

# LABOR ROUTES



“**S**ince 13 years old,” Isaac Litwak later recalled, “I’ve dreamed of a free world.” For Litwak, one of 15 million Europeans who emigrated to the United States between 1890 and 1914, his native Russia was a world of oppression. A Ukrainian Jew born in 1892, his entire childhood was shadowed by the anti-Semitic laws of the Czarist regime—laws which prohibited Jews from owning land, barred them from government employment, and forced them to live in specified areas of western and southern Russia. Frequent massacres of unarmed Jews by civilian and military rioters were routinely condoned and promoted by the Czar’s government.

Isaac’s boyhood dreams of a free world found their inspiration in the mass strikes and armed uprisings which nearly toppled the Czar in 1905. Before his twenty-first birthday, his dreams, socialist activities, and anti-Czarist organizing made him a political prisoner in Siberia. After his release from prison, he fled Russia to the United States, arriving in Detroit in 1913. Like thousands of other immigrants, Litwak found his first job in the city’s booming auto industry, hiring on at the Ford Highland Park foundry.

Among his co-workers were many newly arrived Poles, Lithuanians, Hungarians, and Italians who had fled rural poverty, religious persecution, or

political oppression. Oppression, many found, was not easily left behind. In 1913, when Finnish and other foreign-born workers struck the Calumet, Michigan, copper mines over unsafe equipment, the official response was blunt and violent: the state government sent in the National Guard, the Sheriff deputized 1,700 men, and the company police killed two strikers. After their union was destroyed, many of the defeated miners set out for Detroit to join the city’s already flourishing Finnish community.

Like immigrants from dozens of other European countries, they were drawn to the city by reports of plentiful work and high wages in the expanding auto in-

dustry. Relatives who had already established themselves in Detroit sent word to their families in Europe, and the glowing, sometimes exaggerated reports circulated from household to household. The city's employers also broadcast the message that Detroit was a place where jobs could be had for the asking. As early as August, 1907, Detroit's Board of Commerce asked immigration officials on New York's Ellis Island to steer foreign workers to the city. The Employers' Association of Detroit placed advertisements in nearly 200 newspapers across the country, encouraging both skilled workers and immigrant laborers to come to the Motor City.

Immigrant workers joined displaced farmers and unemployed harvest hands from the Midwest and South in search of work in the expanding industrial cities. Some of these rural migrants sought only seasonal work to supplement their farm income, but others hoped to find a permanent alternative to agricultural stagnation or rural isolation. Southern farm laborers were especially mobile after 1892, when the Boll Weevil first infested the cotton crop. By 1915, the dreaded insect had spread throughout

the South, devastating entire regions and prompting many cotton farmers to switch to cattle grazing, soybeans and other less labor-intensive crops. Many of the displaced sharecroppers and harvest hands moved north.

For black migrants, the South had become especially inhospitable. Racist sentiment had been on the rise since the late 1880s, and over the next quarter century, blacks were stripped of their voting rights, segregated into inferior schools, and systematically terrorized by vigilante and mob violence. In 1915, the militantly racist Ku Klux Klan organization was revived in Georgia, promising a renewal of the lynch-law violence that claimed 100 black lives a year in the 1890s.

Black-owned newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* urged southern blacks to move north, where job opportunities were undeniably greater, even if race relations were hardly ideal. "To die from the bite of frost," the paper advised its southern readers, "is far more glorious than at the hands of a mob." When the outbreak of World War I closed off the supply of immigrant laborers, northern industries also sent labor agents into the South to bring out

black workers. Detroit's black population suddenly mushroomed in response to all these trends, growing from less than 6,000 in 1910 to 41,000 by 1920. By the spring of 1920, upwards of 1,000 black migrants were arriving by train every week.

