

JOHN L. LEWIS, "SPEECH AT THE FIFTY-FIFTH ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR" (16 OCTOBER 1935)

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**Abstract:** John L. Lewis' address at the 1935 American Federation of Labor (AFL) convention functioned as an important rationale for the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO), which quickly became the nation's largest organization representing unskilled workers. This essay examines the ways in which Lewis argued against the AFL's model of craft-based unionism. Although Lewis failed to persuade the AFL, he succeeded in positioning himself as the leader who would lead the nation's unorganized laborers.

**Keywords:** John L. Lewis, American Federation of Labor (AFL), Committee for Industrial Organization, Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), labor movement, labor unions, craft unionism, industrial unionism, labor leaders.

John L. Lewis was one of the most powerful labor leaders in American history. As president of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW), and as the founder and first president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), Lewis not only revived the American labor movement in the twentieth century, but also played a major role in gaining representation for the masses of unorganized industrial workers. Biographer Saul Alinsky argues that Lewis was "more responsible for industrial unionism than any man in the history of American labor."<sup>1</sup> He further contends that Lewis was "the most powerful and dramatic product of the history of American labor."<sup>2</sup> Biographer Robert Zieger reinforces Lewis' importance when arguing that he "dominated public attention as no labor leader before or since has done."<sup>3</sup> And historian Ronald Filippelli agrees that Lewis simply "dominated the labor scene" in America.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis's significance extended beyond his position as a labor leader. Although Lewis was a "Washington outsider," *Reader's Digest* once named him one of the "Ten Most Powerful People in Washington."<sup>5</sup> As biographers Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine argue: "The story of John L. Lewis . . . can be likened to a prism that refracts and magnifies the history of the American nation and its workers in the twentieth century."<sup>6</sup> Zieger adds: "Lewis'[s] career was so long and so tempestuous that it inevitably touched upon virtually every significant theme of twentieth-century public life."<sup>7</sup>

Lewis's single greatest accomplishment was the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations—one of the more significant events in twentieth-century labor

history.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the CIO, contends Zieger, "stands at the center of the history of the twentieth-century. Its emergence was the key episode in the country's coming to terms with the 'labor problem' that had commanded public attention since at least the 1870s."<sup>9</sup> Immediately after its break with the America Federation of Labor (AFL), writes Filippelli, "workers in the mass-production industries found the initials CIO a rallying cry with almost magical significance."<sup>10</sup> In the defining decade of the 1930s, it was the CIO "that symbolized labor upheaval."<sup>11</sup> As the first organization to unionize mass industrial workers, the CIO created a powerful working-class force with which both corporate and political leaders had to reckon. Lewis personally symbolized the CIO, particularly during its formative and most powerful years. "Indeed," remarks Zieger, "in a real sense the CIO, at birth, was Lewis."<sup>12</sup> Dubofsky and Van Tine agree, arguing that "to the public and the millions of workers, Lewis was the CIO, and the CIO was Lewis."<sup>13</sup>

More than any other single address, a speech Lewis delivered at the 1935 AFL convention can be credited as the rationale for the formation of the CIO. I argue that this particular address was designed to begin the new industrial union movement, a movement that sought to unionize all of the nation's workers whether skilled or unskilled. In the short term, Lewis's address at the 1935 AFL convention failed to win the organization's support for industrial unions. Yet, as a declaration of Lewis's independence from the AFL, the 1935 convention address can be seen as his most complete justification for approaching labor union organization and recruitment in a drastically different manner than had been dominant to this point in U.S. history.

Although this proposed change to unionize unskilled laborers lost by a nearly two-to-one margin of votes, many historians consider the 1935 AFL convention one of the most significant events in labor history. Dubofsky and Van Tine, for example, remark that the convention was "like no other" in the AFL's history,<sup>14</sup> and Walter Galenson argues that the convention marked a "new epoch in American labor history."<sup>15</sup>

Although most historians acknowledge the significance of the 1935 convention itself, they have either declared Lewis's address at the convention a failure because industrial unionism was voted down at the convention or ignored it altogether. Galenson, for example, does not mention the speech at all.<sup>16</sup> In his history of the CIO, Zieger briefly mentions the address writing that "as the convention wound down . . . it was clear that Lewis's rhetoric had been fruitless."<sup>17</sup> In his biography of Lewis, Zieger concludes that Lewis's "biting words changed few votes."<sup>18</sup> Dubofsky and Van Tine likewise write little about the speech beyond noting that "defeat loomed for Lewis."<sup>19</sup> Because Lewis failed to persuade the AFL to change its position on industrial unionism, labor historians suggest that his speech failed. Such assessments, I argue, do not properly account for Lewis's larger purposes with the speech.

After providing a brief biography of Lewis, I outline the historical context and events leading up to Lewis's 1935 convention address. In this section, I show how tensions between supporters and opponents of industrial unionism escalated throughout the convention, and why it is reasonable to conclude that Lewis had already abandoned any hope of persuading the old guard to create industrial unions. Second, I show how Lewis's convention address succeeded in launching a new industrial union movement by proclaiming industrial unionism inevitable, discrediting the AFL's old

guard, forging a new collective identity for industrial workers, and establishing himself as that new movement's leader. In challenging and confronting the old guard of the AFL, Lewis exhibited an aggressive working-class style that eschewed negotiation and compromise. In the process, Lewis's speech polarized his listeners and forced workers to choose sides in the impending split between craft unionism and a new movement of industrial workers.

