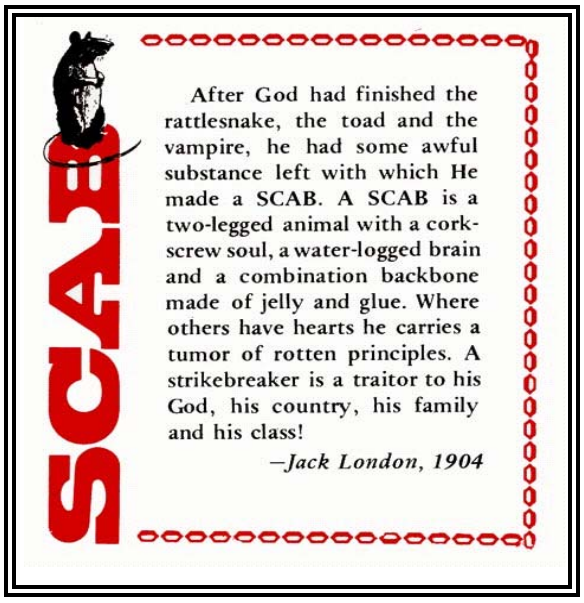
Labor's Many Languages:

A Bibliography of American Workers' Speech

Revised and Expanded



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WHAT IS A *SCAB*?
AN INTRODUCTION

"I would venture to call your attention to the general use now made of the word 'scab,'" wrote Thomas W. Welsby, a Brooklyn shop owner, in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1887. "One reads in the newspapers each day of scab labor, scab coal, scab everything that does not meet with the approval of so-called 'organized labor.' Is not the free use (in this direction) of this very obnoxious word calculated to bring into contempt those who may cho[o]se to work according to their own way of thinking? I am an employer of labor, and I rejoice in having a 'free shop,' almost the only one in the trade. All my best employe[e]s are men of undoubted character and more than average intelligence. Is it [appropriate], then, that they should be likened to a festering sore, while some miserable specimens of humanity, not half as intelligent . . . , are dubbed 'Knights [of Labor]' forsooth?"[1]

The term *scab* is one of the oldest American labor epithets and undoubtedly the best known, and among those respected students of American speech who have explored the term and its history are Archie Green, Stuart Berg Flexner, and William Safire.[2] But even today its origin as a labor epithet is uncertain and its usage remains as controversial as it was in 1887. Generally, the slang term is used, especially by members of a labor union, as a derisive noun to describe a worker who, variously, refuses to go on strike, takes the place of a striker, or otherwise engages in strikebreaking activities. Among its synonyms are *blackleg*, *fink*, *scissorbill*, *Eliot's hero*, *strikebreaker*, and, more euphemistically, *replacement worker*.[3] *Scab* is also often employed as an adjective to describe, alternately, businesses or commercial organizations that employ nonunion workers, nonunion workers themselves, or the commodities they produce or handle, such as in the expressions *scab shop*, *scab labor*, or, in the letter quoted above, *scab coal*. *Scab* is occasionally used as both a transitive and intransitive verb, as in the

expressions *to scab a job*, *to scab it*, or *to scab on*. *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (*DAE*) (1938) offers the following definition of the term when used as a verb: "to perform, or employ another to perform, the job of a striking worker." Conversely, as the *DAE* notes, the term can also mean "to ostracize (a worker) as a scab, or to declare (a shop) a nonunion organization and to boycott it," although this usage is rare.[4] During the early twentieth century, the use of the term extended from shopfloors and picketlines into other realms of American life, especially to college and university campuses where the epithet connoted a similar derogatory meaning. According to a 1926 article in *American Speech*, for example, students at the University of Kansas applied the epithet *scab* to "an industrious student who sets a standard of work difficult for his fellow students to keep up with."[5]

