the Klan’s rallies won over erstwhile socialist voters and working people. Sharts painfully acknowledged that the “thronging legs and feet protruding under the white robes” in a Klan parade were mostly “the legs and feet of working-men.” Unions also suffered from the Klan’s rapid ascent. “The Ku Klux Klan has already run like a red-hot plowshare thru every labor union,” Sharts lamented in September 1923. “It has split labor into hostile and mutually distrustful groups.” That month Sharts sold the Miami Valley Socialist offices to a Klan representative. By 1925 his newspaper ceased publication as the once lively radical presence in Dayton faded to insignificance.41

KLUXING THE COAL FIELDS

When the Socialist Party denounced the Klan at its 1924 convention, an Indiana delegate suggested that socialist organizers in his home state faced a difficult problem, since “the mining towns [there] are crowded with union men marching in Klan regalia.”42 The robust presence of the Invisible Empire among native-born white Protestant miners intensified a host of difficulties that confronted the United Mine Workers in the 1920s. One of the few racially open unions, the UMW struggled to unify a mixed labor force of native white Protestants, Catholics, recent Central and Eastern European immigrants, and African Americans. Defeats in strikes such as the Birmingham district work stoppage in 1920–1921 had driven the UMW into the northern coal fields, where the union maintained an embattled presence. Unfortunately, the UMW’s domain in the Central Competitive Field, comprising Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Western Pennsylvania, was also the section of the country experiencing the most explosive growth of the Ku Klux Klan. Steps to root out Klan influence became entangled in union politics, particularly left-wing challenges to the abrasive authority of UMW President John L. Lewis. Meanwhile, dispiriting episodes of hatred and violence between hooded UMW miners and their black, Catholic, immigrant, and prohibition-defying fellow workers further devastated the union at the low tide of its fortunes. The experience of one major union with the Klan thus highlighted the central troubles that beset organized labor in the 1920s: failed strikes and weak unions in an open shop decade, divisions among workers, disabling internal disputes, and the presence of alternative institutional structures in
which white Protestant workers could construct identities based on race and religious exclusivity rather than worker solidarity.

Miners in the southern portions of Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois joined the Invisible Empire during the brisk recruiting drives that built the midwestern Klan movement of the mid-1920s. David Curtis Stephenson, the flamboyant Grand Dragon of the Indiana realm and regional Klan organizer, started assembling the powerful Hoosier Klan in the southern Indiana coal country. Amid reports of Klan intimidation of labor organizers, Stephenson stressed the compatibility of membership in both the Klan and the UMW. Charges in September 1923 that the Invisible Empire was “instigating trouble in the coal fields,” led an indignant Stephenson to a defense of Ku Klux unionism. The “Ku Klux Klan is the greatest friend that organized labor has in America today,” he claimed. Moreover, the Grand Dragon embraced “staunch, high-grade Protestant American citizens who are members of both the United Mine Workers of America and of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.” In a speech to miners, Stephenson framed the Klan’s intolerant beliefs to fit the economic concerns of nativist white Protestant unionists. “The demand of large manufacturers for immigrant labor … is baldly a demand for cheap labor,” Stephenson explained. “It is a demand for men who will accept work at wages below that which the American standard of living demands; for men who will work longer hours than American standards of health and comfort insist should constitute a day’s work; for men who will undermine the American standard of living, who will tend to break down the labor unions, who will work for a wage so small that the employing class can temporarily reap larger profits from their labor.”

Stephenson’s blandishments offered to white Protestant unionists were transparently self-serving, but some white Protestant UMW miners proved willing to strike at the “alien” customs of fellow workers. The Ku Klux Klan’s savage war in Williamson County, Illinois, against bootleggers and the mining families that patronized them involved UMW members on both sides of the violence. Masatomo Ayabe compiled a list of likely Klan members and supporters who aided the reckless series of vigilante raids by S. Glenn Young and his gunmen between 1923 and 1926. Among those whose occupations could be confirmed, 37 percent of the involved Klansmen were UMW miners, with former miners boosting the union representation among the hooded vigilantes to 43 percent. UMW coal miners made up 31 percent of Williamson County residents who provided support to the vigilantes. The inclusion of additional UMW members, including one who sat on the union board, and former miners boosted UMW connections among the supporters of the vigilantes to 41 percent of the total. A shameful episode of violence that is usually portrayed as an example of Ku Klux persecution of working people was also, at least partially, an internecine war within a beleaguered union.