*John L. Lewis: From Son of a Coal Miner to Powerful Labor Leader*

John Llewelyn Lewis's parents were immigrants from Wales. Lewis's father, Thomas Lewis, eventually settled in Lucas, Iowa to work in the coal mines. John L. was born in 1880. Throughout most of his childhood he lived in company-owned homes, which were little more than shacks.<sup>20</sup> Little is known about Lewis' childhood from the age of three to seventeen.<sup>21</sup> What has been pieced together, however, is that Lewis and his family frequently moved from city to city in Iowa, likely seeking employment.

Sometime in 1901 Lewis left Iowa for the West, only to return to Lucas five years later. What he did during that time is uncertain, but Lewis claimed to have worked in a variety of mines (gold, lead, silver, and copper). Many legendary, but likely false, stories about Lewis's life come from this time period. One story recounts Lewis helping rescuers pull the charred bodies of 234 coal miners from a mine in Wyoming.<sup>22</sup> This story was often used to demonstrate Lewis's sympathy for the dangers coal miners faced. Another story, often told to illustrate his fierceness and brute strength, describes Lewis battling a "man-killing" mule nicknamed "Spanish Pete." Lewis is credited with stunning him with a punch to the head before jamming a piece of lumber into the animal's brain.<sup>23</sup> Although both of these stories have been discredited by historians, they contribute to the aura of mystery surrounding Lewis's five years away from Lucas and added to his legendary stature.

When Lewis returned to Iowa, he attempted to become involved in politics and business. In 1907 he ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Lucas. The same year, he opened a grain and feed business that quickly failed. Having been unsuccessful in both arenas, Lewis decided to leave Lucas for Panama, Illinois.<sup>24</sup> In Panama, Lewis would begin his career as a labor leader. Soon after his move to Illinois, he was elected president of Panama's local union of United Mine Workers of America (UMW). Samuel Gompers, then president of the AFL, appointed Lewis as an AFL organizer in 1911. Over the next six years, Lewis traveled extensively organizing miners in New Mexico, Ohio, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania.<sup>25</sup>

In 1916, Lewis was elected as a UMW delegate to the AFL convention, the first move in what would become his four-decade long career with the union. Less than a year later, Lewis was appointed as the UMW's statistician. Following this appointment, the UMW president, John P. White, was appointed as a permanent member of the wartime Federal Fuel Board. White resigned as the UMW president, leaving UMW vice-president Frank Hayes as the successor to his office. White and Hayes decided Lewis was worthy of a larger leadership role and appointed him acting vice-president of the UMW. Lewis's appointment was unanimously approved by the UMW's executive board.<sup>26</sup>

Hayes's time as UMW president was short-lived; he suffered from several illnesses and was an alcoholic. Beginning in March 1919, Lewis unofficially ran the UMW. On January 1, 1920 Hayes resigned and Lewis officially took charge of the UMW. In December 1920, Lewis was elected president of the UMW, the nation's largest and, arguably, one of its most powerful labor unions.<sup>27</sup> He would hold this position for the next forty years.

Although Lewis had been a powerful labor leader since 1920, the peak of his national prominence began in 1935 with the founding of the Committee for Industrial Organization (later the Congress of Industrial Organizations). The beginning of the CIO can be traced most directly to a speech that Lewis delivered as vice president at the 1935 American Federation of Labor (AFL) convention.

Few labor leaders in the history of the United States commanded public attention like Lewis, and his oratorical prowess was the chief reason. According to Dubofsky and Van Tine "workers responded enthusiastically to Lewis" because of his dynamic delivery; through his delivery he "commanded the rapt attention of hundreds of convention delegates."<sup>28</sup> Dubofsky and Van Tine contend that Lewis "charmed and cajoled his audiences, entertained and taught them, agitated and pacified them. So fine was his voice modulation, so smoothly could Lewis change moods, that listeners became hypnotized by him and cheered platitudes, inappropriate classical allusions, and outright solecisms."<sup>29</sup>

Lewis's vocal qualities, delivery, and even his physical appearance added to his image as a powerful labor leader who commanded attention, respect, and at times, even inspired fear. Zieger has noted that "his booming voice" made Lewis stand out "from the dry-as-dust functionaries" who normally attended labor union meetings. Zieger further recalled that Lewis was the "master of the high-sounding phrase" and "in full voice" could turn "a dreary convention into exciting theater."<sup>30</sup> Richard Rothman described Lewis's voice as "sonorous, orotund, and very deep."<sup>31</sup> Richard Jensen writes that Lewis's "thundering voice was supplemented by a ferocious physical appearance."<sup>32</sup> Lewis's physical appearance was often the subject of biographical flourish. Louis Adamic described Lewis as a "six-footer, very broad, almost abnormally deep-chested" with a head that was "the most impressive affair I have ever seen on top of a man's neck." Yet no description of Lewis would be complete without mention of his signature eyebrows: "The wide, medium-high forehead is crossed by two deep, uneven lines immediately above the tremendous dark eyebrows."<sup>33</sup> Yet Lewis's deep voice, broad chest, and imposing eyebrows alone do not account for his success as an orator.

### *Contested Methods of Labor Organization: Craft versus Industrial Unionism*

Throughout American history, two distinct ideas have dominated the organization of labor. One has attempted to use the labor movement to transform society into "some form of cooperative commonwealth."<sup>34</sup> The other—a far more limited view of organized labor's role focused primarily on the "bread-and-butter" issues of hours, wages, and working conditions. As Filippelli has observed, it "would be wrong" to see these two ideas as mutually exclusive, as some labor organizations have

attempted to accomplish both purposes.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, these two approaches historically have caused division and tension within the American labor movement.

These differing philosophies were manifested in two of America's largest labor organizations: the Knights of Labor (KOL) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Founded in 1869 by Uriah Stephens, the KOL was all-inclusive in its membership and was the first large-scale attempt at industrial unionism. By contrast, the AFL, founded by English-born Samuel Gompers in 1886, was more exclusive, organizing skilled tradesmen and craftsmen like carpenters, shoemakers, and cigarmakers.