According to the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED2*), *scab* is derived from a Scandinavian word (Swedish *skabb* and Danish *skab*), and it appeared in print in Old English as *sceabb* as early as the mid-thirteenth century to refer to a skin disease in which pustules or scales formed over open sores. Its related, more common meaning as "the crust which forms over a wound or sore" dates to around 1400. Within two centuries, the English began using the term to refer to people. At least since 1590, according to *OED2*, *scab* has served as a term of abuse in Great Britain to describe "a mean, low, 'scurvy' fellow; a rascal, scoundrel," and was occasionally even applied to women.[6] From this definition, it took only a short leap in verbal creativity to use *scab* to denigrate fellow workingmen who refused to join unions or participate in strikes. Although some historical dictionaries wrongly identify *scab* as an Americanism, its first known printed usage in a labor setting actually appeared in Great Britain. A 1777 issue of *Bonner & Middleton's Bristol Journal* reported, following a cordwainers' (shoemakers') strike, that, "Matters are amicably settled. . . . The Conflict would not [have] been so sharp had not there been so many dirty Scabs; no Doubt but timely Notice will be taken of them." In 1792, A. Aspinall, the author of *Early English Trade Unions*, wrote: "What

is a scab? He is to his *trade* what a traitor is to his *country*. . . . He first sells the journeymen, and is himself afterwards sold in his turn by the masters, till at last he is despised by both and deserted by all."[7] *Scab*'s first known appearance as a labor pejorative in the United States dates to around 1794, when it was used among Philadelphia boot- and shoemakers who were members of the Federal Society of Journeymen Cordwainers.[8] During the nineteenth century, *scab* gained popularity in the American trade union movement, and during the last half of the century, strikers sometimes compiled a "blacklist" of "scab" workers who refused to strike or who returned to work before a strike ended, and then circulated this list for the purposes of either placing social pressure upon disloyal workers or barring them from union membership. By the 1880s and 1890s the epithet was commonplace in American workers' speech, as the examples below demonstrate.

Scab has long been considered a stinging, emotionally charged reproach, perhaps the ultimate insult for a worker. Its effectiveness in branding one a traitor to his fellow workingmen, his union, and even his class sometimes resulted in embarrassment and shame that weighed heavily on the conscience of the so-called "scab." In 1887, during a New York City shoemakers' strike, a 40-year-old strikebreaker named Eugene Conner committed suicide by slitting his throat with a penknife. He did so reportedly because his fellow strikers, members of the Knights of Labor, had called him a "scab" and "subjected him to various annoyances."[9] In 1891, to cite another extreme example, Ambrose Parr, a tending boy at the Whitall, Tatum, and Company's South Millville Glass Works in Millville, New Jersey, hanged himself in his mother's home. During a strike at the plant, he had refused to join the walkout and remained on the job. "Since then," the *New York Times* reported, "the strikers had several times called him a 'scab,' and this, it is thought, unsettled his mind and drove him to suicide."[10]

Scab's usage sparked countless outbreaks of violence. In 1880, for example, William Gair was discovered "lying insensible" at a forge in Corning's Iron Works in Troy, New York. A striking

puddler had accosted Gair, a strikebreaker who had taken a job in the foundry, and called him a "scab." "When [Gair] resented the insult, he was stabbed. Gair," the *New York Times* noted, "will probably die."[11] In 1902, Charles Smith shot and seriously wounded George Gisel, a friend and fellow miner who, during a coal strike in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, had accused him of secretly working during the strike and called him a "scab." After shooting Gisel, Smith narrowly escaped death at the hands of a lynch mob.[12]

During the late nineteenth century, using the term *scab* was, in some contexts and places, illegal. In 1878, Joseph P. McDonnell, editor of the Paterson, New Jersey, *Labor Standard*, was tried for libel because his newspaper had reprinted a definition of the term *scab* from a recent court case in England and then published a list of "scabs" working at the struck Adams Mills. Much of the prosecution's case was devoted to establishing the meaning of the term, and at least three witnesses, including two of McDonnell's employees, testified that *scab* was "'an epithet of bitterness and reproach' applied to those [workers] who took the place of strikers."[13] The verdict of the trial remains unknown, but several other U.S. court cases also involved the use of the epithet during episodes of labor conflict.[14] In *People v. Radt*, for example, a New York judge directed the jury to acquit a group of defendants who had posted notices reading "Scab Labor! Don't Patronize! Scab Labor!" at a business that employed non-union workmen. The judge, in arriving at his decision, affirmed, "Labor has a right to organize and has a right to appeal to the community and say, 'Don't patronize this man, because he does not sympathize with organized labor.' I take it that the word 'scab' is one which means that a person does not give honest or fair compensation for labor. It is a word that perhaps has a certain objectionable character."[15] In 1887, a striker named Robert Kane was arrested in Worcester, Massachusetts, for "shouting 'Scab!'" at his employer. Kane was convicted of disturbing the peace in the Superior Criminal Court and was sentenced to three months in the House of Correction.[16] In 1899, David Davidson and William Reed, two strike leaders at