Miners opposed to the Klan complained that the secret fraternity subverted the UMW’s organizing work and perhaps even operated on behalf of the coal companies. This was especially evident in contested areas outside the Central Competitive Field, where the UMW struggled to resist open shop drives. Lonnie Jackson, the mayor of Central City, Kentucky, and president of UMW District 23, stated that the Klan was a threat to “destroy our organization, as our membership is composed of Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, negroes, Jews, and many other nationalities.” Others reported direct hooded intervention against union activities. In 1923, a Mine Mill organizer leading a tense
strike for union recognition against the American Zinc Company in Taylor Springs, Illinois, a strike supported by the UMW, received a threatening letter from the Klan instructing him to leave immediately or “be helped along” by rough methods. In West Virginia, where the UMW was attempting to establish unionized mines against stout employer resistance in 1925, striking immigrant, ethnic, and African American UMW miners told investigators that Klan ties to white Protestant miners undercut the union and aided the coal operators. “Both the Negroes and foreigners were vitriolic in their denunciation of 100 per cent Americanism,” reported Abram L. Harris. “They said it is disrupting the effectiveness of concerted action on the part of the workers and that the employers, knowing the effectiveness of this weapon, use it advantageously.”

Elsewhere in Appalachia, unionists alleged direct cooperation between coal companies and the Invisible Empire. Thomas Myerscough of the radical Progressive Miners’ Committee charged that “the coal barons” used the “medium of ‘Imperialists’ of the ‘Empire’ of the Ku Klux Klan” to threaten a radical organizer in 1923. Early in 1924, coal company clerks in Eastern Kentucky stated that “union miners … filled with hate by Klan propaganda” assisted in shutting down “no less than a dozen [union] locals.” The mine operators along the Big Sandy River, the report continued, “require their officials, and straw bosses to don the white robes, and keep the men at fever heat against foreigners, Catholics, anybody or anything that will divert their interest from unions.”

Resentment against the Klan’s incursion into unions ran particularly strong in the Pennsylvania coal fields, where substantial numbers of workers from Southern and Eastern European stock labored alongside miners of British descent. Klan provocations in 1924 produced violence in Lilly, a heavily immigrant and Catholic community. In the nearby mining town of Nanty-glo, located in UMW District Two, Klan intrusions signaled a struggle for control of work and community. Ku Klux organizing among Protestant miners threatened to create “an alternative value system” to that of the town’s ethnic majority. The Klan’s white Protestant nationalism also “challenged District 2’s efforts to develop working-class conscious ideas.” Klan activity coincided with employer moves to close local mines and shift work to nonunion locations. The presence of the area’s main Klan recruiter in the company’s supply house and the election of a reputed Klansman (and reputed former company spy) to the presidency of Nanty-glo’s UMW local led militant miners to charge that coal operators were manipulating the Klan as their union-busting instrument.

Rather than collapsing in the face of company pressure, however, the ethnic communities of Nanty-glo coalesced against the Klan and the open shop. Miners purged the pro-Klan clique from UMW Local 1386 and launched a strike. Local activists formed a multiethnic Citizen’s Committee to resist the Klan and sponsored Labor Chautauquas to promote worker unity and education. Ethnic voters elected pro-labor public officials that protected union workers from company police. Hostility to nativism and the resurgent Klan prompted similar defiance and celebrations of ethnic culture in other Pennsylvania mining towns such as Windber.