Gompers founded the AFL to compete against the Knights of Labor. He believed the KOL was too diffuse because it allowed all unskilled laborers, minorities, and women to become union members. The focus of the AFL was on "pure and simple" unionism, emphasizing higher wages and better working conditions. Allowing unskilled workers, women, and minorities into unions would diminish the unions' main point of leverage to demand higher wages. Skills represented scarcity, which meant that skilled workers could demand higher wages. In an era with no laws against discrimination, allowing women and minorities into a union could also have hindered the fight for higher wages. In short, the AFL had a much narrower vision, scope, and purpose than the Knights of Labor.<sup>36</sup>

Due to organizational and leadership troubles, the Knights of Labor enjoyed only a brief time as a successful union of unions. As the KOL declined at the turn of the century, the AFL became the largest and most powerful conglomeration of unions. Because of the AFL's dominance and reputation as the voice of American labor, only skilled tradesmen and craftsmen continued to have a voice in the labor movement. Carpenters, shoemakers, blacksmiths, and masons, for example, all belonged to their own separate unions. In an era when locally-owned shops employed small numbers of skilled laborers, this model of labor organization was sufficient to protect the interests of most workers. When technological advances and the concentration of capital spawned large industries, however, workers no longer needed special skills to earn a wage. By the 1930s, industries needed more unskilled labor and fewer workers qualified for membership in the existing trade and craft unions.

One exception to the dominance of the skilled labor unions within the AFL was Lewis's United Mine Workers of America (UMW). As president of the UMW, Lewis had seen the benefits of organizing all workers within a given industry. So it came as no surprise when, as a vice-president of the AFL, he tried to convince other AFL leaders to put more effort into organizing all workers, regardless of skill, trade, or craft allegiances. If unskilled laborers were organized, Lewis believed that the power of the labor movement could be significantly strengthened. In his early efforts, Lewis achieved partial success in convincing the AFL to unionize unskilled workers. In 1934, the AFL passed a compromise resolution allowing charters for particular industries (specifically, the iron, steel, automotive, aluminum, and cement industries). This allowed organizing at least some industrial labor unions as part of the AFL. Thus, after the 1934 convention, Lewis had some reason to believe that he might be able to persuade the AFL to embrace industrial unionism on a larger scale.<sup>37</sup>

AFL leaders, however, proved stubborn in their resolve to protect the existing structure and hierarchy of the AFL. More than one full year after the 1934 AFL convention resolution, little had been done to organize industrial workers. After many failed attempts at establishing industrial union charters, Lewis realized that a majority of the AFL leadership remained opposed to industrial unions. By October 1935, when the AFL's next convention would take place, it became clearer that the AFL leadership had no intention of unionizing unskilled, industrial laborers.<sup>38</sup>

Members of the press anticipated that Lewis might be forced to split from the AFL if he wished to organize industrial workers. As early as May 4, 1935, Louis Stark of the *New York Times* predicted that the AFL would split as a result of the disagreement over organizational strategies.<sup>39</sup> An editorial writer for *The Nation* agreed, predicting that industrial unions would need to secede from the AFL to be successful. Leadership of that new union, the writer continued, would "naturally" fall to John L. Lewis.<sup>40</sup> By most accounts, a civil war in labor's ranks was imminent. The issue would come to a head at the 1935 AFL convention, held in Atlantic City.

Even before the convention began there was something different about the mood surrounding the event —something that suggested rebellion was brewing. For example, labor journalist Len DeCaux wrote that one could "feel the challenge. On the boardwalk, in lobbies, in lower-priced restaurants, you could hear them laugh and kid—making jokes about the old guard. A treasonous mood."<sup>41</sup>

Lewis began his rebellion by strategically setting up camp in opposition to the old guard. The convention headquarters, the Chelsea Hotel, "personified the character" of the old guard. The Chelsea "reeked of late nineteenth-century Victorian respectability," with its "rococo design and garish elegance."<sup>42</sup> Lewis, however, "consciously and calculatingly" chose to set himself apart from the "ambience" of the Chelsea by establishing the UMW headquarters at the more "modest" President Hotel.<sup>43</sup> Even Lewis's choice of lodging conveyed that he would not fall in line with the old guard. Lewis's decision to segregate the UMW from the rest of the AFL had the desired effect. Perceived by some within the AFL establishment as an act of defiance, Lewis's move demonstrated to the younger, more militant labor leaders that he had the courage and the power to stand up to the old guard. DeCaux observed that Lewis's supporters left the President Hotel "glowing" with confidence in their new leader.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the sense that conflict was inevitable, the first week of the convention proved routine and uneventful. The eighth day of the convention brought the report of the AFL's Committee on Resolutions, to which twenty-one proposals regarding industrial unionism had been referred. The morning session on the eighth day still brought no debate on the resolutions regarding industrial unionism, which increased the tension at the convention. The executive council and the committee chairmen had delayed discussion of industrial unionism as long as they could, almost assuring that the tension would explode into open conflict. Finally, the Committee on Resolutions reported its decision during the afternoon session. It recommended "non-concurrence" with the resolutions proposing industrial unionism.<sup>45</sup> Industrial unions would not be promoted, at least not under the auspices of the AFL. The recommendation of the committee was not surprising, but neither was it unanimous. As Lewis expected, the vote against

industrial unionism passed in the Committee on Resolutions by a margin of eight to seven.<sup>46</sup>

After being silent for nearly seven full days, Lewis finally rose to speak. His speech was a half-hour extemporaneous address. Although the speech was not scripted, Lewis had delivered many of his arguments in favor of industrial unionism before. Zieger has described the anticipation with which Lewis's address was received:

As he began his oration, delegates, journalists, and onlookers perked up their ears. The imposing Lewis had earned an unmatched reputation for convention oratory. In prose salted with biblical, Shakespearean, and classical allusions, Lewis gained a ready audience among the scores of newspapermen covering the proceedings. Here indeed was quotable copy.<sup>47</sup>

In the end, the delegates, journalists, and others present for Lewis's historic address would not be disappointed. Serving as the industrial union movement's manifesto against the AFL's antiquated trade unionism, Lewis's speech signaled the beginning of a new epoch in labor history.