John Hand & Son's silk mill in Paterson, New Jersey, were convicted of disorderly conduct and "fined $5 each, and directed to furnish bonds to keep the peace." The men were charged with "serenading" strikebreakers. Apparently, this "serenading," a form of labor chivaree, consisted of "following non-union workers and calling them 'scabs,' blowing horns, and singing, thus attracting attention to the non-union worker and causing a disturbance in the streets."[17] In 1903, a soldier in Richmond, Virginia, shot a sixteen-year-old boy named Lester Williams for refusing to stop shouting "scab" at strikebreaking conductors during a streetcar strike.[18] As late as 1965, Kern County sheriff's deputies arrested the Reverend David Havens, a pastor affiliated with the California Migrant Ministry, on charges of disturbing the peace after reading "Definition of a Scab," a brief essay often attributed to Jack London, to a group of strikebreakers at a vineyard outside of Delano, California. Five weeks later, a municipal judge dismissed the case against the Reverend Havens.[19]

Scab has not only been a term of great controversy, but it has also been a contested term, as pro-business politicians, academics, and civic leaders have attempted to defend scab workers and rehabilitate the epithet. In 1902, for example, Charles W. Eliot, longtime president of Harvard University, delivered a speech before the Economic Club of Boston in which he denounced American labor unions and proclaimed the strikebreaker, or "scab worker," as he called him, "a good type of the American hero."[20] Trade unionists' anger at Eliot's pronouncement led them to coin another synonym for *scab*, the occasionally seen *Eliot's hero*. A trade unionist who signed himself "C.H.C." of Newark, New Jersey, protested Eliot's comments in a letter to the *New York Times* and then went on to define the various kinds of "scabs":

> The "scab," as we know him, is a man who will not work at a "steady job" or at regular wages, but who makes, when he works, more money than a regular, for he travels about from place to place wherever there is trouble and blood money to be made.

> The first men to take the strikers' places are the professional strike breakers who go in for a price. They are generally Jacks of all trades and can turn their hands to almost anything. We had a strike here in a large cigar factory a few years ago and about the first man to go to work there was known as the "King of Scabs." . . . This class of men are followed by a few black sheep who have been suspended or expelled from their [trade union] organizations for breaking rules. They pave the way for a few poor workmen who are generally too ignorant to known the need or value of an organization. With the exception of the professional leaders these men receive $2.50 a day and they are lodged and fed within an inclosure [*sic*]. When their month is up, unless granted leave of absence for a few days to go on a good spree, they will throw up the job.
>
> If there is anything heroic in that class of "scabs" my perceptions must be blunted, for I can not [*sic*] see it.[21]

Trade union members have expressed their animosity toward scabs, as Archie Green has noted, through what is now more than two centuries of "song, story, and slang." Joe Hill, the preeminent balladeer of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), composed the humorous song "Casey Jones—The Union Scab" around 1911 in response to a railroad strike in Southern California. In this parody, Hill transforms the legendary brave engineer into a despicable class traitor who refuses to join a strike on the Southern Pacific Railroad. In one verse, Jones even scabs in the afterlife on the angels in Heaven as he did on his co-workers on Earth.[22] In 1957, the *Industrial Worker*, the official organ of the IWW, published an unsigned, 37-line poem titled "The Scab," several lines of which are worth quoting:

> A sordid thing, alone he walked the street,
> With hanging face, as if afraid to meet
> The eyes of those who knew him. In his face
> Was written many things. There one might trace
> A worm-like attitude to crawl and cringe,