Opposition to the Klan may have unified ethnic sentiment and inflamed labor militancy in Pennsylvania, but the penetration of Klansmen into the UMW along with the aggressive open shop drive by coal companies revealed intrinsic weaknesses in the union. Despite the spirit of the Nanty-glo strikers, the coal companies broke the strike in 1926 and scattered the workers. Defeat in a 1923 strike also damaged the miners’
union in Windber. Economic setbacks reverberated in union politics. Both communities supported District Two president John Brophy’s challenge to the strategically cautious and bureaucratically authoritarian leadership of UMW President John L. Lewis. Lewis’s failure to protect Pennsylvania miners worsened an organizational power struggle that significantly weakened the union’s ability to resist infiltration by the Invisible Empire.\(^49\)

Klan factionalists steered disputes between Lewis and his reform critics to the advantage of the Invisible Empire. At the raucous 1924 convention, for instance, Lewis and local district supporters sparred over the power to name UMW organizers and field workers. Lewis wanted to retain authority to appoint officials who did local union work. The dissidents called for electing these workers, which would help break Lewis’s autocratic control and provide democratic flexibility for embattled UMW locals. Klansmen joined the reform faction and nearly defeated Lewis before the wily president employed parliamentary tactics to retain his appointive powers. Ku Klux intervention into issues of centralized versus local authority indicated a subtext of racial politics within UMW debates. African American miners backed Lewis’ appointive powers, not because they opposed union reform, but because centralized appointive power allowed UMW headquarters to organize African American miners and employ black field workers despite the racist resistance of some UMW locals. The surface battle between Lewis and local reformers provided cover for the Klan faction to reduce African American participation in the UMW.\(^50\)

The UMW commitment to interracial organizing had lagged among many white miners. The union’s struggles in eradicating rank-and-file Klansmen since 1920 confirmed the problem. After vicious resistance to biracial unionism destroyed the Alabama coal strike of 1920–1921, the lead UMWA official in the strike, Van Bittner, advocated that the miners’ union enact a constitutional ban on Klan membership. That policy was adopted in 1922, but the Klan foothold in the union continued to spread. In 1925, West Virginia investigators offered a stinging rebuke of the UMW’s ineffective anti-Klan policy:

> It is useless for leaders in the United Mine Workers to set forth that their constitution prohibits discrimination between the races in matters of employment and membership in the Klan when the most flagrant discrimination is practiced by many locals and when Negro union men are frequently persecuted, intimidated and driven from union operations by white union men, and when very frequently every native white Protestant upon the job is a Klansman.\(^51\)

Between the 1922 constitutional ban on Klan membership and 1924, the UMW struggled to come to terms with the phenomenon of unionized Klansmen. Arkansas District No. 21 of the UMW added the ban on Klan membership to its district constitution. In midwestern hotbeds of Klan unionism, however, the presence of defiant Klansmen in UMW locals undermined worker solidarity. A Catholic official from an Ohio local complained in 1923 that “some of our members joined this un-American organization and are openly boasting of the fact.” His brother added that Ku Klux involvement in the multiethnic local had put the “men in an up Stir” to the point that he “would not be surprised to see a Strike any time [over] this thing in our Mines.” Both miners implored District Six president Lee Hall to intervene in the worsening conflict before the Klan contingent, composed of “Farmers” who “have not been in our Movement long,” managed to “Break
up the Miners Organization.” Yet Hall offered little assistance. Fifty to 75 percent of Indiana District Eleven UMW workers “belong to the Klan,” he reported. “I find the same condition prevailing in Ohio, … also in Illinois and other districts.” Beleaguered Ohio UMW officers met with “high Officials of the Klu Klux Klan,” who told them “the Klan was not against Organized Labor.” Hall concluded weakly that “some Local Unions where the Klan are in the majority have refused to comply with the constitution and others, where they are in the minority are endeavoring to comply with [the] constitution.” He threw the dispute back to John L. Lewis and “the National Organization.”