As workers from around the world streamed into the city, Detroit took on the characteristics of a gold-rush town, spreading outward and annexing neighboring land and towns at breakneck speed. From a city of 23 square miles at the turn of the century, Detroit expanded to 139 square miles by 1927. The flood of incoming workers swelled the city's population from less than 300,000 to over 1½ million in these same years, swamping old neighborhoods with newcomers who crowded into every available living space. Open fields and dirt roads on the edge of town gave way to hastily built row and tract houses. In some years, the Detroit Department of Buildings issued 21 permits for new buildings *every day*. "Families unable to

*Below: Detroit's Ukrainian Workers' Theatrical Chorus, 1926.*

*Inset: Arbeiter (Workers') Hall on the near East Side, 1915. This German hall, with outdoor beer garden visible along the side, hosted everything from union meetings, to political campaigns, to dances. The Marx running for reelection as Mayor was Oscar Marx, a German businessman and Progressive Republican.*

*Opposite: Russian immigrants after arrival in Detroit's train station, 1917.*



rent,” the *Detroit Free Press* reported in the summer of 1913, “have purchased sites and lived on them in tents or shacks while their homes were being rushed to completion.”

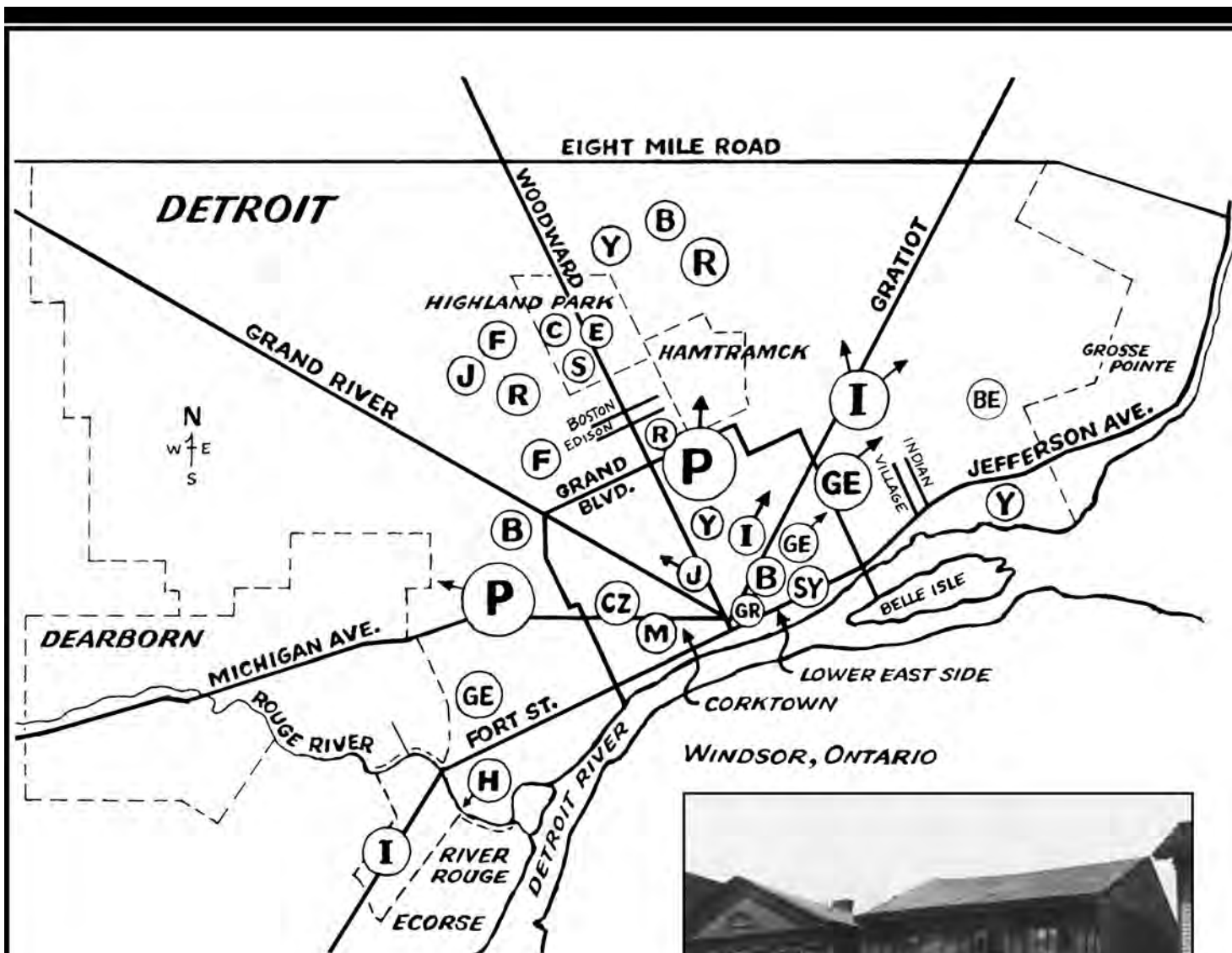
Like prospecting towns of the old West, Detroit was full of single men. Some never intended to stay: they planned to work several years, save money, and return to Europe or the South. Others hoped to bring wives and families to Detroit once they established themselves, while others regularly commuted back to their rural (usually Southern) homes between jobs.