A nature born and bred with a single twinge
Of conscience, and without a single thought
Apart from self. . . . . .
What foolish brain conceived the thought that [the scab]
With honest men a fellowship could find?
The rat, the wolf, the snake, the shark, to their own kind
Are true. Forever fares alone this thing.
Betraying and betrayed it cannot cling
To any hold. The sport of time and tide
It drifts from coast to coast. No mask may hide
The livid brand of Cain. Its leprous face
Proclaims it outcast from the human race.
A nature selfish, yet too mean for crime;
A boneless thing that lives its life in slime.
The street was silent, yet there seemed to pass
A shiver of repulsion through the grass
As if his very shadow were unclean,
A thing utterly foul and mean,
With shapeless mouth and slanting, boneless chin,
With loose, slack greedy lips without; within
A mockery of manhood bleak and drab.
The very stones seemed murmuring: "A scab, a scab."[23]

The most famous definition of *scab*, however, is a brief sketch titled "The Definition of a Scab," frequently attributed to novelist and social critic Jack London (1876-1916). Several variants of this definition have been published over the years, including the following account, titled "Portrait of a Scab," which appeared in the August 30, 1946 issue of the San Francisco *Labor Herald*. It is one of the longer and more elaborate versions of the definition. "Portrait of a Scab" was published under the headnote: "The following description of a scab was written many years ago by Jack London, the famous novelist. It still holds good today."

> After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad, and the vampire, He had some awful substance left with which He made a scab. A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a water-logged brain, and a combination backbone made of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts, he carries a tumor of rotten principles.
>
> When a scab comes down the street, men turn their backs and angels weep in Heaven, and the Devil shuts the gates of Hell to keep him out. No man has the right to scab so long as there is a pool of water deep enough to drown his body in, or a rope long enough to hang his carcass with. Judas Iscariot was a gentleman—compared with a scab. For betraying his master, he had the character to hang himself—a scab hasn't.
>
> Essau sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. Judas Iscariot sold his Savior for thirty pieces of silver. Benedict Arnold sold his country for a promise of a commission in the British Army. The modern Scab sells his birthright, his country, his wife, his children, and his fellow men for an unfilled promise from his employer, trust, or corporation.
>
> Essau was a traitor to himself. Judas Iscariot was a traitor to his God. Benedict Arnold was a traitor to his country. A Scab is a traitor to himself, a traitor to his God, a traitor to his country, a traitor to his family, and a traitor to his class.
>
> There is nothing lower than a Scab.[24]

This account has often appeared in shorter versions, some of which conclude with the statement: "A real man never becomes a strike-breaker," or "There is nothing lower than a SCAB." Occasionally, the term *strikebreaker* is substituted for *scab*.[25]

Tony Bubka, who conducted an exhaustive search of California labor newspapers, concluded that selected quotations from this definition appeared in print as early as 1914, published both in the Eureka, California, *Labor News* and the *Miners Magazine*, the official publication of the Western Federation of Miners. The former newspaper, interestingly, credited the definition to Mother Jones (1830-1930), the militant Irish-born union organizer whom the labor press dubbed the "patron saint and angel of light" of American coal miners. Other accounts attribute the definition incorrectly to

William "Big Bill" Haywood (1869-1928), the secretary-treasurer of the Western Federation of Miners and co-founder of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In 1935, *The Voice of the Federation*, the official publication of San Francisco's Maritime Federation, reprinted a version of the above definition but attributed it, in a vague headnote, to "a prominent clergyman." Bubka speculated that this clergyman might have been Father Thomas J. Hagerty, a Roman Catholic priest who was one of the founders of the IWW.[26]