Near rebellion in Klan-infested District Eleven was forcing Lewis to vacillate on the UMW proscription of Klan membership. District Eleven president John Hessler badgered Lewis to suspend the constitutional ban, claiming “that practically 75% of the membership of District No. 11, who are eligible to membership in the Klan are active members thereof.” Angry miners claimed “they have just as much right to belong to the Klan as other members of our Organization in belonging to the Knights of Columbus.” Indiana UMW lawyers suggested that the expulsion of Klan members from the union could make the UMW liable to civil damage suits, since the union had negotiated a closed shop agreement in Indiana that would prevent dismissed miners from practicing their trade in the state. Lewis advised Indiana UMW officials to ignore the organization’s constitution and “prevent if possible any cases … asking for expulsion” of hooded miners from the union. In 1924, backed by numerous resolutions from District Eleven locals, Lewis asked the national convention to backtrack on the Klan membership ban. Van Bittner, the leading advocate of the Klan exclusion clause in 1922, now took on the “delicate” task of removing his handiwork from the UMW constitution in the interest of compromise and legal caution. The proposal sparked bitter and contradictory charges among the delegates—that the Klan had or had not worked “in the dark” to “destroy labor” in Maryland; that “the pioneers” of the miners’ union in Ohio and Indiana were Klansmen and deserved not expulsion but “some kind of compromise”; that UMW Klansmen “scabbed” in Kentucky—before the impassioned arguments of African American, Southern European, and radical anti-Lewis delegates helped to defeat the committee recommendation and preserve the UMW’s official ban on Klan membership.

The tumult at the 1924 convention did not resolve the question of Ku Kluxed union miners. After the convention, UMW officials in Pennsylvania, already hostile to the Invisible Empire, moved to expel a few dozen Klansmen from the union. Oklahoma unionists used binoculars to identify mine workers at a Klan meeting, hoping to initiate expulsion proceedings against them. But in the Midwest, frustrated UMW officers unsuccessfully sought guidance to resolve “embarrassing” examples of continued Klan activity in union ranks. In Indiana, officials overlooked the presence of Klansmen in the mines and the union halls. Before another showdown became necessary, the Ku Klux Klan collapsed as a mass movement under the accumulated weight of leadership scandals, political setbacks, and internal dissent that reached crisis proportions in 1925. As the Klan movement subsided, its importance in UMW politics also slackened. The miners’ union itself suffered calamitous reverses in the late 1920s that left the UMW hanging on in an open shop industry until labor revived in the 1930s. By then, a much-diminished Klan bitterly resisted the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the interracial labor initiatives of the industrial union era, and the radical and communist organizers who
were the most fervent advocates of renewed labor militancy. Even so, after World War II, Klansmen again drifted into the Alabama UMW.\textsuperscript{54}

The 1920s Klan movement welcomed the allegiance of white working-class Protestants, even though organized labor vigorously criticized the Invisible Empire. Mainline Protestant churches and fraternal organizations likewise condemned the secrecy and intolerance of the Klan, even as rank-and-file Baptists, Methodists, and Masons crowded into klaverns. During the Klan’s brief career as a mass social movement, many among the four million or so hooded converts nationwide bent and accommodated their beliefs to fit the caste-conscious essentialism of Ku Klux identity. Klansmen insisted that Ku Klux Protestantism was more authentic and powerful than the creed of any particular denomination. So, too, perhaps did working-class Klansmen find in white Protestant nationalism a meaningful expression of their self-perception as American workers. Working-class Klansmen saw themselves as more than the associates of foreign and nonwhite laborers. They were the heirs and guardians of democracy, who had earned by race, religion, and residency “a prior right to control America.”\textsuperscript{55}

The Klan’s grassroots orientation enabled local knots of Klansmen to exploit working-class issues in the 1920s. Labor’s hard times after World War I introduced opportunities for redirecting disaffected workers into hooded fellowship. Local Klans tailored native-born white Protestant hegemony to fit specific episodes of industrial unrest, in some cases demonizing workers as threats to community stability and, in other situations, backing white Protestant workers against callous elites or un-American strikebreakers. Neither a rigorous anti-labor position nor a populist vein of radicalism dominated the Invisible Empire’s encounter with the white working class.\textsuperscript{56}

Despite evidence that Ku Kluxism seriously weakened organized labor, thousands of white Protestant workers nevertheless claimed to be both Klansmen and loyal unionists. That contradictory position captured the unsettled state of 1920s working-class identity. In the aftermath of progressivism neither class cohesion nor the progressive goal of public-spirited harmony unified American workers. Divided by race, ethnicity, and religion; separated by skill levels; and ranging from casual day laborers to disciplined unionists, working-class Americans banded together in a variety of discrete allegiances outside a shared working-class consciousness or a progressive sense of joint citizenship.\textsuperscript{57} During the mid-1920s, the Ku Klux movement provided a powerful and disruptive example of one such circumscribed identity.