#### *The Working-Class Style in Lewis' 1935 AFL Convention Address*

In *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, James Darsey observes that "from the time of Aristotle forward, the tradition of public discourse in the West has been one of civility, diplomacy, compromise, and negotiation."<sup>48</sup> Within this Hellenic tradition, the orator is expected to conform to the communicative norms of a cooperative society. Rhetoric that fails to comply with these characteristics—for example, rhetoric that openly rejects compromise or that is decidedly confrontational—has been, according to Darsey, "taken as a signal of the disintegration of society itself."<sup>49</sup>

Yet, as Darsey notes, there is another rhetorical tradition that is as much a part of our "cultural inheritance" as the Hellenic tradition. That other tradition, which has been prominent though less acknowledged in the history of rhetoric, is Hebraic in origin. To characterize these contrasting traditions of rhetoric, Darsey borrows two phrases from the work of Matthew Arnold. "Sweetness and light" characterizes the Hellenic tradition, which has been the dominant ideal in American rhetorical studies. This tradition stresses civility, compromise, and logic or reason-giving as the guiding principles of rhetorical practice. The Hebraic tradition, on the other hand, invokes "fire and strength."<sup>50</sup> This tradition views compromise as weakness and celebrates the strong, confrontational advocate. According to Darsey, many "radical" rhetors, including some labor leaders, fit into this tradition.

Darsey offers socialist Eugene V. Debs as one example of a well-known labor leader in this radical tradition. Describing his rhetoric as "scrappy and democratic," "rough-and-tumble," "impertinent," "damnatory," and filled with "sarcasm" and "unveiled contempt,"<sup>51</sup> Darsey shows how Debs's style differed from the "old rhetoric" of civility and compromise. According to Debs himself, his rhetoric was as "harsh as

truth." Confrontation and attack, not ingratiation and persuasion, defined Debs's rhetorical approach. Not surprisingly, this style of rhetoric polarized listeners. Critics denounced Debs for his rhetorical style, yet it had an "astonishing resonance with his working-class" audience.<sup>52</sup> Most importantly, Debs's rhetoric forced working-class issues onto the main stage of American politics and brought about change in the situation of workers in America, "however reluctantly" or "incrementally" the establishment responded.<sup>53</sup>

Although more moderate in his social vision, Lewis employed many of the same rhetorical strategies as Debs, and he too polarized audiences. Like Debs, Lewis alienated and offended his critics, but he also attracted fierce loyalty from many rank-and-file workers. Yet, Lewis's rhetoric also differed in substance from Debs's. Lewis remained a champion of democratic capitalism, appealed to patriotism, and emboldened rather than insulted his working-class followers. Lewis's distinctive working-class style was clearly evident in one of his earliest and most significant speeches in support of industrial unionism: his 1935 AFL convention address.

On the surface, Lewis's 1935 convention address was an attempt to convince the AFL leaders and other delegates to the convention that organizing unskilled workers alongside skilled craftsmen was the only way to match the ever-increasing political and economic power of corporations. Lewis began the address by recounting the current economic conditions and the strength of industries that were adversely affecting labor and the working class. He then proposed industrial unions as a necessary remedy to labor's dwindling strength. In its most basic argumentative form, then, Lewis's convention address was a classic "problem-solution" speech. Without more closely examining the rhetorical style of the address, one might conclude that the address was simply a failed attempt to convince the AFL that industrial unions were needed.

Yet the case can be made that Lewis never aspired to persuade the leaders of the AFL to organize industrial workers. Most evidence suggests that Lewis already had abandoned hope of persuading the old guard, but nevertheless he delivered one last speech on the subject to drive the point home that he had indeed tried to work with the AFL before breaking free. Moreover, the text of the speech itself supports this contention. About half-way through the address, Lewis remarked that he was "convinced that the Executive Council" was not "going to issue any charters for industrial unions in any industry" (29).<sup>54</sup> In addition, Lewis's speech developed four strategies that made the case for a separate labor movement. First, he established industrial unionism as the only viable option for organized labor if it wished to speak for the majority of American workers. Second, because the AFL's leadership was unable to see this inevitable truth, Lewis disparaged and discredited these leaders. Third, his speech forged a new collective identity for industrial workers that would define their separate movement. Finally, the address worked to craft Lewis's own persona as the leader of this new coalition of workers. Taken collectively, these four strategies comprised Lewis's working-class style and supported the argument that he spoke not to persuade the AFL delegates, but to launch what would become a separate confederation of industrial unions: the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Self-Evidence and the Inevitability of Industrial Unions



Darsey has shown that presenting a situation as "self-evident" is a common technique in radical rhetoric. Radical leaders refer to self-evident truths to prevent and deflect criticism and to avoid argumentative burdens, such as the need to present evidence. When a rhetor makes claims of "self-evident" truths, "persuasion" is no longer the goal of the rhetoric. Instead, the rhetor hopes to make the audience simply "see" the situation as it is.<sup>55</sup> Thus, no arguments or reasons need be offered; anyone willing and able ought to recognize the simple truth.