By 1920, Detroit had 87,000 more men than women. Living in lodging houses and small hotels near the factories or on the city’s lower East Side, these bone-weary workingmen relied on

the city’s numerous saloons for escape from the lonely grind of factory labor. Until 1916, when Michigan prohibited the sale of alcohol, Detroit boasted 1,600 licensed bars within its city limits, compared to just 310 established churches. Saloons were the poor man’s social club and welfare agency, providing free lunches with a 5¢ glass of beer, postal services for transients, public toilets, newspapers, billiard tables, and companionship. Meeting rooms were open to political gatherings, trade unions, and weddings, and many saloons also took in boarders; many also doubled as brothels. Until the enactment of statewide prohibition, saloonkeepers sat on the city’s election board, served as aldermen, and generally dominated Detroit’s politics.

As immigrants continued to pour into the city, old ethnic and racial neighborhoods began to expand and shift. New immigrant “colonies” appeared, with many of these ethnic neighborhoods springing up around particular factories. The first Yugoslavs brought to Detroit by the American Car and Foundry Company settled on Russell and Ferry streets next to the plant. Hungarians working in track gangs for the Michigan Central Railroad or as laborers in the Solvay Company’s alkali plant on West Jefferson settled in the nearby town of Delray, soon to be annexed by Detroit. The new Ford plant in Highland Park attracted nearby colonies of Finns, Yugoslavs, Rumanians, and Lithuanians, while the Dodge Brothers’ sprawling plant in Hamtramck drew new Polish immigrants





**Map Key**

<b>P</b> Polish	<b>S</b> Scottish	<b>F</b> Finnish
<b>C</b> Canadian	<b>H</b> Hungarian	<b>M</b> Mexican
<b>GE</b> German	<b>Y</b> Yugoslavian	<b>J</b> Jewish
<b>I</b> Italian	<b>CZ</b> Czechoslovakian	<b>B</b> Black
<b>E</b> English	<b>BE</b> Belgian	<b>SY</b> Syrian/Lebanese (Christians)
<b>R</b> Russian	<b>GR</b> Greek	



Immigrant housing in Detroit, circa 1900.

north from the original Poletown. For the impoverished and bewildered immigrant who spoke no English and often knew nothing of city life, these ethnic settlements served as a bridge to the new world. Recent arrivals from the old country might initially live in boarding houses run by and for their nationality group (the Finnish Coop Boarding House, for example) or get a home loan from an ethnic bank (the Croatian Building and Loan Association, among others). Ethnic churches, groceries,

restaurants, and saloons also provided links with the Old World and a sense of solidarity in the New. National "Homes" were built to serve as community centers in each immigrant neighborhood, while mutual-aid societies provided sick benefits, insurance, and low-cost funerals. Above all, ethnic ties often determined whether and where one worked. While many companies relied on the Employers' Association to provide workers during strikes and peak produc-

tion periods, only a few companies bothered to set up centralized Personnel Offices to handle regular hiring. Even in large factories, hiring was often left to the individual foreman, who naturally favored his family, friends, and nationality group when it came to recommending new workers. As a result, entire departments in many plants often spoke a foreign language. From supervision on down, the pressroom might be Polish in one automobile factory, and predominantly Hungarian in another. Some na-



Mansion of A.L. Born, Secretary Treasurer of Oldberg Manufacturing, maker of auto mufflers, in suburban Bloomfield Hills.

# Immigrant Detroit

Three of every four people in Detroit were immigrants or the children of immigrants in 1910. Poles, Germans, Italians, Russians, Austrians, and English-speaking peoples made up the city's leading ethnic groups, but counting them was no easy matter. In 1910, Poles were not counted at all. Because their nation had long been occupied by the neighboring empires of Russia, Austria, and Germany, census takers simply lumped them with the nationality groups of the conquering powers. Thus, at least half of the "Germans" counted were probably Poles. The government began tallying Detroit's largest ethnic group only when Poland became an independent nation after World War I.

