

Northern Workers

YOU WORK IN A FACTORY that produces cloth from cotton. As you know, the United States is becoming more “industrialized.” Factories are springing up everywhere. Recently you read that in just the last 20 years, the value of manufactured goods produced by workers like you quadrupled. Many of you are native-born, and some of you left your farms for work in the cities. Others of you are from different countries, especially Ireland. Currently, you face a number of problems.

In 1857 a major depression hit the country and, at least temporarily, some of you lost your jobs. This taught you that even though more and more things are produced by machines in factories, you don’t have a guaranteed job. The factory owners try to convince you that the depression was caused by the Democrats in Congress who lowered the tariffs on imported manufactured goods in 1857. The owners say that because foreign owners can find cheaper workers, the U.S. needs high tariffs—which make foreign goods more expensive. Otherwise, American products can’t compete. Or so they say. The owners say that we should elect politicians who support high tariffs to protect American industries and American jobs.

Because of your job insecurity, and because factory jobs aren’t so great, many of you dream of owning your own farm out west. It would be expensive to pull up and move, but there is one proposal that would make it a lot cheaper. Some politicians support the idea of giving “homesteads”—free land out west—to people who will work a plot of land with their families. This would be great. However, some people think that slave owners should be able to take advantage of the homesteads and bring in their slaves to work the land. With free workers, these southerners could sell their crops for almost nothing. How could you and other *free* farmers compete with that?

Something else that would make it easier to move west is if there were railroads to take you there. You might want to go all the way to California or Oregon. But to do that now, it takes months of difficult and dangerous travel by wagon. For years, politicians have talked about building a railroad across the entire country, but so far they haven’t done anything about it. The owners support railroads because they say they’ll sell more products and that will make your jobs more secure. Of course, the owners say lots of things.