If radical leaders often rely on the "self-evidence" of the problem, they often present their favored solution as "inevitable." Presenting future actions as inevitable obviates the need for argument and evidence. However, there is also a risk associated with claiming a particular course as inevitable. If the event is guaranteed to occur, then presumably no action need be taken to bring it about. Future events are therefore rarely portrayed as inevitable without some sort of qualification; for example, "x will occur, but only if y happens first." With some minor qualifications, then, leaders inspire followers with promises of an inevitably successful outcome.

The logic of the present as self-evident and the future as inevitable went hand-in-hand in Lewis's discourse. Dubofsky and Van Tine argue that Lewis often "worked to polarize issues and differentiate policies so that the alternative became simplistically self-evident."<sup>56</sup> In the 1935 convention address, Lewis portrayed craft unionism as doomed to fail and—at the same time and for the same economic reasons—presented industrial unions as inevitable. As a result, he avoided the fatalism of identifying a problem without offering any solution. Although Lewis did not explicitly articulate a belief in historical inevitability, his words at the 1935 AFL convention nevertheless suggest that inexorable economic changes had made industrial unionism the only possible strategy for organizing against ever-increasing corporate power. Further, by framing the current situation as self-evident and the formation of industrial unions as inevitable, Lewis's speech revealed himself as a visionary—the one labor leader who understood what the future would bring and who could guide industrial workers through the changes about to take place.

In presenting craft unionism as self-evidently a failure, Lewis claimed only to state the obvious: that "every attempt" to organize workers on the craft union model in recent history had broken "upon the same rock that it breaks upon today—the rock of utter futility" (2). For twenty-five years, Lewis declared, the AFL had experienced only "constant, unbroken failure," which should be "convincing" to anyone who actually had a "desire to increase the prestige of our great labor movement" (3). To highlight the self-evidence of that futility, Lewis stated that it was an "absolute fact" that America's great modern industries could not be organized successfully under the AFL's model and that the AFL could not protect workers against "the power of the adversaries of labor in this country under the policy which has been followed for the last quarter of a century" (11).

The "absolute fact" of craft unionism's failure was rooted in trends that were likewise obvious. Lewis pointed out that there had "been a change in industry" such that "great combinations of capital have assembled great industrial plants" (12). As a result, he noted, corporations had "assembled to themselves tremendous power and

influence" (12). He concluded that current economic conditions threatened the security of workers: "We are all disturbed by reason of the changes and the hazards of our economic situation and as regards our own political security" (14). Lewis portrayed economic conditions as fixed, not as something that could be altered. In this sense, he further demonstrated the self-evident nature of the problem.

Because existing conditions could not be altered, and because craft unionism had proven largely ineffective, Lewis stated that industrial unions were the only answer. Specifically, Lewis's strategy involved speaking as if it were obvious that industrial unions would be successful in increasing the power of organized labor. "Surely I don't need to portray to the convention of the American Federation of Labor," Lewis remarked, "the advantages that will come to labor and to America through the organization of the unorganized" (40). To Lewis, a unified labor movement necessarily meant greater strength and influence. "How much more security would we have in this country for the future," he argued, "if we had a virile labor movement that represented, not merely a cross-section of skilled workers, but that represented the men who work with their hands in our great industries, regardless of their trade and calling" (44). In Lewis's rhetoric, industrial unionism was depicted not only as the route to unprecedented strength for the labor movement in America, but also as an historical inevitability.

By refusing to accept the inevitability of industrial unionism, according to Lewis, the AFL's leadership had revealed that it was out of touch with the times and lacking in courage. Oblivious to the self-evident failure of their policies and resistant to inevitable changes, they had let down the working-class—a class that Lewis intended to reorganize under the banner of industrial unionism.

#### Discrediting the Old Guard

As Darsey argued, a working-class style of rhetoric does not seek to ingratiate. Instead, it is "impertinent," "direct," "damnatory," and "scrappy."<sup>57</sup> Lewis's rhetoric at the 1935 convention was openly confrontational and exhibited many of the qualities Darsey has observed in Debs's rhetoric. Lewis's convention rhetoric suggested that he thought he had more to gain by insulting and discrediting the old guard than by trying to win them over to industrial unionism. In his convention speech, Lewis used accusations, sarcasm, and insults to demonize the old guard, to force his audience to choose sides in the impending contest, and to enact stylistically the break between craft and industrial unionists.

Lewis accused the AFL's leaders of something worse than opposing the inevitable; he accused them of betraying their promise to the industrial worker that they would organize the mass industries. A year earlier, according to Lewis, the old guard had "seduced" him into believing the AFL would issue industrial union charters (28). When he realized that the AFL leadership had no intention of following through on that promise, he was "enraged" and "ready to tear [his] seducers limb from limb." Lewis quickly added that he was only speaking "figuratively" (28). Literal or not, however, Lewis's accusations and threats clearly displayed his anger at what he characterized as the old guard's betrayal.

Lewis also portrayed the old guard as weak. He remarked that if the AFL were to attempt to organize the iron and steel industries into existing craft unions, they would be "mow[ed] down like the Italian machine guns will mow down the Ethiopians in the war now going on in that country" (38). To emphasize this weakness further, Lewis continued: "They [the iron and steel industries] will mow you down and laugh while they are doing it and ridicule your lack of ordinary business sagacity" (38). Any attempt to organize the iron and steel industries into craft unions, Lewis predicted, would fail because of the "feebleness of [the AFL's] methods" (38). Lewis thus portrayed the old guard not only as weak and feeble, but also as a laughing stock.