"The Definition of a Scab," however, is most often attributed to Jack London. As early as November 13, 1936, for instance, the *Black Gang News*, published by members of the Pacific Coast Marine Firemen, Oilers, Watertenders, and Wipers Association, reprinted a variant of the definition under London's name. Since then, versions of this definition have periodically appeared in labor histories, magazines, and newspaper articles incorrectly citing London as the author.[27] Even the late noted labor historian Philip S. Foner credited the famous pronouncement to the novelist in *Jack London: American Rebel* (1964).[28] Some of the confusion no doubt stems from the fact that London, a well-known Socialist, did publish a ten-page essay titled "The Scab" in the January 1904 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. The Charles H. Kerr Company, a Chicago-based socialist publishing house, later reprinted the essay as a pamphlet under the title of *The Scab*, and it appeared in London's 1905 collection *War of the Classes*.[29] But this essay is an entirely different piece and contains none of the language found in "The Definition of a Scab" quoted above. Indeed, Bubka found no evidence to substantiate the claim that London wrote the definition so often attributed to him, and speculated that this misidentification originated with the San Francisco labor press during the 1930s. Hensley C. Woodbridge, John London, and George H. Tweney, the co-authors of *Jack London: A Bibliography* (1966), also concluded that "as of now there is no reason to associate Jack London with this definition of a scab."[30] Despite extensive scholarly work, this famous description of a *scab* continues to be attributed spuriously to London, including in the accompanying artwork on the

front cover of this bibliography.[31] This powerful image of a rat perched on the word *SCAB* can be found in the IWW Graphic Library on the IWW website (http://www.iww.org/culture/articles/).

The study of occupational language, as I've suggested above, offers labor historians, occupational folklorists, and sociologists a useful approach to exploring the construction of identity among American workers. "There is no better way to approach labor lore than by dialect study," Archie Green, the dean of industrial folklorists, pointed out in 1965, "for it is a commonplace that groups define and bound their roles by argot or jargon."[32] The brief history of *scab* I have sketched here will, I hope, suggest the exciting possibilities for further research and study within the field of American workers' vernacular speech. The following bibliography is intended to assist scholars in this and similar work. It indexes books and articles about the occupational jargon of American workers, including coal miners, railroad workers, loggers, firefighters, shipyard workers, waitresses, postal employees, sawmill hands, sailors, truck drivers, and oilfield workers. I have, however, consciously excluded books and articles dedicated to the vernacular of criminals and hoboes, despite the fact that much of their specific argots often overlapped with and contributed to workers' speech. This revised and expanded bibliography should be treated as a work in progress and by no means considered exhaustive. Rather, these citations are intended both to generate interest in the occupational slang of American workers and to assist researchers in the fields of labor history, working-class culture, occupational folklore, and American vernacular speech. Certainly, future researchers will contribute many additional bibliographic entries to this catalog.[33]

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NOTES

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[1] Thomas W. Welsby, "An Obnoxious Word" (letter to the editor), *New York Times*, February 21, 1887.

[2] See, for example, Archie Green, "The Workers in the Dawn: Labor Lore," in *Our Living Traditions: An Introduction to American Folklore*, ed. by Tristram Potter Coffin (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 254-255; Stuart Berg Flexner, *Listening to America: An Illustrated History of Words and Phrases from Our Lively and Splendid Past* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 514-515; William Safire, "On Language: Goons and Ginks and Company Finks," *New York Times Magazine*, November 1, 1987.

[3] On the rare *Eliot's hero*, see Stephen H. Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19.

[4] William A. Craigie and James R. Hulbert, *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), 4: 2028.

[5] "KU Slang," *American Speech* 3 (February 1926), citation in the Peter Tamony Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri.

[6] J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds., *Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1989), 14: 549, 550.

[7] Ibid., 14: 550.

[8] On *scab*'s early usage among Philadelphia boot- and shoemakers, see *The Trial of the Boot & Shoemakers of Philadelphia, on an Indictment for a Combination and Conspiracy to Raise Their Wages* (Philadelphia: B. Graves, 1806), reprinted in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, ed. by John R. Commons, Ulrich B. Phillips, Eugene A. Gilmore, Helen L. Sumner, and John B. Andrews. 10 vols. (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1910), 3: 59-248, especially the testimony of Job Harrison, pp. 71-88; Green, "The Workers in the Dawn," 254.

[9] "Two Motives for Suicide," *New York Times*, April 19, 1887.