Most of the city's population in 1910 lived south of Grand Boulevard — Hamtramck and Highland Park were still rural villages on Detroit's northern border, with only 5,000 residents between them. When the Dodge Brothers opened their plant in Hamtramck and Henry Ford began building factories in Highland Park and Dearborn, the city's population rapidly expanded into

these developing areas, blurring the boundaries of old ethnic neighborhoods. (The 1930 population figures in the accompanying table include these three fast-growing cities.) As the more established nationality groups moved outward, new groups of immigrants and Southern migrants took their place in the East Side slums around lower Gratiot. Detroit's wealthy residents moved outward as well, some to exclusive sections like Indian Village and the Boston Edison district, others as far as Grosse Pointe and Bloomfield Hills.

Some of these neighborhoods excluded Jews; most of Detroit's neighborhoods, rich or poor, barred blacks. The city's nationality groups, on the other hand, were frequently intermingled, with Russians, Lithuanians, and Rumanians living in and around Detroit's Poletown. The further each group moved away from the Detroit River, the more its members intermixed with the neighboring group. English-speaking immigrants were dispersed throughout the city, with a greater-than-average concentration in Highland Park. The city's outer wards were dominated by "native American" whites, and included the more prosperous descendants of the city's older ethnic groups as well as Appalachian hill people and former farmhands from midwestern states.

## Major Groups in Detroit, 1910 & 1930

1910		
		% of total
Total Population...	466,000	100%
Black .....	5,700	1%
Foreign-Born or Children of Foreign-Born....	345,000	74%
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Polish .....	?	
German .....	29%	
Canadian .....	16%	
Russian .....	6%	
Austrian .....	5%	
Irish .....	4%	
English .....	4%	
Italian .....	2%	
Hungarian .....	2%	
Scottish .....	1%	
Belgian .....	1%	
(1% = about 4,700 people)		

1930		
		% of total
Total Population...	1,720,000	100%
Black .....	125,300	7%
Foreign-Born or Children of Foreign-Born....	1,018,000	59%
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Polish .....	13%	
Canadian .....	11%	
German .....	8%	
Italian .....	4%	
English .....	4%	
Russian .....	3%	
Scottish .....	2%	
Irish .....	2%	
Hungarian .....	1%	
Yugoslavian .....	1%	
Czechoslovakian .....	1%	
Austrian .....	1%	
Belgian .....	1%	
Greek .....	½%	
Finnish .....	½%	
Mexican .....	½%	
Syrian/Lebanese .....	½%	
(1% = about 17,000 people)		

tionality groups were also associated with particular crafts: Italians dominated the tileworking industry, Germans predominated in brewing, and Scotsmen stood out in the tool-making operations of many auto plants.

When Detroit's workers formed unions, their trade organizations often bore the stamp of this ethnic segregation. There was a "German Branch #2," for example, of Detroit's Amalgamated Society of Carpenters in 1902, and a "Jewish Laundry Drivers Union" in the

1920s. While ethnic and religious ties bound many workers to their supervisor or foreman, ethnic solidarity could also embolden those who challenged Detroit's Open-Shop employers.

National and religious unity was a frequent rallying cry in the city's immigrant neighborhoods. But the call to solidarity was not always heeded. Yugoslavians, for example, were not a traditional ethnic group at all, but an

amalgam of Serbian, Croatian, and Slovenian peoples bound together in a new nation after World War I. Detroit's Yugoslav American Independent Club tried repeatedly to unite the three groups, but was undermined by the bitter conflicts between Serbs and Croats, the one Eastern Orthodox, the other Roman Catholic—and both intensely committed to separate national identities.

Divisions within Detroit's Jewish community were less embittered, but



perhaps more confusing. Virtually every nationality group was represented, with German Jews usually living north of the downtown area and worshipping at the Reform Temple Beth El, while East-European and Russian Jews usually joined Orthodox temples in the heart of the lower East Side Jewish districts.

Even distinct nationality groups were fragmented by regional and political differences. Many northern Italians, coming from an urban and industrialized society, had little in common with local

Sicilians, who came from the rural and clannish south. Detroit's Italian-language press was equally divided, with *La Tribuna* openly endorsing Italy's Fascist regime after Mussolini came to power in 1922, and *La Voce del Popolo* just as vigorously opposing the new regime.