Lewis sarcastically recalled the AFL's pledge to unionize twenty-five million workers after its 1934 convention. No such membership gains were realized, and Lewis took the opportunity to ridicule the old guard for this failure: "Where are those twenty-five million that in a moment of exuberance we were going to organize?" He went on to suggest that maybe the AFL president's "arithmetic was wrong and he meant twenty-five thousand, because the total results are nearer the twenty-five thousand than the twenty-five million" (4). If the leaders of the AFL stuck with their current policy, Lewis continued, they "might as well sit down . . . in easy chairs and twiddle their thumbs and take a nap as to conclude that any results will come" (35). Lewis's image of the union leaders sitting in chairs, twiddling their thumbs and taking a nap, created a portrait of the AFL leadership as feeble old men who made big promises but did little to deliver.

Lewis's rhetorical style was characterized by accusations of betrayal, ridicule of the old guard's feebleness, and sarcasm. Only a large, burly character with a reputation for toughness could have pulled off such a critique of the leadership of the nation's biggest federation of labor unions. Had the timid William Green, then-president of the AFL, adopted such a style of speaking, he might have been laughed off the stage. No one laughed when Lewis threatened to tear people limb from limb, however, nor when he talked of how labor's enemies would "mow down" the old guard if they tried to organize the iron and steel industries.

Throughout the address, Lewis referred to examples of rubber and ironworkers who had attempted to organize. Each time they did, he noted, the AFL divided the workers into crafts, thus creating division rather than unity. As a result, every attempt to organize these workers proved futile. These workers had experienced first-hand the failures of craft unionism, and they were now more than ready to pursue a new course of action. Building upon these shared experiences and common disappointments, Lewis forged a new collective identity for the industrial workers of America under what would become the banner of the CIO.

#### Forging a Collective Identity

For a new social movement to succeed, its leaders must not only define and discredit the opposition, but also construct a collective identity for the movement's followers. In his 1935 speech to the AFL, Lewis began that process by laying the foundation for a new class-consciousness among industrial workers, a consciousness that he hoped might someday unify the labor movement regardless of skill or trade.

In his rhetoric, Lewis attempted to unify all workers, but he did so within the context of existing political and economic structures. First, he portrayed the industrial

worker as the victim of neglect. As opposed to Debs's rhetoric that, according to Darsey, "taunted the workers with their impotence,"<sup>58</sup> Lewis's rhetoric absolved the workers of blame or guilt for their own problems. Second, Lewis portrayed the workers as potentially powerful by celebrating their strength and courage. Finally, Lewis forged a patriotic working-class identity that embraced the capitalist system.

Lewis and Debs employed contrasting strategies in assigning blame for the problems of the working class. According to Darsey, Debs "always emphasized that the sufferings of the working class were a product of its own moral failings."<sup>59</sup> Lewis, on the other hand, placed the blame squarely on the leadership of the AFL. Lewis suggested that industrial workers were victims of corporations and the unfulfilled promises of their labor leaders. He pointed to strikers in Alabama who had been locked out of the coal mines by the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company. The coal miners, Lewis said, were "hungry" and were "suffering" (36). Likewise, Lewis defended his followers against their enemies at the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, which he alleged, was "trying to starve my people to death" (37). While the companies were primarily to blame, Lewis argued, workers also were suffering because "the American Federation of Labor, for some reason or other has failed . . . to organize the iron and steel workers and establish collective bargaining in that industry" (36).

Lewis blamed corporations and labor leaders for their plight, but assured the workers that they possessed the strength and courage to change the situation themselves. He paid homage to the tens of thousands of industrial workers who had made "eternal human sacrifices day after day and year after year" in efforts to improve their situation (26). When industrial workers attempted to organize, the companies had tried to "destroy and punish and harass" them (32). Despite such treatment, industrial workers had "put themselves on the firing line" to make improvements in their conditions (42). According to Lewis, the problem was not that workers lacked power or courage; they simply lacked the leadership necessary to organize into an effective movement.

Finally, Lewis portrayed industrial unionism as a patriotic cause. To Lewis, organizing industrial workers was essential to protecting America's democratic form of government "against the isms and the philosophies of foreign lands that now seem to be rampant in high and low places throughout the country" (45). Not only was industrial unionism good for organized labor, but it was also essential to ensure the survival of democracy in America. Lewis's defense of industrial unions invoked two collective identities: that of the working class and that of patriotic Americans. Thus, Lewis promoted a class-consciousness that upheld the principles of capitalism and the American democratic system.

In sum, Lewis's rhetoric at the 1935 AFL convention initiated the crafting of a collective identity for a new industrial labor movement. He removed guilt and blame from the industrial worker, portrayed them as strong and courageous—at least potentially—and depicted them as patriotic Americans. For Lewis, the improvement of the workers' situation rested on their ability to organize behind a strong leader who could give voice to their concerns.

*Voice of the Movement: Lewis as Rhetorical Leader*

In his 1935 AFL convention address, Lewis began establishing himself as the undisputed leader of the new industrial union movement. He displayed an understanding of working-class problems and desires, particularly their inability to unite because of the craft union model that worked against them. He also portrayed himself as a knowledgeable, experienced, and commanding labor leader who possessed the power and influence to move forward with the formation of industrial unionism. Finally, with his words, delivery, and even his physical appearance, Lewis showed his defiance in the face of the AFL's majority leadership.

Lewis demonstrated his understanding of the desires of unskilled laborers throughout the convention address. According to Lewis, industrial workers wished to be organized. He claimed that he had received many letters from workers stating that they wanted the "kind of organization [industrial]" that the United Mine Workers have (25). As the recipient of these letters, Lewis also suggested that workers were calling upon him to represent their concerns. Industrial workers, Lewis remarked, also had attempted to communicate their desires for organization to the AFL in the form of "messages and communications and resolutions" to the convention delegates. Workers had even written articles to the "press" that encouraged "attention" to the subject of industrial unions (13). All these requests had been ignored by the AFL. By advocating industrial unionism in the convention address, however, Lewis proved that he was not one of those AFL leaders who ignored the workers's needs.