[10] "A Boy Driven to Suicide," *New York Times*, September 28, 1891.

[11] "Crime and Its Results," *New York Times*, February 27, 1880. See also "An Abusive Striker Killed," *New York Times*, August 19, 1883.

[12] "Teacher Prevents Lynching," *New York Times*, October 19, 1902.

[13] "A Suit for Libel in New Jersey," *New York Times*, October 22, 1878.

[14] See, for example, Walter Drew, "The Epithet of 'Scab'" (letter to the editor), *New York Times*, January 2, 1910; Louis Lande, "The 'Scab' Epithet," *New York Times*, January 4, 1910.

[15] Lande, "The 'Scab' Epithet." Although it probably dates from the last decade of the nineteenth century, I have been unable so far to locate the specific year of the *People v. Radt* case.

[16] "Three Months for Shouting 'Scab,'" *New York Times*, March 13, 1887; "A Warning to Strikers," *New York Times*, May 14, 1887.

[17] "Strike Leaders Convicted," *New York Times*, October 14, 1899.

[18] "Two Shot in Richmond," *New York Times*, June 27, 1903.

[19] Joan London, "Unusual Arrest" (letter to the editor), *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 4, 1965; "Pastor Freed for Reading 'The Scab," *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 24, 1965.

[20] "President Eliot Scores Labor Unions," *New York Times*, November 11, 1902. See also Norwood, *Strikebreaking and Intimidation*, 19.

[21] "A Trade Unionist's Views," *New York Times*, November 23, 1902.

[22] For the lyrics to "Casey Jones—The Union Scab," see Joyce L. Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An I.W.W. Anthology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972 [1964]), 133-134.

[23] "The Scab," *Industrial Worker* 43 (October 28, 1957): 4, clipping in the Tamony Collection. This poem is almost certainly reprinted from an earlier labor periodical dating probably to circa 1905-1915.

[24] "Portrait of a Scab," San Francisco *Labor Herald*, August 30, 1946, clipping in Tamony Collection.

[25] Tony Bubka, "Jack London's Definition of a Scab," *American Book Collector* 17 (November 1966): 23-26; Hensley C. Woodbridge, John London, and George H. Tweney, comps., *Jack London: A Bibliography* (Georgetown, CA: Talisman Press, 1966), 277.

[26] Bubka, "Jack London's Definition of a Scab," 25-26.

[27] Ibid., 23-26; Woodbridge et al., *Jack London*, 277-279.

[28] Philip S. Foner, *Jack London: American Rebel* (New York: Citadel Press, 1964), 57-58, 132-133.

[29] Jack London, "The Scab," *Atlantic Monthly* 93 (January 1904): 54-63; Jack London, *The Scab* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Co., 1905); Jack London, *War of the Classes* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1905), 101-147.

[30] Bubka, "Jack London's Definition of a Scab," 23-24, 26; Woodbridge et al., *Jack London*, 279.

[31] For other examples of the definition being wrongly attributed to London, see Michael Winerip, "Colt Pickets Pass Second Summer Out in the Cold," *New York Times*, September 8, 1987; review of Michael F. Mayer, *The Liberal Revolution: A New Look at Defamation and Privacy*, in *New York Times*, February 7, 1988.

[32] Archie Green, "American Labor Lore: Its Meaning and Uses," *Industrial Relations* 4 (February 1965): 58.

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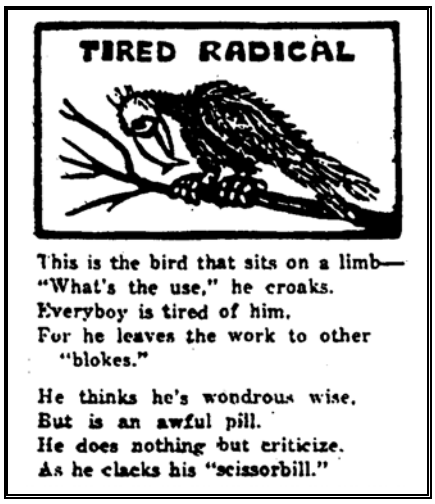

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