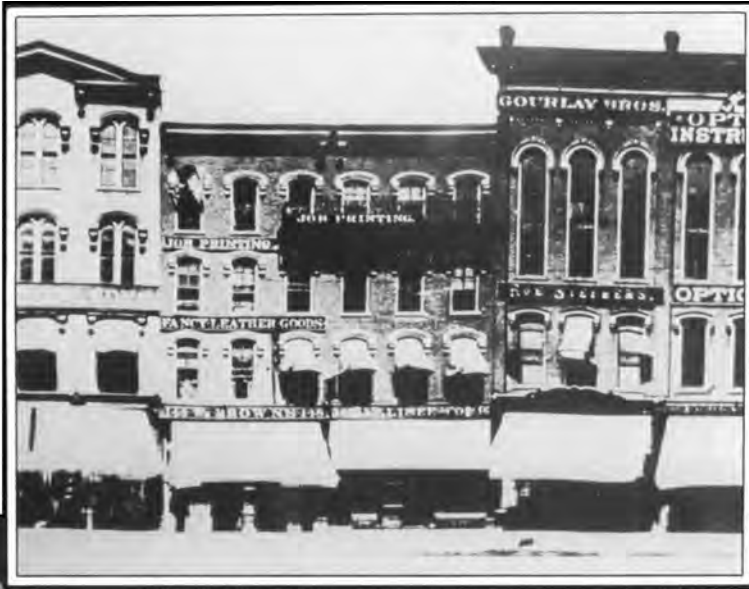
Detroit's black community, in contrast, was relatively united behind the middle-class leadership of the Detroit Urban League, founded in 1916, and the National Association for the Advance-

ment of Colored People (NAACP), which founded a Detroit chapter in 1912. Both organizations relied on black churches for support—principally the Second Baptist Church, a congregation with a large number of poor Southern migrants, and St. Matthews Protestant Episcopal Church, catering to a small number of established black businessmen and professionals. While the NAACP fought to break down discriminatory barriers, the League, under John Dancy, served as a multi-purpose social service agency, organizing vocational training, housing referrals, a baby clinic, recreation, and (with funding from the Employers' Association of Detroit) a job bank.

There was no comparable degree of unity in Detroit's Polish community. Polish nationalists who favored independence for their homeland from Russian, Austrian, and German domination frequently clashed with the conservative hierarchy of the Catholic Church, which more often favored accommodation. The resulting conflict impelled some American Poles to found the Polish National Church, whose four Detroit parishes rejected both the social-conservatism and the Latin ritual of Roman Catholicism, replacing the latter with a Polish liturgy. Pro-independence sentiment also inspired the formation of the Polish National Alliance, whose social insurance programs competed with those of the Polish Roman Catholic Union.

Nationalists and Catholics, in turn, often squabbled with the Poles in Detroit's Socialist Party, whose members formed five branches of their own sick and benefit society, the Polish Mutual Aid Association. While moderate and conservative groups centered their activities in the two Polish Homes (Dom Polski, sites 4 and 5) built shortly before World War I, Polish socialists centered their activities at the Peoples' Home (Dom Ludowy) on Harper Avenue at Joseph Campau. After the Russian revolution of 1917, even the socialists were split, with many pro-communist Poles eventually joining the Polish branch of the International Workers Order, located on Yemans Street in Hamtramck (site 6).

But whatever their political, social, and religious differences, the principle of group solidarity remained a compelling ideal for Detroit's foreign-born workers. National pride could sustain them in an alien and often unfriendly environment, even as it also separated them from native-born whites, blacks, and other foreign-born workers.



*Above: Saint Albertus Church, facing St. Aubin Street (site 7). Built in 1884, St. Albertus was the first of Detroit's Polish churches. Together with neighboring Sweetest Heart of Mary (1889) and St. Josaphat (1890), St. Albertus marked the center of Detroit's expanding Poletown.*

*Inset: Downtown stores and workshops, Woodward Avenue and State Street, date unknown. Once the industrial and commercial hub of the city, the downtown's riverfront district declined in importance as new industries located their factories near Poletown and other outlying neighborhoods.*