According to Lewis, the "great voice" of workers was not being heard because they were only as "articulate as their own circumstances" permitted (13). Unskilled labor needed a voice, a visionary, a leader of their own: Lewis himself. Lewis deftly positioned himself as a "man among working men," a veteran leader speaking not just to, but for all workers based on his own special insight into their plight, its causes, and its inevitable solution: industrial unionism.

Lewis identified with workers by discussing his own experiences as a labor leader in industrial settings. He too had been involved in labor strikes and had felt the same frustrations as the workers. In recalling his experience in Akron, Ohio more than two decades earlier, Lewis said:

I was in their rubber strike at Akron years and years and years ago— . . . when this question was up, the same question of organization and the same question of collective bargaining that we have had out there during the past two years . . . .And after the lapse of all these years we find that the American Federation of Labor is still tinkering with this job in the great rubber stronghold of Akron in the same inefficient manner as was the case some twenty or more years ago, with no more result and no more hope (24).

In addition to his experience in Akron, Lewis spoke about an ongoing lock out in Alabama. The Tennessee Coal and Iron Company refused to pay workers the wage

increases that had earlier been negotiated and agreed upon through the Appalachian Joint Wage Conference. Lewis blamed the officers of the United States Steel Corporation and the owners of Tennessee Coal and Iron Company for locking the workers out in Alabama. Lewis remarked that he knew U.S. Steel was to blame for the lockout because he had met with the officers, and they "frankly admit[ed]" that they "opposed making collective bargaining contracts in the coal mining industry" (34). U.S. Steel, Lewis further explained, was resisting the power of the coal mining industry because it did not "want that power to follow them and annoy them in the iron and steel industry" (34). Thus, Lewis demonstrated his first-hand knowledge of corporate motives; at the same time he flexed his own muscle as leader of the coal miners, which, according to Lewis, U.S. Steel feared.

Lewis portrayed himself as a defiant voice of the new labor movement and as a labor leader who possessed the power to help unskilled as well as skilled workers. Lewis questioned and challenged the reigning leaders at the convention: "Is it right, after all, that because some of us are capable of forging great and powerful organizations of skilled craftsmen that we should lock up in our own domain and say, 'I am merely working for those who pay me'?" (49). Moreover, Lewis accused the old guard of pandering to special interests, which was clearly a confrontational allegation. He claimed that the proponents of craft unionism would not support industrial unions because they were "representing great organizations that have rendered splendid service to their membership formed, on craft lines, who fear such a policy would jeopardize the interests of their members and jeopardize the interests of their own positions" (13). With these statements, Lewis juxtaposed his intentions of using his power for the benefit of the unskilled laborer with the selfish interests of the AFL's old guard. Because Lewis likely knew the majority of the AFL leaders would vote against industrial unionism, these challenges and accusations not only exhibited a defiant position, but also implicitly demonstrated his own desire and ability to serve as the leader of an industrial union movement.

Scholars have treated Lewis's 1935 convention address as a failure. Yet as a declaration of independence from the old guard of the AFL, Lewis's speech at the convention served a number of purposes. Arguing that the failure of the AFL's organizing methods was self-evident, he established industrial unions as the only viable option for organized labor. He also discredited the old guard as feeble and out of touch with the workers' needs. Third, he began to craft a new identity for workers as victims of both corporations and their own inept leaders. Finally, by referring to his empathy with worker concerns in the persona of a powerful speaker, Lewis established himself as the frontrunner for leading the industrial labor movement.

### *Lewis's Legacy in the Aftermath of the Convention Address*

Despite the significance of Lewis's speech, the 1935 American Federation of Labor convention is most remembered for a single, dramatic event: a fistfight between Lewis and William Hutcheson, president of the carpenters' union and opponent of industrial unionism. Although Lewis's opponents had already defeated industrial

unionism, they sought to silence any further discussion on the issue by using points of order and other parliamentary maneuvers to prevent advocates of industrial unionism from speaking. On one occasion, Bill Hutcheson cut off a supporter of industrial unionism from the rubber workers' union with a point of order. Lewis challenged Hutcheson, stating that "this thing of raising points of order all the time . . . is rather small potatoes." The two labor leaders exchanged angry words and Hutcheson allegedly called Lewis a "bastard." According to the now-legendary story, Lewis leapt to his feet "quick as a cat" and punched Hutcheson, sending him "sprawling against a table."<sup>60</sup> Defeated and bloodied, Hutcheson left the convention.

As most historians have suggested, Lewis's punch was probably not a spur-of-the-moment reaction. Dubofsky and Van Tine have claimed that it was "a moment Lewis had waited for"; it was "an event he would have manufactured, if necessary." They further argued that it was "cool calculation, not passion; purposeful tactics, not anger" that explained Lewis's physical violence.<sup>61</sup> It was, moreover, "intended to symbolize publicly [Lewis's] irrevocable rupture with labor's old guard."<sup>62</sup> Saul Alinsky wrote, "There is evidence that more than suggests that Lewis's physical attack on Hutcheson was premeditated and deliberate."<sup>63</sup> First, according to Alinsky, Lewis never acted without a carefully thought-out plan. Second, Lewis knew that Hutcheson symbolized to "millions of frustrated workers" the craft-unionism policies that prevented their organization on a larger scale.<sup>64</sup> In punching Hutcheson, Alinsky has suggested, "[Lewis] would be doing what thousands of workers wanted to do," and by extension he attacked the trade unionism that "workers so bitterly hated."<sup>65</sup> Whatever Lewis's motivations, the punch became more than a mere physical act of bullying. It both shaped more favorable media coverage for Lewis and the efforts of industrial unionists and reinforced the message of his convention address—that what was needed in America, in Lewis's words, was a new, more "aggressive, fighting movement" (45).

