

A lively discussion raised more questions than could be answered. Parallels were drawn between prisoners and seamen as cases where workers of many backgrounds were brought into enforced contact. Many from both audience and panel noted that the least-skilled workers—first the Irish, later the Italians—were not viewed as “white men”; the conditions under which such workers became “white” and the effect of this transformation on their relations with native-born African-Americans need further study. Conflicting explanations for the very different reactions of German and Irish immigrants to slavery and emancipation were argued. Whether or not missionary activity by Catholic or African-American churches should be considered or compared to working-class internationalism was also discussed.

## North American Labor History Conference: Ethnicity and Class

*William G. Falkowski*

Erie Community College, Buffalo

“Ethnicity and Class in Canada and the United States” was the topic of a 1990 North American Labor History Conference panel chaired by Larry Kulisek (University of Windsor). A paper by David Bright (University of Calgary), entitled “‘We are All Kin’: Class, Ethnicity and Labor in Calgary, 1919,” challenged what Bright termed the “romanticized myth” of widespread radicalism among Canadian workers during the World War I period. Bright proceeded to pick away at what “orthodox” scholars have offered as contextual evidence of workers’ growing class consciousness. In response to claims that a boom period of Canadian economic prosperity ended with the advent of war, Bright showed that real wages of workers in Calgary remained generally stable. Although other scholars have held that conscription led to intensified class consciousness, Bright argued that the large number of Calgary workers who enlisted in the armed forces indicates otherwise. As further evidence of workers’ less-than-radical inclinations, Bright pointed to the meager extent of unionization in Calgary, union locals’ lack of enthusiastic support for Canada’s One Big Union movement, and their reluctance to stage sympathy strikes for Winnipeg workers.

Bright explained that working-class radicalism in Calgary, in marked contrast to the situation in Winnipeg, was attenuated by cordial working class–middle class relations that revolved around a mutual belief in the efficacy of the existing order. This, Bright suggested, was the result of the homogeneity of Calgary’s ethnic population, which was 75 to 80 percent British, compared to the more heterogeneous population of Winnipeg, which included greater numbers of workers from Eastern Europe. In conclusion, Bright argued that “kinship not conflict” characterized social relations in Calgary.

A paper by William Falkowski, “Scabs on Strike: Polish Immigrant Workers and the 1893 Lumbershovers’ Strike in the Tonawandas, New York,” showed that workers who are scabs one day can become roaring militants the next, pointing to the oftentimes ephemeral nature of working-class consciousness. Polish immigrant workers, recruited from Buffalo’s East Side to break the strike of local workers in the nearby dock town of the Tonawandas, staged their own strike in response to a changeover from hourly to weight-rate wages and the suspension of their free beer break. Striking local workers and the Poles then joined in a one-day celebration of their newfound solidarity, supported by local merchants’ donations of food, drink, and cigars. When the Poles returned the next day to demand their wages for the previous week of work, they threatened to burn down the docks unless they were promptly paid. A riot ensued and martial law was declared, with the state militia being called in to restore order.

Although striking local workers responded to the Poles’ decision to join the strike with a show of friendship, they did not welcome the Poles into the ranks of their union. Confronted by armed force, lacking organization, faced with the reluctance of the Polish immigrant community’s middle class to offer more than token support, and given the willingness of other workers to scab, the Poles’ strike soon dissipated. So, too, did the strike of the local dockworkers, who were compelled to accept terms that entailed the disbanding of their union. Falkowski concluded that it was ultimately the responsibility of unions to mobilize immigrant support if strikes were to prove successful. All too rarely, even when presented with a golden opportunity as in the case of the scabs’ strike in the Tonawandas, did unions prove capable of the task.

In the discussion that followed, commentator Howard Kimeldorf (University of Michigan) spoke to the dangers of taking an overly behavioralist stance in assessing worker protest or the lack thereof. Several members of the audience took Bright to task in this respect for not considering the context of workers’ actions (or inactions). For example, Calgary workers may well have joined the armed forces not because they lacked working-class consciousness but, rather, to gain an increase in wages or simply to get out of Calgary.

## French-American Radicals and Labor Activists, 1848–1914: A Projected Biographical Dictionary

*Michel Cordillot and Hubert Perrier*

Université Paris–Nord

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