The Klan’s appropriation of white working-class identity fits other reactionary populist episodes. White working-class Americans periodically embrace political ideologies at odds with their economic interests. Anger toward elites and unresponsive institutions, an aggressive proprietary patriotism, and the visceral sense of a white “prior right” to status take organized form in moments of social stress. Fueled by economic resentment and class injustice, these movements nevertheless target identifiable scapegoats: women, ethnic minorities, immigrants, and others designated as hostile to American principles. As long as divisive forces manipulate this restrictive sense of American identity, the spirit of 1920s Ku Kluxism endures.
NOTES


3 New York Herald, Oct. 3, 1923, clipping in American Civil Liberties Union Records, subgroup 1, The Roger Baldwin Years, Reel 31, Volume 228 [hereafter ACLU].


5 Virginia Durr interview, Hardy T. Frye Oral History Collection, Special Collections and Archives, Auburn University, 14, 18 (quotation).


7 W. D. Robinson report, May 3, 1922, W. D. Robinson Papers, Series 1, Folder 2, Southern History Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Robinson also stated that “75 per cent of the yellow pine saw mill owners” also worked through the Klan “to keep out bootleggers and I.W.W. agitators.”

8 For opposing positions on the impact of class on progressive reform, contrast Sheldon Stromquist, Reinventing “the People”: The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); and Robert D. Johnston, The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism in Progressive Era Portland, Oregon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Stromquist contends that progressives, fearing the disruptive potential of working-class consciousness, “banished the language of class from the vocabulary of reform” (4), thus hampering modern liberalism. Johnston, on the other hand, asserts that class consciousness on the part of the middle class was a vital element of progressive activism. One need not accept Stromquist’s claims of a unified progressive movement or agree that progressives rejected class considerations to recognize the preference many progressives expressed for a harmonious civic ideal rather than class consciousness as a primary working-class identification.


11 Goldberg, Hooded Empire, 46, Moore, Citizen Klansmen, 66, 117.

12 Nearing, “Who Is Joining the Klan.”


Thomas Pegram


27For this and the following, see David R. Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 72–94, quotation 87.


32Goldberg, Hooded Empire, 80, 133–34, 146–47 (quotation 80).


The Ku Klux Klan, Labor, and the White Working Class during the 1920s


41This and the following paragraph are drawn from Alan J. Singer, Ideological Conflict in the United Mine Workers of America, 1919–1928 (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1982), 217 (quotation).

42Socialists Assail the Klan by Name,” New York Times, July 9, 1924, 6.

43Grand Dragon Sends Reply,” Fiery Cross, Sept. 7, 1923, 1, 7 (quotation, 1); “Grand Dragon Speaks before Coal Miners,” FC, Sept. 21, 1923, 1, 3, 7 (quotation, 7). Hooded Indiana UMW miners had refused to work with anti-Klan miners. See Union Official (probably Lee Hall) to H. J. McAbier, Sept. 15, 1923, United Mine Workers of America, District #6 Collection, Box 2, Folder 10, Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries.


51Harris, “Strike of 1925 in Northern West Virginia,” 41.

52“Bar Kluxers from Arkansas Mine Union,” Milwaukee Leader, Nov. 25, 1923, ACLU, Reel 31, Volume 228; Leonard McAbier to Lee Hall, Aug. 8, 1923; H. J. McAbier to Lee Hall, Sept. 3, 1923; H. J. McAbier to
Lee Hall, Sept. 10, 1923 (date uncertain); Lee Hall (unsigned) to H. J. McAbier, Sept. 15, 1923 (all in United Mine Workers of America, District #6 Collection, Box 2, Folder 10). Three UMW Klansmen were tried before the executive board of Local 2528 and all denied membership in the Klan, despite testimony that fellow unionists had seen the three wearing Klan regalia at an open-air Ku Klux meeting in Redfield, Ohio. The uncooperative miners, following Klan policy, instead claimed to be attending a “church” or “100% meeting” (UMWA District #6 Collection, Box 2, Folder 10).


57Nancy MacLean, Behind the Mask of Chivalry, 71–73, 182.