Lewis's punch had a noticeable impact on media coverage of the 1935 AFL convention. On October 17, two days before the punch, Louis Stark of the *New York Times* reported that the "advocates of industrial unionism were overwhelmingly defeated."<sup>66</sup> After the punch, however, the newspaper coverage not only increased, but also suggested that Lewis and the industrial unionists had now "won" the debate. On October 20, for example, the *New York Times* reported that the issue of craft versus industrial unionism had "caused a fist fight" and that this time the "advocate of industrial unionism won." The "winner," the article read, was John L. Lewis.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, *The Nation* reported that while "industrial unionism was defeated by a safe margin," it was clear that "the fight between horse-and-buggy unionism and industrial unionism" was "now not only in the open but practically settled."<sup>68</sup> *The Nation* concluded with a startling prediction: "Within the next year or two industrial unionism seems slated to become the official structure of American labor."<sup>69</sup> Although technically defeated, Lewis's actions at the convention gave the impression that he (and industrial unionism) had "won" the debate.

Perhaps more important than the impact of the punch on media coverage was the impression it left on the rank-and-file. Lewis's punch reinforced for many workers his claim that he would fight for industrial unionism, even physically if necessary. Upon

hearing news of the incident, for example, even one of Hutcheson's own constituents, a carpenter from Kansas City, contacted Lewis: "Congratulations, sock him again."<sup>70</sup> Another worker, John R. Schaefer, did not appear to endorse the violence but congratulated Lewis nonetheless, writing that he "was thrilled to read an account of your bout with this reactionary Huthcinson [sic] and the courageous battle waged in favor of Industrial Unionism, even though you were compelled to smack him."<sup>71</sup> Thus, Lewis's physical action reinforced his public persona as a powerful labor leader who was literally willing to fight for the working class and particularly for the industrial worker. "The punch" strengthened Lewis's image as a man who not only spoke sternly, but also backed it up. In effect, the punch was the exclamation point for his convention address.

Nonetheless, for two years after the 1935 convention the AFL repeatedly demanded that the CIO stop its efforts to unionize mass-industry workers. Lewis, however, used the AFL's admonishments as opportunities to publicize the aims of his committee. In late November of 1935, William Green sent a letter to Lewis and the other members of the CIO warning them to discontinue their pursuit of what he labeled "dual-unionism." Green further warned that "bitterness and strife" would follow from Lewis's actions. At that point, however, Lewis and the CIO had not yet committed any violation of AFL policy.<sup>72</sup> Lewis nevertheless took the opportunity to respond in a way that would gain publicity. He made sure the letter he wrote to Green was published in area newspapers. Lewis's letter was short and simple: "Effective this date (November 23), I resign as vice president of the American Federation of Labor."<sup>73</sup>

Lewis's resignation "electrified the nation" and "stimulated interest in the CIO."<sup>74</sup> Several weeks later, Lewis noted that although his actions might have seemed arrogant, they were a "methodical attempt to dramatize" the efforts of the CIO.<sup>75</sup> According to the executive board of the CIO, it did create a "healthy response back in the field."<sup>76</sup> Lewis seemed keenly aware of how the newspapers would report the labor feud, and he used that publicity to his advantage.

After Lewis resigned his position in the AFL, he made another calculated move to achieve publicity. On December 7, 1935, he released a letter to the press offering Green the position of CIO chairman. The move was a typical gamble by Lewis. Lewis knew that Green was sympathetic to industrial unionism. In order to become the leader of industrial unionism, however, Green would have to forfeit his position as AFL president. Predictably, Green rejected the offer, opening the door for Lewis to remark that had Green accepted the offer, it "would have revolutionized the American labor movement."<sup>77</sup> Green's response meant that Lewis would need to revolutionize the labor movement without the AFL's assistance. In the meantime, however, Lewis's offer to give up his position as CIO chairman actually strengthened his leadership of the CIO because it gave the impression, whether accurate or not, that the cause of industrial unionism was greater than Lewis's ambition for power.

Even in the face of Lewis's doggedness, Green did not give up in his efforts to keep the labor union movement united under one federation. As president of the AFL, which was technically still the parent organization of the UMW, Green spoke at the 1936 United Mine Workers of America convention. In a one-and-a-half hour speech, he pleaded with the UMW delegates to remain loyal to the AFL. In his response, Lewis



asked the delegates to rise if they were convinced by Green's speech. Only two out of the approximately 1,800 present stood. Lewis then asked if anyone believed the CIO should disband. Only one delegate stood.<sup>78</sup> Labor journalist Heywood Broun later wrote that in a time when it was typical for labor leaders to speak for several hours—the longer the better—Lewis "knocked out William Green in precisely three minutes."<sup>79</sup> Lewis's opponents had failed to convince Lewis or his miners to halt the formation of industrial unions in other mass industries.

Within one year, the CIO claimed to have four million members and everywhere there seemed to be militant organizing drives, mass picketing, sit-down strikes, and company union takeovers.<sup>80</sup> In 1937, the CIO outnumbered its long-established rival, the AFL, with five million members.<sup>81</sup> Lewis indeed had begun a new "era" of the labor movement in the United States. Although the CIO rejoined the AFL two decades later, the existence of the independent CIO for those two decades significantly altered the face of labor unions in the United States forever: all workers, regardless of skill or trade, now had the ability to join a labor union.

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## NOTES

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